"Getting America told": The black press and its dialogue with white America, 1914-1919

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"GETTING AMERICA TOLD":
THE BLACK PRESS AND ITS DIALOGUE WITH WHITE AMERICA,
1914-1919

BY

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BA, University of Lowell, 1984
MA, University of New Hampshire, 1991

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
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the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History

December, 1996
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For
Wendy Aldrich Jordan
and
James Aldrich Jordan
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ABSTRACT

"GETTING AMERICA TOLD":
THE BLACK PRESS AND ITS DIALOGUE WITH WHITE AMERICA,
1914-1919

by

William G. Jordan
University of New Hampshire, December, 1996

This dissertation examines the role of African-American newspapers as a forum for interracial discourse during World War I. The black press addressed itself to white America, arguing that African-Americans' participation in the war made them worthy of full citizenship, pointing out the similarity between the nation's aim of championing democracy in Europe and the goal of creating racial justice in America, and drawing parallels between atrocities against civilians in Europe and the lynching of African Americans in the Southern states. Some influential white Americans paid attention to these arguments and responded to them. In doing so, they sought to use the black press to reach African Americans and eliminate "unrest" among them. In fact the Wilson administration called a conference of black editors in Washington in 1918 precisely for this purpose.

Thus, African Americans used the black press to persuade white America to provide racial equality and whites used it to understand and try to manipulate the opinions and actions of the black population. The response of the black press to World War I can only be fully understood in the context of
this dialogue across America's racial divide. As the Russian linguist M. M. Bakhtin postulated, ideology emerges from such dialogue because individuals assemble their arguments using words taken from other people's utterances and then speak those words with the aim of making their own case in a way that will persuade those other people. The black press developed its approach to World War I by appropriating words from mainstream discourse and using them with the aim of breaking through to the consciousness of white America.

This study is based on a close reading of four weekly newspapers (the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Chicago Defender*, the *Cleveland Gazette*, and the *New York Age*), one national monthly (the *Crisis*), and a sampling of ten other black publications, as well as records from three Federal agencies and the personal papers of black journalists and President Woodrow Wilson. It also deals with the careers of black journalists, including editors W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson, and publishers Harry C. Smith, and Robert S. Abbott.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: DEFENDERS OF THE RACE

Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon?

--Richard Wright

Richard Wright's epiphany, after reading H. L. Mencken's A Book of Prefaces in 1927, started him on a long and successful career of using words to pound away at American racism in his famous novels, short stories, and essays. One-hundred years earlier, in 1827, two other black men embarked on a similar quest when they established the first African American newspaper, Freedom's Journal. John B. Russwurm and Samuel E. Cornish said they planned to defend free blacks by refuting "the calumnies of our enemies . . . by forceful arguments." Since that time, African-American writers, editors, and publishers, have used black newspapers to defend the black people and attack racism.

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To them, the black press has been a "defender of the race," ever ready to counter attacks on African Americans in the mainstream "white" press, to make the case for black equality and civil rights, or to point out the inhumanity of American race relations. As the *Chicago Broad Ax* put it, black newspapers have served African Americans by "constantly struggling as best they can to fight their battles for them."

Even black readers have seen the black press in this light. A reader criticized the *California Eagle* at a public forum in Los Angeles in 1917 because that black weekly had failed to respond to a recent attack on African Americans in the *Record*, a local daily. "It was confidently expected that we should be on the job every minute and make this fight for the race," the *Eagle* explained. The *Eagle*’s editorial writer agreed that "with such copperhead sheets as the Record, we should ever be in a position to hurl these attacks back into their teeth."

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3 *Chicago Broad Ax*, Dec. 18, 1915. For an example of a letter-writer who characterized the *New York Age* as "defender of the race." See J. Williams, "Leading Paper of the Race," *New York Age*, Feb. 22, 1917, p. 4. In the *Age*’s frequent letters column "Commending the Age," most writers complimented the newspaper for educating black readers. Some, however, commented on its role as representative or defender of the race. A North Carolina reader said the *Age* was pleading the race’s case "as a consummate diplomat both to the heart and the head of this great nation." See ibid., March 1, 1917, p. 4. Please note that in any quotations of newspapers where I have found minor typographical or spelling errors I have silently corrected them.

Without the "united and strong support" of the entire black community of Los Angeles, however, the *Eagle* could defend the race only selectively, the editor added by way of explaining the paper's failing. *California Eagle*, Sept. 29, 1917.
But the idea that the black press could fight for the race with words begs some fundamental questions. Just how, and in what situations, have African Americans used words in their newspapers as weapons—of defense or offense? And how effective have they been at it? This dissertation seeks to answer these questions in the context of the first World War and at the same time to develop insights into the black response to that war and its immediate aftermath.

In the years from the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914 to the emergence of the New Negro in 1919 African Americans needed a great deal of defending. A majority could not vote and were relegated to segregated and inferior public accommodations, and dozens were lynched every year. When America went to war, black soldiers served in poorly trained, segregated units, usually labor battalions. Meanwhile, the mainstream American media during this period not only largely excluded black opinions, but reflected and reinforced widely held racist assumptions and stereotypes. Black journalists

waged their battle on behalf of "the race" by printing indictments of America's racial practices, monitoring and criticizing white media and the statements of white leaders, praising messages complimentary to blacks, and condemning racist utterances. Sometimes they reprinted and rebutted articles, addressing white authors as "you." Most importantly, they chose their words and shaped their arguments not simply to appeal to black readers, but to resonate with white readers as well.

Like contemporary editors and readers, historians of the black press have looked upon it as an arena of conflict between black and white and have sought to evaluate the strategies employed in that conflict and to understand its impact on the larger struggle between the races. Beginning with I. Garland Penn in 1891, nearly all historians of the black press have recognized its role as "champion" of "an oppressed people," or as a "fighting press." According to Frederick G. Detweiler, Gunnar Myrdal, Vishnu Oak, and others, black newspapers have demanded democracy, protested injustice, challenged white statements on race, exhibited positive images of black people, and sought to perfect American democracy.6


But the focus of these accounts usually turns quickly to the role of the black press within the black community. Some examine the way black newspapers fought racism indirectly, by creating solidarity within the black community, bolstering black self-esteem, promoting militant consciousness, or advocating protest.'

Others see a more conservative role, suggesting that the press served as a "safety valve," relieving black anger and discontent rather than directing it against oppressive systems." Myrdal defined the black press as an instrument of the "Negro upper classes" for spreading conservative values, establishing group control and identity, channeling black anger, and teaching readers how to think and feel. The black press, which Myrdal called "the greatest single power in the Negro race," taught American ideals to black readers while


'Oak, for example, examined the press's impact on black opinion, the way it crystallized Negro thought and action against oppression and sometimes diffused black anger and despair with fiery rhetoric. Oak, Negro Newspaper, 26, 133.

showing how little white America lived up to them. In this way, the press fostered discontent and militancy and taught blacks to demand full citizenship.\

Of primary interest to many historians of the black press has been the way black newspapers act as both a "mirror" of black life in America, and an institution that "defines the Negro group to the Negroes themselves." Some of the most provocative work on African-American newspapers has focused almost exclusively on this introspective quality. E. Franklin Frazier argued that the major function of the black press was to provide psychological compensation for the black bourgeoisie's inferiority complex by printing white praise of blacks and exaggerated accounts of black achievement.

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9 See Gunner Myrdal, "Chapter 42, The Negro Press" in American Dilemma, 908-24. In his biography of Defender publisher Robert Abbott, Roi Ottley calls his subject a warrior and says that "Negroes looked more and more to their own press to fight their news battles, even, indeed, to apologize [for] and defend their wrongdoing." Yet Ottley also does not elaborate on the way that such battles were fought, and his portrait of the Defender emphasizes its role within the black community. See Ottley, Lonely Warrior, esp. 128.

10 Detweiler, Negro Press in the United States, 204, 31; Myrdal, American Dilemma, 911.

11 Frazier's wholly negative account gives little credit to editors' attacks on racism and oppression because they were not, he argued, part of a coherent and consistent oppositional ideology which rejected industrial capitalism. Like many Marxist scholars, Frazier finds the lack of left wing ideology among his subjects to be a dysfunctional adaptation requiring some explanation. See E. Franklin Frazier, Black Bourgeoisie (New York: Free Press, 1957), chapter 8. For a critique of radical historians' search for radical consciousness among the working class, see Aileen S. Kraditor, The Radical Persuasion, 1890-1917: Aspects of the Intellectual History and the Historiography of Three American Radical Organizations (Baton
a more affirmative interpretation, Albert Lee Kreiling shows how black newspapers created mythical symbols for mostly urban blacks in a secularizing society. The strident protest against racial injustice was less important for the way it attacked racism than for the psychological and cultural service it performed for the blacks who wrote and read them, Kreiling argued. After all, Northern black newspapers spent more time denouncing racial injustice in the distant South than in their own cities, where they could have had greater impact. The posture of outrage against Southern atrocities, according to Kreiling, was part of a collective ritual that replaced traditional, mostly religious, rituals, provided meaning and identity, and asserted the independence and manhood of the African Americans who participated.12

But while black newspapers undoubtedly served many important functions within the black community, they also acted as an advance force in the black struggle against white racism. Black editors put them together with the knowledge that some white Americans would read them. They knew this to


be true because of the letters white people wrote them, the attacks of white mobs on Southern black newspapers in response to militant editorials, the patronage some black newspapers received from white-dominated political parties, and the criticisms of black newspapers which appeared in white newspapers. During and shortly after America's involvement in World War I, black editors knew white people were reading their newspapers because of public comments on the black press by three separate governmental agencies, the U.S. Congress, Southern officeholders, the state legislature of New York, and uncounted white individuals.

Though the actual number of white readers was small, their existence influenced the character of the black press in important ways. As linguistic and literary theorists have argued, writers are often more interested in affecting their readers than describing reality. Thus, the process of speaking or writing becomes not a matter of simply saying what you mean, but of breaking through the "alien conceptual horizon of the listener" and making sense in the context of his "apperceptive background." Indeed, a close reading of

\[\text{Another piece of evidence that whites read the black press, of which the editors would not have been aware, is that some whites saved clippings from black newspapers in their private papers. See Suggs, "Preface," viii.} \]

\[\text{M. M. Bakhtin, The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist; edited by Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 282. "Literature may appear to be describing the world, and sometimes actually does so, but its real function is performative: it uses language within certain conventions in} \]
black newspapers—and especially their editorial pages—suggests that this is just what editors and writers were trying to do, to persuade white readers. Fiery rhetoric may have functioned as a group ritual or as a safety valve for African Americans, but it was also an instrument of protest oriented toward white points of view. The promotion of conservative values may have been a means of controlling lower class blacks, but it also established some common ground between the black press and the ruling class of American society. Exaggeration of African Americans' accomplishments may have boosted the black ego, but it also presented a positive image which countered negative white stereotypes.

This view places emphasis on the dialogue inherent in all communications. Speakers and writers do not choose neutral words from a dictionary and use them in a vacuum, but snatch them from the mouths of others and speak them in particular historical contexts or language environments. In the process, speakers try to make these words their own, to make them serve their own intentions. Sometimes they succeed, sometimes they fail. As the linguist M. M. Bakhtin has written, "many words..."
stubbornly resist, others remain alien, sound foreign in the mouth of the one who appropriated them and who now speaks them."15 Black writers' attempts to appropriate words from America's social and political mainstream often succeeded, but sometimes failed, leading to the appearance of ambiguity and contradiction in black protest ideology and editorial policies. Historians attempting to break down black ideology into neat dialectical polarities, like accommodation-protest, integration-separatism, or nationalism-acculturation, have generally failed to account for these ambiguities. By contrast, this study views ambiguity and contradiction as a natural byproduct of thinkers' efforts to engage in dialogue. This dialogical model sees black ideology in a constant state of becoming, a process rather than a product, conditioned by the desire not merely to reflect reality or express a coherent ideology, but to change the world by influencing others. Ideology is shaped by ongoing tensions in dialogues among multiple discourses, meanings, and intentions.16

The black press, then, seized terms from mainstream American discourses and attempted to make them serve the cause of black rights. A "war to make the world safe for democracy" could be transformed into a war to make the "south safe for

15Bakhtin, Dialogic Imagination, 293-4.

16For a similar understanding of black ideology, which also uses Bakhtin's theories, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 16.
the Negroes."^{17} Mob actions against blacks in the South
during World War I could be classified as "Southern
Atrocities" akin to German atrocities against the Belgians or
Turkish atrocities against the Armenians during the European
war.^{18} But some of the words that black journalists took
from white pens and mouths did not fit the cause of racial
justice quite as easily. Phrases like loyalty, patriotism,
and "100 percent Americanism" could be used to bolster black
claims to citizenship. Yet the self-sacrificing loyalty
demanded by the national government conflicted with the desire
of many black leaders to use their cooperation in the war
effort as a bargaining chip for racial progress.

While attention to dialogue explains much about the black
press's relations with white America, it does not explain
everything. For while the black press's attack was limited by
the words available to it and the adaptability of those words
to the struggle for equality, it was also limited by the
looming threat of white coercive power. In the South, black
newspapers were the object, from time to time, of vicious
attacks by white mobs. These mobs formed when black
newspapers went "too far" in their protest rhetoric. Such

^{17}Boston Guardian fragment, circa October 1918, folder 91,
box 5, William Monroe Trotter Papers, Boston University, Mugar
Library. Or as the another newspaper put it two years after
the war, "Let us make America safe for Americans." See "The

^{18}See, for example, Savannah Tribune, Nov. 16, 1916, p.
4; William A. Byrd, "Things Must Change," Cleveland Gazette,
June 2, 1917, p. 2.
attacks served to warn others away from making similar statements. In the North, coercive pressures were not as naked, but played a role in shaping the discourse of black newspapers there nonetheless. White advertisers and political parties could withhold crucial funds, and during World War I the regulatory and legal power of the state could shut down black newspapers. During those years of pro-war frenzy, it seemed possible, too, that even in the North black newspapers might be the victims of vigilante violence.19

Thus, the current study seeks to understand the black press during the era of World War I as a frontier between black and white in which terms of racial coexistence were negotiated and renegotiated through written exchanges that were conditioned by the ever-present threat of force.20 This understanding of the black press sheds light on African-American militancy, the role of the black press in black protest and in American life, and, most importantly, the African-American response to World War I.


20 A theory of how ideology and physical force are used in combination to control subordinate groups can be found in Antonio Gramsci Selections from the Prison Notebooks edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971). For a model of how to apply Gramsci's theories to modern American cultural history, which emphasizes the interaction of physical coercion and ideological control, see T. J. Jackson, Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony: Problems and Possibilities," American Historical Review, 90 (June 1985), 567-93
Historians have been deeply divided over how to characterize the black response to this war. Some argue that militancy was negligible during World War I, that African-Americans generally followed the advice of W. E. B. Du Bois to "forget our special grievances and close our ranks"—supporting the war and soft-pedaling protest out of a combination of "deeply-felt patriotism," hope that the war would accelerate racial progress, and fear that failure to comply would lead to brutal persecution. In the post-civil rights era, historians have been more inclined to emphasize the militancy of African Americans whether in opposing the war, or using it as an excuse to step up demands for racial equality. Both sides recognize diversity of opinion among


22 For an account which estimates that between 40 and 50 percent of African Americans opposed the war, see Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., "Apathy and Dissent: Black America's Negative Response to World War I," South Atlantic Quarterly, 80 (Summer 1981), 322-38. Kornweibel and others argue that accounts of the war which emphasize black support of the war shortchange militancy by relying too heavily on elite sources and ignoring the actions of the masses. See, for example, Steven A. Reich, "Soldiers of Democracy: Black Texans and the Fight for
blacks, depicting one group as dominant and the other as the exception that proves the rule. But it has been too easy to see black reaction to the war as breaking down simply along the lines of the old Booker T. Washington/W. E. B. Du Bois, accommodation/protest dichotomy, with Du Bois simply on the other side this time. Such typologies mask profound ambivalence not only within the black press but within individual leaders, newspapers, and journalists.

Historians who try to sum up the editorial position of each black newspaper and plot it on a continuum impose a fictitious consistency on these texts and gloss over their indeterminacies. Black writers were interested in both conveying information, (what linguists call the constative

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Barbeau and Henri, for example, say that unlike Du Bois, "not all black leaders could so totally swallow their bitterness. . . . But most black people went along with Du Bois's "Close Ranks position." See Barbeau and Henri, Unknown Soldiers, 11-12.

Mark Ellis makes this point explicitly, saying that "the question of whether to agitate for reform during the war divided them in ways that perpetuated the long-standing rift between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. See Ellis, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Formation of Black Opinion in World War I," 1585.
aspects of language) and having an impact on an audience. They hoped not just to describe reality, but to create, shape, or condition it. To understand the black response to the war, therefore, the historian needs to go beyond summarizing editorial positions and begin to look at the ways authors used language. Black ambivalence toward the war was not simply a product of indecision or imprecise thinking. Rather it flowed from their attempts to use language to motivate powerful white readers to work on improving race relations in America. The consistency of their thinking mattered less than the impact of their words. This study seeks to describe the circumstances within which black newspapers wrote, reveal the rhetorical strategies they used, and evaluate the effectiveness of those strategies.

The chapters have been organized chronologically as far as possible; since each chapter deals with a different theme, however, there is considerable overlap. Chapter 2 provides a chronological history of the black press from its beginnings in 1827 to the early 20th century, focusing on how it was used as a weapon by blacks and how white people launched their own counterattacks on it. It also gives background on the origins

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of the publications used in this study. Chapter 3 looks at how black newspapers fought with the white South over the practice of lynching. While white Southerners like Thomas Dixon and D. W. Griffith tried to convince the rest of America that lynching was a necessary means of controlling criminal blacks, the black press argued that barbarous Southern lynchers made a mockery of American democracy and destroyed the nation's claim to be fighting for humanitarian values in Europe.

Chapters 4 and 5 focus more directly on the ways black newspapers responded to World War I in a time of fluid, shifting, circumstances and language. While the African American people took advantage of new opportunities in American social and political life by, among other things, participating in the military and migrating to the North, black journalists seized for their own purposes the terms and phrases that the nation was using to wage war--words like preparedness, self-determination, democracy, and loyalty. Chapter 4 looks at how black newspapers sought to simultaneously pledge full loyalty to the government while at the same time seeking rewards for it. Chapter 5 examines the way they tried to transform the war for democracy and human rights in Europe into a war for democracy and human rights for blacks at home.

Chapter 6 examines the response of white America, especially the Federal government, to the black press's
wartime strategies. Although white readers usually rejected black arguments for equality, their clear preference for censoring black newspapers went generally unrealized. In fact, by the summer of 1918, it seemed that black newspapers had struck a working balance between making demands and pledging loyalty. Though the government had instituted some repressive measures and some publications had softened their demands for racial justice, high-level Federal officials had begun to act on a "Bill of Particulars," a list of fourteen demands made by black editors. A few white Southerners had begun to form anti-lynching organizations. Most importantly, President Wilson, the man who three years earlier had implicitly endorsed the racist film, *Birth of a Nation*, condemned lynching in a speech.

Chapter 7 examines the editorial policies of black newspapers during the tumultuous year of 1919, when radical doctrines were sweeping the land, race riots broke out in cities across the country, and government agencies clamped down on dissent. Black editorialists spent the year trying to control the public image of what many were calling the "New Negro," more assertive and angry, proud and politicized than Negroes had been before the war. That image was constructed with white readers in mind, and it was constructed in a way that opposed its good qualities to the negative qualities of the white supremacist South.
This study is based on a close reading of five leading black publications--the Baltimore Afro-American, the Cleveland Gazette, the Chicago Defender, the Crisis, and the New York Age--and an unsystematic sampling of 10 others--the Appeal of St. Paul and Chicago, the Boston Guardian, the California Eagle, the Chicago Broad Ax, the Cleveland Advocate, the Indianapolis Freeman, the Messenger (a socialist weekly), the Norfolk Journal and Guide of Virginia, the Savannah Tribune of Georgia, and the Washington Bee. These journals range from the highly influential and well-circulated Crisis magazine to the relatively obscure California Eagle. They include the Baltimore Afro-American and the Chicago Defender, two newspapers which became, between 1915 and 1925, national, mass-circulation leaders of the industry. On the other hand, the New York Age, one of the leading black weeklies of the time, had begun a long decline relative to up-and-coming journals like the Defender and the Afro-American. The Cleveland Gazette and the Chicago Broad Ax were typical of many 19th century black newspapers, run almost single-handedly by and reflecting the outlook of their owner-proprietors, Harry C. Smith and Julius Taylor.

All but the monthly Crisis and Messenger were published weekly and all but the Crisis were controlled exclusively by blacks. The Crisis was largely under the control of its black editor, W. E. B. Du Bois, but he often had to contend with interference from whites in the magazine's parent.
organization, the NAACP. Few of the publications made much money; the majority of black newspapers operated on a shoestring. Only the Defender approached a regular circulation of 100,000 before 1920. The list includes only two black newspapers from the South, making this primarily a study of Northern black newspapers. After several violent attacks on black newspapers in Southern states at the end of the 19th century, black newspapers in that region drastically curtailed their attack on American racism. Black newspapers outside of the South expressed a wider range of opinions.

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"The Crisis sold 100,000 copies in May of 1919, but it was a one-time high."
CHAPTER 2

"RENOVATING THE PUBLIC MIND": ORIGINS OF THE FIGHTING BLACK PRESS

No, Brother Freeman, we must not be silent. We have but one weapon unimpaired and that weapon is speech, and not to use this and use it freely, is treason to the oppressed.

--Frederick Douglass¹

Throughout the 19th century, Frederick Douglass and many other black authors, publishers and editors of autobiography, poetry, oration, pamphlets, novels, and periodicals employed speech as a weapon against oppression, slavery, and racism. Of these works, periodicals account for the steadiest and most voluminous output. African Americans produced 27 newspapers and journals before the Civil War and hundreds more afterward. As Douglass suggested and as literary scholars have shown, these literary efforts were not concerned principally with the achievement of aesthetic excellence or with faithful descriptions of reality; first and foremost, they were intended as "weapons" in a war that took place not on grassy

battlefields, but within words, languages, and discourses as writers sought to influence the American mind.²

The Antebellum Black Press

Freedom's Journal, the first African American newspaper, was founded in 1827 in part to unite and define "people of color" as a group, and like other black newspapers, it contributed to the creation of a separate black identity by promoting a shared heritage, a pantheon of heroes, and a mythos of struggle, survival, and triumph. It also advocated uplift of African Americans through moral and intellectual improvement; cooperative ventures; and, in the Journal's words, linking "together by one solid chain, the whole free [black] population, so as to make them think, and feel and act, as one solid body, devoted to education and improvements."³ John B. Russwurm, one of the original editors of Freedom's Journal, ultimately came to reject America altogether and advocate colonization of all black Americans to


³Quoted in Bella Gross, "Freedom's Journal and the Rights of All," Journal of Negro History, 17 (July 1932), 284-5, see also, 258, 259-60, 272, 284.

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Africa. His coeditor, Samuel Cornish, however, followed the path of most other free blacks who envisioned his race as a nation within and part of the American nation.

Frederick Douglass, the most famous of all antebellum black publishers, also saw his newspapers as media of communication among blacks. He saw it as his duty as editor to promote the "moral and intellectual improvement of the colored people," to make blacks aware of "their own latent powers" to fight prejudice, and to provide them with hope for the future. His newspapers promoted community activities, accentuated positive accomplishments and events, and provided hope in a way that Frankie Hutton argues "was a clever form of resistance to oppression and to the race's degraded status."

But early black newspaper publishers also hoped to make contact with white America. *Freedom's Journal* defined itself as a "channel of communication between us and the public," and an instrument of "defense." Douglass referred to his work in journalism as "renovating the public mind, and building up a public sentiment, which should send slavery to the grave." He hoped "to remove prejudice" against blacks by demonstrating

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"their capacity for a more exalted civilization than salary and prejudice had assigned them." Blacks who founded newspapers in the antebellum period frequently did so in direct response to denial of access to white newspapers. Rev. Samuel Cornish and John B. Russwurm founded Freedom's Journal as a means of responding to the daily, vicious attacks on blacks by, among others, Mordecai M. Noah, editor of the New York Enquirer. Martin R. Delany founded The Mystery in Pittsburgh in 1843 after the local dailies refused to print blacks' letters. When William A. Hodges attempted to rebut the New York Sun's attacks on black voting rights in 1846, the daily newspaper would only print his letter-to-the-editor for a fee of $15 and even then altered its content. An editor told Hodges "The Sun shines for all white men and not for colored men," and that if he wanted a public forum for his ideas, he should start his own newspaper. A year later, Hodges took the Sun's advice and established the Ram's Horn. These men preferred to have their say in the existing mainstream press, and founded their own journals only when rebuffed.10

Whether writing to white newspapers or in their own publications, black authors trying to reach white America faced formidable obstacles. White readers had trouble believing that black people were even capable of writing. Phillis Wheatley, the first African-American poet, was quizzed by a panel of 18 of Boston's most eminent citizens, including John Hancock, to evaluate her claim to having authored a book of poetry which included references to Greek and Latin Gods, Milton, and Pope. Only with their "Attestation" could she secure a publisher. Authors of slave narratives usually included a preface or "authenticating document" in which a white writer assured skeptical white readers that the book was indeed written by a literate black man or woman.

White Americans both North and South generally accepted as given the notion of blacks' inferiority. The Victorian world view rested on a belief that the world was divided between dichotomous and hierarchical elements which must remain separated: human and animal, civilized and savage,

11Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that "writing, for these slaves, was not an activity of mind; rather, it was a commodity which they were forced to trade for their humanity." See "Editor's Introduction: Writing 'Race' and the Difference it Makes," in "Race," Writing, and Difference, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 7-9. According to another author, Wheatley "did not write as a Negro; she wrote as an eighteenth-century Bostonian, a proper eighteenth-century Bostonian." See Lerone Bennett, Jr., Before the Mayflower: A History of the Negro in America, 1619-1964, 6th ed. (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 64.

white and black. Even most northerners who favored emancipation of the slaves—including Abraham Lincoln—believed that inferior blacks should be sent back to Africa because it would be impossible for them to live in harmony with superior whites.\textsuperscript{13}

African American journalists sought to renovate the public mind not by showing the Victorian world view to be false, but by showing that blacks were human, not animal; civilized, not savage. They placed on display the doings of respectable, middle-class blacks, ignored the masses of lower-class blacks, criticized the attacks of white newspapers, and defended the virtue and honor of black women. As Hutton concludes, antebellum black editors sought both to guide black behavior and "mold white attitudes" by documenting "the abilities and successes of free blacks."\textsuperscript{14}


\textsuperscript{14}Hutton, Early Black Press in America, 74, 39-43, 66. For another interpretation which argues that the antebellum black press sought to "attract white readers, thus furnishing an evidence of Negro abilities as well as an exposure to his
Rise of the Black Press in the South

The Civil War marked a major and abrupt turning point for the black press, causing the end of anti-slavery newspapers and the beginning of Afro-American newspapers in the South. L'Union, established in union-occupied New Orleans on Sept. 27, 1862, became the South's first black newspaper, just five days after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation and three months before it took effect.\textsuperscript{15} Black newspapers were founded in Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Alabama in 1865 and in Mississippi in 1867. The first Texas paper, the Freeman's Press, owned by a white radical Republican in Austin, but operated and read by blacks, was founded in 1868, and weeklies were started up in Arkansas in 1869 and Florida in 1870. Most of these were short-lived, with a life span of a couple of years--few survived a decade or more. Circulation figures were low, but comparable to white rural community weeklies, usually under 1,000.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{16}The Montgomery Sentinel of Alabama printed 1,000 copies weekly in 1872 and three South Carolina newspapers had circulations of 480, 280, and 1,000 in 1873. See Allen Woodrow Jones, "Alabama," in Black Press in the South, ed. Suggs, 25; and Theodore Hemmingway, "South Carolina," in ibid., 293. Although these numbers seem ridiculously small by
Despite frequent violence against them during Reconstruction, many of the new papers took strong political stands. Although protest was virtually impossible in places like Mississippi, in most of the South editors usually supported Republican candidates; agitated for political and sometimes even social equality; criticized white politicians, the Democratic Party, and the Ku Klux Klan; and organized black resistance. In his study of the South Carolina press, for example, Theodore Hemmingway found that Reconstruction papers like the Missionary Record (1871-75) "were all militant in protecting and securing the rights of the freemen," and "advocated full economic, social and political rights" while attacking white supremacy.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Southern whites perfected and encoded in law the system of exclusive white rule and racial segregation in housing, public facilities, and today's standards, even major urban newspapers' circulations were generally much lower in the mid-19th century. The New York Sun, a leading daily in the nation's largest city, for example, had a circulation of just 43,000 in 1868. And "country weeklies" in small towns generally sold less than 1,000 copies a week--often less than 500. See Frank Luther Mott, American Journalism: A History of Newspapers in the United States Through 250 Years, 1690-1940 (New York: Macmillan, 1941), 374, 396; John Cameron Sim, The Grass Roots Press: America's Community Newspapers (Ames: Iowa University Press, 1969), 29.


Hemmingway, "South Carolina," 299.
institutions. Blacks would now be virtually excluded from politics and even persecuted for statements they made in their newspapers. As part of their "redemption" of the South, white elites established a system of white supremacy, with intellectual and "scientific" justifications, cultural taboos, ritualistic means of enforcement, and restrictive rules of discourse. This system was solidified and embodied in new state constitutions at different times in different states after 1890, and by the first decades of the twentieth century, blacks had been effectively excluded from politics in the South, and most black editors there had moved away from the most strident forms of protest. This change was accomplished by a combination of physical coercion--including a general increase in violence against blacks and direct attacks on black newspapers--and the persuasive power of a new ideology derived from the hegemonic ideas of the Gilded Age, including social Darwinism, commercial values, individual social mobility, and political conservatism.

Hundreds of black citizens were being lynched every year toward the end of the century, and in the 1880s and 1990s, angry whites drove several black newspapers out of business. In 1887, publisher Jesse C. Duke of the Montgomery Baptist Leader had to flee the state of Alabama with a mob on his heels after he wrote, in response to the lynching of a black man for alleged rape, of "the growing appreciation of the
white Juliet for the colored Romeo." R. C. O. Benjamin, editor of the *Birmingham Negro American*, and a self-proclaimed "chronic disturber of the peace," was forced into exile that same year for defending Duke in print. In 1889, after Mansfield E. Bryant, "the most aggressive and fearless editor in the country," predicted in his *Selma Independent* the outbreak of a race war in which, he hoped, blacks would wipe whites out of existence, he was arraigned on charges of making "incendiary utterances," narrowly escaped a lynching, and finally fled to Nashville.20

But Tennessee would prove to be no haven. In 1892, white Memphians drove Ida B. Wells to the North after she wrote an unequivocal attack on lynching. Twenty-nine years old that year, Wells already had an impressive career as journalist and activist. In addition to co-publishing her own journal, the *Memphis Free Speech and Headlight*, she had filed a lawsuit in 1884 challenging the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad's Jim Crow practices; written articles in the *New York Freeman*, the *Indianapolis World*, and the *Chicago Conservator*; worked as a school teacher in Memphis Tennessee; and helped raise her newspaper's circulation from 1,500 to 4,000 with a one-woman circulation drive in the lower South. Some of the *Free Speech*'s more incendiary polemics were reprinted in the white press, including Wells's 1891 call for violent retribution


20 Jones, "Alabama," 31-33; Benjamin quoted, *ibid.*, 33.
against lynchers, which resulted in the expulsion from Memphis of the paper's first owner. Wells and an editorial associate, J. L. Fleming, purchased the paper from him, setting the stage for their own expulsion. A year later, when three friends of Wells--black men who owned a successful grocery store--were lynched for resisting arrest, she advised black readers to leave the city (2,000 did) and boycott streetcars, and began a series of exposes on lynching and the rape myth. A few weeks later, in late May, when five blacks were lynched for allegedly raping white women, she wrote,

Nobody in this section believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men assault white women. If Southern men are not careful they will over-reach themselves and a conclusion will be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women.

Fortunately for Wells, she happened to be visiting Philadelphia when, in response to the editorial, a bloodthirsty mob led by leading white citizens descended on the office, destroying its contents. They seem to have been heeding the counsel of the Memphis Daily Commercial, which reprinted Wells' editorial (presumed to be written by a man) and added:

The fact that a black scoundrel is allowed to live and utter such loathsome and repulsive calumnies is a volume of evidence as to the wonderful patience of Southern whites. . . . . There are some things that the Southern white man will not tolerate, and the obscene intimations of the foregoing have brought the writer to the very outermost of public patience. We hope we have said enough.
Well's partner also escaped the city safely, but they were warned never to publish another issue, and Wells never returned to Memphis. It is not surprising that remarks about sex between black men and white women were the cause of Wells's and Fleming's expulsion. These issues obsessed white supremacists and drove their fears and hatred of blacks during those years.

An editorial on lynching also led to the expulsion of editor Alex Manly of the *Wilmington Daily Record* from Wilmington, North Carolina six years later. In an editorial on lynching in 1898 he noted that many blacks had white men for fathers and suggested that white women often accused their black lovers of rape as a way to save their reputations. White-owned newspapers reprinted the editorial; the *Raleigh News and Observer* even distributed 300,000 copies as a leaflet. At a time when, according to Joel Williamson, many white "race radicals" all over the South had become convinced that black men were insatiable, sex-hungry beasts, waiting for any opportunity to brutalize white women, "the Manly editorial became a cause celebre in the white supremacy campaign." One white speaker suggested "'choking the Cape Fear River with the bodies of Negroes'" as a response to the editorial. An ad hoc

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committee of moderate city officials voted to expel Manly and the Daily Record from Wilmington, but when the editor seemed to delay leaving, an angry mob burned the Record office, then rampaged through the black neighborhoods shooting down inhabitants. When the smoke cleared, 30 African Americans had been killed and scores of blacks were fleeing the city.  

The decline of protest in the Southern black press was a result not only of intimidation, but also the triumph of an individualistic, self-help ethos. Booker T. Washington became the agent through which the conservative self-help ideology of the times was disseminated among African Americans. Washington operated Tuskegee Institute, a well-known vocational training school for blacks, in Tuskegee, Alabama. Though he was influential in the South in the 1880s and 90s, especially in Alabama, Washington was catapulted into the role of leader of black America in 1895 after whites chose him to deliver a speech at the Atlanta Exposition in which he outlined his philosophy of black advancement. In the famous speech, Washington counseled survival through adjustment to, 

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23 While black papers in Alabama "continued to protest racial violence, segregation, white supremacy, and disfranchisement, . . . the editors were less militant. Booker T. Washington's influence upon black editors in Alabama became evident by the mid-1890s, and his ideas of racial survival were reflected more each year in the black newspapers," according to Jones, "Alabama," 36.
rather than protest against, the South's system of white supremacy. Black people should stop protesting for equality and civil rights and focus on self-improvement and uplift, especially in the economic realm. If they proved themselves economically useful, Washington reasoned, whites would welcome them as full citizens. Washington's economic determinism was not developed in a vacuum, but emerged from the intellectual and cultural currents of the second industrial revolution: the Social Darwinism of William Graham Sumner, Andrew Carnegie's Gospel of Wealth, and the rags-to-riches fantasies of Horatio Alger.

Black newspapers increasingly reflected this philosophy, giving less coverage to politics and placing more emphasis on business, individual self help, moral uplift, and group achievement. After Washington's home state adopted a constitution that disfranchised black voters in 1901, "most black editors in Alabama recognized that politics held limited promise for safe-guarding the rights of Afro-Americans in the state," one historian has written. When they did discuss politics, they "emphasized earning political rights through observation, education, and economic self-sufficiency." Accommodation perhaps reached its peak when the Selma Advocate announced in its first issue in 1915 that it would never print


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"anything that has a tendency to bring about unpleasant relations between the races."²⁵

Some editors during the New South era implicitly accommodated white supremacy simply by de-emphasizing politics and racial conflict while increasing their attention to social and economic issues. Others overtly endorsed and practiced the philosophy of accommodation with white racism and adjustment to, rather than protest against, white supremacy. When Isaiah Montgomery, the only black man at the 1890 Mississippi state constitutional convention, voted with the majority to restrict black civil rights, much of the black press in the state supported him.²⁶ John Willis Menard's Southern Leader supported a new Florida constitution that included a poll tax aimed at preventing blacks from voting. An editorial expressed the hope that whites would "'ever feel kindly towards the colored people'" for backing the new document. In opposing T. Thomas Fortune's militant Afro-


American League that same year, Menard argued that racial prejudice should be handled "'with soft gloves.'"

Although it was the most visible and controversial aspect of the Washingtonian philosophy, accommodationism may not have been its most important component. At the core was dedication to self-help and the notion that hard work, self-improvement, and upright behavior would guarantee economic success and personal advancement. Many blacks, even a young W. E. B. Du Bois, believed that the degraded condition of blacks, rather than race prejudice, kept them down. Black newspapers, including many that rejected accommodation, called on their readers to become educated, buy land, and establish businesses. Furthermore, they extolled middle class Victorian morality and values of thrift, industry, temperance, and cleanliness. Numerous black editors rejected dependence on whites or the notion of reparations for slavery in favor of a model of manly reliance. Matthew M. Lewey, editor of the Florida Sentinel, wrote a few years before Washington's Atlanta Address that African Americans should "rely entirely upon ourselves in the development of manly character, aspire to excel in everything, work hard day and night, get money,

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educate our children, don't beg but depend upon our own brain and muscles."

The social separatism of the Tuskegee program and its emphasis on self help contributed to the ongoing development of black nationalism, or "moderate racialism," a belief in racial collectivism which made a priority of advancement of the whole race, especially in business, and required individual service and charity to the race, but also acknowledged the importance of interracial good will. Editors, well before Washington's arrival on the scene, had called on blacks to "be a unit in action" in business and politics in order "to build each other up." In addition to political and economic cooperation, moderate racialism usually meant black pride. As the Savannah Tribune put it, one should "love his race and do his part to advance its interests." Black newspapers sought to foster love of race by running profiles of blacks successful in business, politics, arts, and other endeavors; citing the contributions of blacks to American and world history; and broadcasting the social and

29 Quoted in Penn, Afro-American Press and Its Editors, 173.


32 Savannah Tribune, Jan. 1, 1876, quoted in Alton Hornsby, Jr., "Georgia," in Black Press in the South, ed. Suggs, 120.
economic advancements of the race as a whole. The Nashville Globe advocated the study of Negro history, the patronizing of black businesses, and racial purity. Its publisher, Richard Boyd, sold black dolls which he advertised in 1908 as toys that would teach black "children how to look upon their people," because "They represent the intelligent and refined Negro of today, rather than that type of toy that is usually given to the children."

The white South did not eliminate all militancy—or even all discussion of interracial sex—from the Southern black press. Alabama's Birmingham Era survived, for example, even after it defended Duke's remarks by citing examples of consensual liaisons between white women and black men, and opposing a miscegenation bill under consideration by the state legislature. Some Southern newspapers, like the Dallas Express, the St Louis Argus, and the Richmond Planet continued to emphasize protest. John L. Mitchell Jr. of the Planet "hammered away at the barbarity of Southern [lynch] mobs without suffering reprisals from whites." Mitchell spoke of blacks arming themselves in self defense, criticized incompetent police and racist judges, and even warned of a bloody race war. But he seems never to have challenged the


"Jones, "Alabama," 33-34.

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rape myth, and after the turn of the century, even this gadfly "muted" his tone." By the 1890s, most Southern black newspapers had become extremely cautious.

The combination of the threat of violence and the attractiveness of Booker T. Washington's self-help ideology worked a great change in the Southern black press. In part, these newspapers had altered their approach to mollify white readers. Though white Southerners may not have bought enough black newspapers to increase circulation revenues, enough of them read the black press that the white community would find out when when racial etiquette had been violated. In the cases of Wells and Manly, for example, white newspaper editors reprinted offending black articles in their own newspapers. Black editors found themselves in a difficult position. They could generally not count on persuading white Southerners and knew anything deemed offensive might be used as a reason to persecute them. Black editors in the South could not ignore their white readers. In order to preserve their own safety, they had to refrain from saying certain things. In addition, black editors had moved away from protest and politics because they had come increasingly to accept Washington's ideas about self help and industry. In the end, however, catering to white readers damaged the Southern black press enormously.

Black readers—the ones who accounted for circulation revenue—wanted to read the things that had to be left unsaid. What George Schuyler observed about black papers in Mississippi—that they avoided "nine-tenths of the real news and practically all of the possible topics crying for comment"—was true of black newspapers in other states only to a lesser degree. Not surprisingly, Southern blacks increasingly turned to Northern papers for race news and the black press declined precipitously all over the South, especially after 1915.


37 Some Southern black newspapers like the Dallas Express, the Nashville Globe, and most notably the Norfolk Journal and Guide prospered after the turn of the century, but these were the exceptions. In Alabama, the black press "declined rapidly" after 1915, in both the number of papers published and in overall circulation. See Jones, "Alabama," 36, 37, 39-40, 42; Selma Advocate quoted, 39.

The years 1914 to 1920 marked a "departure point in the affairs of Florida blacks" which had the effect of making the state's African-American press "much less dynamic and more static" and "more difficult to establish and maintain," with the result that many readers now turned to Northern papers for race news, according to Jerrell H. Shofner. The black press in Florida had been thriving: the Jacksonville Florida Standard reached a circulation of 17,000 in 1910, one of the highest in the nation; the National Negro Press Association was established in the state in 1911; and in 1914, the state's leading black paper, the Gainsville Florida Sentinel was moved to Jacksonville to be published as a daily. But as Negro laborers began to leave the South that year in what would come to be known as the "Great Migration," Sentinel publisher Matthew M. Lewey decided to continue publishing as a weekly. See Shofner, "Florida," 99-100, 105, 106.
Agitation and Accommodation in the North

The golden age of black journalism began shortly after the end of Reconstruction. Between 1879 and 1895, a dozen influential and long-lasting black newspapers as well as many other minor or short-lived ones were established. Though the vast majority of African Americans still lived in Southern states, the most important of these publications arose outside of the South. They included the California Eagle (at first called the Owl) in 1879; the Washington Bee in 1882; the Cleveland Gazette and the New York Globe (later reincarnated as the New York Freeman and the New York Age) and the Richmond Planet in 1883; the Philadelphia Tribune in 1884; the Appeal of St. Paul and Chicago in 1885; the Indianapolis Freeman in 1888; the Baltimore Afro-American in 1892; and the Broad Ax of Salt Lake City in 1895 (it moved to Chicago four years later). Two of these, the Philadelphia Tribune and the Baltimore Afro-American, still publish and all survived through World War I. It is no coincidence that most of these newspapers were located in the North. In the more hospitable climate there, black newspapers could agitate relatively freely for black equality and citizenship rights. Many of the editors of these


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new newspapers could claim membership in a group which became known in the 1890s as the "Afro-American Agitators."

*Atlanta Constitution* editor and New South prophet Henry Grady, who invented the label, meant it as an insult, but Agitators adopted it as a badge of honor." The Agitator editors of newspapers like the *New York Age*, the *Cleveland Gazette*, the *Richmond Planet*, the *Indianapolis World*, the *St. Paul Appeal*, the *Chicago Broad Ax*, the *Washington Bee* and the *Chicago Conservator* were independent and outspoken advocates of civil rights who boldly criticized racial inequities and railed against the precipitous decline of race relations--especially in the South--in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Most, like Calvin Chase of the *Washington Bee* and Harry C. Smith of the *Cleveland Gazette*, denounced Booker T. Washington. Julius Taylor of the *Chicago Broad Ax* sometimes praised Washington in the 1890s, but attacked him bitterly after 1900, hurling such epithets as "moral pygmy," and the "Great Beggar of Tuskegee." T. Thomas Fortune, the leading Agitator journalist, and the only one who has been the subject of a full-length, published biography, did not attack Washington and accommodationism. Instead, he developed an alliance with the "Wizard of Tuskegee" and argued that

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different approaches were required in the North and South. Most Agitators agreed with Booker T. Washington on several significant matters. For example, like him, the Agitators had faith in upward mobility and middle class values; emphasized black and white unity of interests; supported industrial education; and advocated land and business ownership as means of black uplift.

But there were even more important differences between Washington and the Agitators. In contrast to Washington's opposition to "social equality," most Agitators were assimilationists who believed in the unity of the human race and even racial amalgamation. Appeal editor John Q. Adams called for the elimination of any kinds of racial designation which accentuated black distinctiveness. Rather than "African American" or "Negro," blacks should use the term "colored." "The colored people of America are Americans and not 'negroes.' Any man who uses the world 'negro' to describe the Americans who happen to be darker than other Americans does


himself and his children a great wrong," Adams wrote. "All persons in this country should be considered Americans without any prefixes or suffixes." Harry C. Smith opposed separate black institutions of any kind, even those which would benefit blacks in their communities. He opposed creation of a separate hospital, home for girls, and YMCA in Cleveland. Fortune thought the best course for the future of mankind would be the mixing of races. He advocated the spread of Christianity in Africa and promoted the term "Afro-American" over "Negro" because he believed American blacks were "a new race, more American than African." Fortune also believed the term forced white Americans to assert the humanity of blacks. "All the white newspapers of this country regard you as 'negroes' and write Negro with a little 'n,'" he told a convention of black businessmen in 1906.

They regard you as a common noun. . . . Now I get around that undesirable title by adopting "AFRO-AMERICAN," which calls for the use of two big capital 'A's." (Laughter and applause). I AM A PROPER NOUN, NOT A COMMON NOUN!"


"Thornbrough, T. Thomas Fortune, 145, 146, 133.

"Quoted in Thornbrough, T. Thomas Fortune, 134.
Where Washington preached political passivity combined with absolute loyalty to the Republican Party, Agitators tended to advocate political activism and independence. Calvin Chase said blacks should split their votes between the Democratic and Republican Parties, since the latter had "deserted, disowned, and frowned upon the colored people of the South in 1876." Julius Taylor's *Broad Ax* was originally a Democratic journal, though he later came to support mostly Republican candidates. Though Harry C. Smith generally supported Republicans, he helped to organize an Interstate League of Independent Colored Voters in 1902, advised blacks to vote against a Republican president in 1908, and supported a local Democratic candidate in 1909. Fortune supported Democrat Grover Cleveland for president in the late 1880s. Blacks, he said, should follow the principle of "race first: then party."

Perhaps the starkest difference between Tuskegee and the Agitators was over black assertiveness. Where Washington counseled passivity, Agitators called for political involvement and advocated armed self defense or even

"Quoted in Meier, *Negro Thought in America*, 30.


retaliatory violence." Harry Smith, editor of the Cleveland Gazette, served three terms in the Ohio state legislature. John Q. Adams kept the Appeal going with income from minor political appointments. Editor John Mitchell of the Richmond Planet, the only major Southern Agitator, exhibited unusual bravery by calling on blacks to arm themselves. "The best remedy for a lyncher or a cursed mid-night rider," he dared write in 1890, "is a 16-shot Winchester rifle in the hands of a Negro who has nerve enough to pull the trigger."

Fortune advocated self-defense and endorsed retaliation after both the Wilmington riot in 1898 and the Atlanta riot in 1906. "'The trouble will go on in Atlanta,'" he told a white reporter after the latter incident, in which thousands of whites rampaged through black neighborhoods, killing and burning, "until the Negro retaliates--until, driven to bay, the Negro slays his assailant." In a letter to the Brooklyn Eagle in 1900, Fortune gave what his biographer, Emma

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50 On the Chicago Conservator's endorsement of retaliatory violence, see Kreiling, "Making of Racial Identities in the Black Press," 140. On the Appeal's belief in political activism despite some sympathy with the Tuskegee approach, see ibid., 170-80.


52 Quoted in Ann Alexander, "Mitchell, John R., Jr.," Dictionary of American Negro Biography, ed. Logan, 444-45. Though Mitchell bucked the Southern trend toward accommodation in the 1890s, he moved away from agitation and emphasized economic betterment after 1902, according to Alexander.

53 Quoted in Thornbrough, T. Thomas Fortune, 279. See also, ibid., 183.
Lou Thomborough, called "his most effective defense of the use of retaliatory force":

The blackman's right of self-defense is identically the same as the white man's right of self-defense. . . . When the law does not protect me, as it does not in the South . . . what am I to do? Accept it all meekly, without protest or resentment? . . . Slaves do that sort of thing, and are worthy to be slaves, but free men, American freemen! Who expects them to do it?"

Though they opposed Booker T. Washington's ideas, some Agitators, notably Chase and Fortune, came to rely on him for financial help, which compromised their editorial independence and led other militants to attack them. Washington secretly became one of the chief stockholders of the Age, and in 1907, after suffering a mental breakdown, Fortune sold his share of the paper to Fred Moore, whom Washington was covertly subsidizing. Calvin Chase, an outspoken critic of Washington since 1895, took a $100 payoff to write a series of pro-Washington editorials in 1906, and then continued to back Tuskegee until 1915."

"Thomborough, T. Thomas Fortune, 200.


According to Albert Lee Kreiling, the significance of Northern Afro-American Agitators lies in their impact on black consciousness. Agitator journals established a ritual of outrage over the decline of race relations in the South. Promoting political independence and self help over dependence on whites and maintaining faith in the power of moral suasion to overcome racial problems, they helped to form a middle-class African-American identity and group consciousness, and a reassuring secular religion or mythos in a confusing urban modern world. But this argument privileges the unconscious motives of historical actors while shortchanging their conscious motives and the impacts of their actions. The Agitators may have contributed to the construction of satisfying rituals, but they also responded to and demolished racist arguments and provided an alternative to Washington's doctrine of surrender. More importantly, they forced at least a few white Americans to face the issue of race and to confront the gap between American ideals and the practices of lynching, segregation, and disfranchisement.

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As the Washington Bee's motto put it, they handed out "Honey for Friends, Stings for Enemies." The Chicago Broad Ax's editor portrayed the black newspaper as a weapon against white racism and the mainstream press. "The vast majority of the daily newspapers are ever ready to use their great power to assist to pull [African Americans] down," Julius Taylor wrote. But on the other hand, "the little Colored newspapers are constantly struggling as best they can to fight their battles for them." When Ida B. Wells began writing for the New York Age she believed she now had the "opportunity to tell the world for the first time the true story of Negro lynchings." Fortune believed that Negro journals were necessary to respond to white newspapers, which were "published by white men for white men; give, in the main, news about white men, and pitch their editorial opinions entirely in the interest of white men." All white newspapers in the South and two-thirds of those in the North and West were "leagued against the Negro and his rights," Fortune wrote, so blacks must make an attempt to fight back. "[T]he only way we can hope ever to win our fight is to arm ourselves as our

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Chicago Broad Ax, Dec. 18, 1915.

opponents do, support those newspapers alone that support us, and support those men alone that support us." 61

And white America sometimes felt compelled to respond in kind. Thornbrough cites a number of occasions when white journalists responded to Fortune's utterances in the Globe, Freeman, and Age. When he wrote in the Globe in 1883 that blacks should defend themselves with guns if necessary, he engendered a "spate of protests in the white press," according to Thornbrough. A year later, the white Wilmingtonian of Delaware felt compelled to rebut his defense of interracial marriage and brand the Globe a "'rabid journal.'" Other white newspapers, including the Macon Telegraph and the New York World, criticized the Globe, while others, including the New York Sun, the Boston Herald, and the Springfield Republican, praised it. Harper's Weekly and a few white dailies in the South all spoke out against the New York Freeman's call for an Afro-American League in 1887. Fortune's speech to the A. M. E. church conference in 1900, in which he advocated armed resistance, led the New York Times to write an editorial under the headline "'A Very Foolish Negro.'" Several white newspapers derided his proposal, printed in the black magazine Voice of the Negro in 1903, to appoint a black governor of the Philippines and encourage African Americans to migrate

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"Fortune quoted in Thornbrough, T. Thomas Fortune, 45-46.

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there. Such white criticism did not intimidate Fortune, safe from Southern mobs. On the contrary, it emboldened him to speak out more sharply in response to them. He would often print a white editorial alongside his own response, visually displaying the dialogue between him and white America.

At a time when African Americans were largely invisible to whites--hidden, as W. E. B. Du Bois put it, behind a "vast veil"--this small opening up of dialogue was neither an inconsequential nor an insignificant outcome. Though most whites ignored the black press, not all did. And to the extent that black journalists like Fortune forced white people to pay attention to their utterances, they succeeded in poking holes in the veil, in making themselves visible, and in forcing whites to reconsider their assumptions about African Americans and race.

"Thornbrough, T. Thomas Fortune. 48-50, 108-9, and 199. Ida Wells reported that "the Age was on the exchange list of many of the white periodicals of the North." See Wells, Autobiography of Ida B. Wells, 78.


"Hans-Georg Gadamer argues that dialogue leads to a "fusion of horizons," and that "one is required to take account of the positions of others in discussing an issue or subject-matter with them. Here, even if one holds to one's initial point of view one has nevertheless to deal with the objections, considerations and counter-examples that others introduce. In the end, whether one changes one's position or maintains it, the view that results is more developed than the one with which one began and the same holds for the views of all participants." See Georgia Warnke, Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason (Stanford: Stanford University Press,
Not all of the major late 19th century black newspapers could be considered Agitator journals. Yet the leading non-Agitator journal of the period, the widely circulated Indianapolis Freeman, also engaged in dialogue with white America, though in different ways. Founded in 1888 and taken over in 1892 by George F. Knox, a committed accommodationist and ally of Tuskegee, the Freeman reflected white ideas and reassured whites of the reasonableness of African Americans. Knox was an embodiment of the Tuskegee program of hard work, self-help, and political accommodation; his life story even resembled Washington’s. Both men were born into slavery and achieved phenomenal success in the face of extraordinary odds. Both were optimistic leaders who preached self-help and adjustment to the segregated society rather than protest against it. Each presented himself as evidence that an upright, moral, and productive life could overcome the limitations imposed by a racist society. Like Washington, Knox had relied heavily during his life on the benevolence of white friends. As slaves in Tennessee, his family had enjoyed

1987), 170.


"'special considerations'" from their masters, and were treated better than other slaves." He made his fortune as owner of several barbershops--first in the town of Greenfield, Indiana, and then in Indianapolis--which catered exclusively to elite white customers, some of whom he followed into Republican Party politics in the 1870s." Indeed, like Washington, it was his influence with whites that gained him a position of leadership within the black community in the 1890s." The Indianapolis World and other opponents sometimes expressed resentment that Knox had been "thrust forward as the leader of Negroes" by whites and that his success had depended on his refusing to serve blacks in his barbershops."

According to Willard B. Gatewood, Knox was shaped by his contacts with whites and most of his views on important issues were modeled on those of white mentors." He believed most blacks should remain in the South; eschewed social equality; scolded blacks for creating their own problems by vagrancy and

"Gatewood, "Introduction," 4-5.


"Gatewood, "Introduction," 17.
lawlessness; and promoted black business and middle class values of thrift, industry, and clean living. He expressed an often unfounded optimism. At the nadir of black history, when race relations were deteriorating in the most profound ways, he saw "little reason to be dissatisfied with conditions in this country.""2

Knox's views were not entirely alien to those of the Agitators. Like them, he espoused middle-class values and sought to establish links with the "'best white people'" while shunning "'lower elements' of both races.""3 Like most Agitators, he saw himself as more American than African, came to see a need for political independence from the Republican Party, and opposed bans on intermarriage."4 Like Agitators, he supported vocational training but also the right of black students to pursue a more academic education."5 Unlike Washington, Knox openly participated in politics and even engaged in some limited protest activities. He spoke out against lynching, for example, and after 1917 protested against the KKK, supported a Federal anti-lynching bill, and called for improved housing."6

"2 Quoted in Gatewood, "Introduction," 35.
"3 Gatewood, "Introduction," 17.
"4 Gatewood, "Introduction," 36, 27.
"5 Gatewood, "Introduction," 34.
"6 Also like some Agitators, Knox accepted financial assistance from Tuskegee. See Gatewood, "Introduction," 34.
"At times," Gatewood writes, "Knox assumed the position of a thoroughgoing accommodationist and at others one that seemed to place him among the more militant elements of the black community. On one occasion he was altogether capable of pursuing both simultaneously." Like Southern accommodationists, Knox never completely eliminated protest, but rather made it a higher priority to placate white people, whom he saw as a source of patronage. In this sense, the newspaper was geared to white readers.

The Black Press Enters the 20th Century

With so many of the older journalists captured by Tuskegee, the mantle of opposition to Booker T. Washington fell to a new generation of activist journalists who became known as "radicals." William Monroe Trotter started the movement in 1901 when he established his Boston Guardian newspaper. In its pages, Trotter carried on a bitter fight against Washington, Tuskegee, accommodation, and segregation of any kind.

A graduate of Harvard College, Trotter had been raised by his father, James, a prosperous Federal officeholder, in a white Boston neighborhood. The elder Trotter fought for the Union Army in the Civil War, authored a book on black

"Gatewood, "Introduction," 35.
musicians, served a lucrative term as recorder of deeds in Washington under the Cleveland administration, and taught his son to stand up to white foes in the neighborhood. Monroe was a quick study, and he grew up lacking in any feelings of inferiority, utterly assured in his conviction that blacks deserved an equal place with whites in American society. After graduating magna cum laude from Harvard in 1895, he tried a succession of jobs while becoming increasingly involved in black protest activities. Finally, in 1901, he embarked on his life work as publisher of the Guardian. Though other militant editors had combined journalism with direct protest activities, Trotter took protest further than any black journalist since the Civil War--and perhaps ever. In 1903, Trotter was sent to jail for his role in the "Boston Riot" when he and some cohorts disrupted speeches of Fortune and Washington at a meeting of the National Business League in Boston by throwing red pepper onto the platform and shouting unanswerable questions at the speakers. Reported in newspapers across the country, the riot made whites aware for the first time of African American opposition to the Tuskegee program. As Trotter biographer Stephen R. Fox wrote, "Few white men at this time agreed with the radicals' case, but at

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*Fox, Guardian of Boston, 4-12.
*Fox, Guardian of Boston, 16-19, 21-28.
*Fox, Guardian of Boston, 29-30.
*Fox, Guardian of Boston, 49-58.

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least they knew of its existence after the riot."8 Most white philanthropist allies of Washington were appalled, yet it was a first step for some of them toward establishment of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1909."

Most important of all, the Boston Riot led W. E. B. Du Bois, a former Harvard classmate of Trotter's and the leading black intellectual of his generation, toward an alliance with the radicals. Du Bois became co-founder in 1905 of the militant Niagara Movement, a group of mostly northern black men, united in opposition to Tuskegeeian accommodation and in outspoken advocacy of civil rights. The Niagara Movement was short lived—a victim of internal squabbling among Trotter, Du Bois, and others. But members of the group, especially Du Bois, were influential in establishing the NAACP."

That new organization sponsored one of the most well-written and influential black journals ever published, the *Crisis*. Where most black newspapers were owned and operated

82 Fox, *Guardian of Boston*, 53-58, esp. 58.


wholly by African Americans, the *Crisis*, was overseen by whites. Though edited and run by an African American, W. E. B. Du Bois, the journal was unique among black publications. The all-white NAACP executive board maintained oversight powers, and in this way Du Bois found himself in close proximity to some of the white readers that all black journals sought to reach. Where other black editors seldom actually got replies from their attempts to establish dialogue with whites, Du Bois got frequent feedback from his white colleagues, who often criticized his editorials or sought to modify is positions.

Du Bois encountered the most interference from Oswald Garrison Villard, whom the editor charged with unconscious race prejudice." But even Mary White Ovington and Joel Spingarn, allies in whom Du Bois saw "no shadow" of racial prejudice, disagreed pointedly with him over rhetoric."

Both Ovington and Spingarn--like Villard--sought to increase the executive board's control over the *Crisis.*" They also


"Du Bois and Spingarn battled for control of the *Crisis* in 1914 and 1915. In 1919, Ovington disciplined the editor for failing to submit his editorials to a committee for approval. On efforts to control Du Bois, see Joel E. Spingarn, *et al.* to NAACP board of directors, Dec. 6, 1915, Du
used friendly persuasion to modify Du Bois's behavior. In one instance, Spingarn advised his "friend" that the NAACP board had come to see the Crisis editor as a spoiled child who refused to "'play the game'" and subordinate his own will for the good of the group. "Many" now believed Du Bois should be "eliminated" from the organization. Spingarn hoped Du Bois would stay, but he suggested the editor become more pliable." Ovington advised Du Bois to stop offending whites in his editorials and reminded him that his job depended on pleasing white readers."

The organization's white founders, who needed at least one visible black "founder," chose Du Bois because of his brilliance as a scholar and his eloquence as a writer, and perhaps also because he seemed more willing to placate whites than most other militants. Villard had said that in contrast to the other contentious black radicals at the 1909 founding conference, Du Bois's "attitude and bearing were


faultless." Significantly, the most important black leaders of this period, including Washington, Trotter, and Marcus Garvey, were critical of white domination of the NAACP and Du Bois.¹

But despite white interference, Du Bois spoke out for black equality and against racism in a clear and militant voice. He frequently outmaneuvered NAACP board members to get his way and wrote on taboo subjects like social equality and armed black self-defense." Yet his proximity to white people altered the dynamic of his effort. The Crisis was certainly more measured than, say, the Guardian. Du Bois, for example, had accepted the editorship with the condition that he not attack Tuskegee. Compared to other black editors, the idea that he was speaking to a white audience was far less abstract. It was a daily reality of which his colleagues often reminded him.

Historians have seen the significance of the creation of the Guardian and the Crisis as providing a counterpoint to Tuskegee and polarizing the black community between those who


favored protest and those who endorsed accommodation. According to this scenario, after Booker T. Washington's death in 1915, the radicals assumed domination of the leadership of black America. The assertive "New Negroes" of the 1920s look, on the surface, like the intellectual descendants of radicals like Trotter. A closer look, however, reveals that the New Negro was more a melding of the radical and Tuskegee philosophies. New Negroes tended to believe in both equality and self help, full citizenship and black nationalism. August Meier pointed out that most of the Northern intellectuals who eventually joined the NAACP had earlier supported Washington and continued to be influenced by his ideas.  

This melding of radical and conservative was evident in the journalistic career of James Weldon Johnson, an early and enthusiastic supporter of Booker T. Washington, who would become field secretary of the NAACP. Johnson was hired to write editorials for the New York Age in 1914 by publisher Fred Moore, a former Treasury Department messenger and a real estate investor who had little experience in newspapers. Moore hired T. Thomas Fortune to run the editorial page from 1911 to 1914. In September of 1914, Johnson replaced

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"Meier, Negro Thought in America, 245-47, 256-78. For a nuanced view of the way conservative and radical ideology came together in the New Negro, see Kreiling, "Making of Racial Identities in the Black Press," chapter 9."
Fortune." At the age of 43, Johnson had already run his own daily newspaper in Jacksonville, Florida, (it lasted less than a year) and worked as a teacher, a school principal, a lawyer, a member of a popular Broadway song-writing team, and U. S. Consul to Venezuela and Nicaragua. Moore told Johnson he wanted a "conservative and constructive" editorial policy, and when Johnson accepted, he told Washington the new editor was "a good friend of ours." Nonetheless, Johnson's editorials, which unlike others in the black press appeared under a byline, never shied away from condemning racial injustice in all its forms and taking on Southern racists, like Tom Watson, and the South in general. He advocated protest, but not the use of physical force, called for group solidarity and pride, endorsed self help, and espoused mainstream economic and political doctrines. Johnson clearly believed that one of the main objectives of an editorial writer should be to reach white as well as black readers. As the young editor of the Jacksonville Daily American, Johnson "did his best, in his reasonable arguments, to direct the opinion of both races," according to biographer Eugene Levy. And in an October 22,

"Moore's mismanagement led Washington to seize control of the paper in 1908. The paper was operating at a weekly deficit of $200, and the succession of journalists Moore hired to write editorials brought the paper more in line with Tuskegee principles. Thornbrough, T. Thomas Fortune, 255, 333, 331, 334, 314."
1914 editorial for the Age, the new editor said black newspapers should be considered "'organs of propaganda.'"'

At the same time Johnson took over the Age editorial page, a group of new black newspapers, which would lead the black press into the twentieth century, were just getting off the ground. They included the Chicago Defender, established in 1905; the Amsterdam News, established in 1909; and the Pittsburgh Courier and Norfolk Journal and Guide, both established in 1910. These local weeklies were joined later in the 1910s by a group of more radical, national publications, including the socialist monthly Messenger in 1917 and Marcus Garvey's Negro World in 1919.

Around the same time, Charlotta Spears (later Spears-Bass) became the only woman owner of a black newspaper when, in May of 1912, she purchased the California Eagle with $50 of borrowed money. From the beginning she put the paper on a course of "social and political activism," fighting for equal employment of blacks in government jobs and campaigning against The Birth of a Nation and discrimination in housing."


Of these, the Courier, the Journal and Guide, and the Defender would become, along with the Baltimore Afro-American, the highest circulation black weeklies in the decades after the war. They adopted a bolder, more sensational style which appealed to a less literate, heavily working class audience than the middle class readers who bought black newspapers before this time. The Defender blazed the trail and set the tone for the new mass-circulation black press. Starting with no capital, Robert S. Abbott built his newspaper into the first highly profitable black publication with a regular circulation in excess of 100,000. The real birth of the mass black press took place in 1910 when a paid employee, J. Hockley Smiley, instituted the changes which would give the Defender its appeal. Copying Chicago's daily newspapers, especially Hearst's Herald Examiner and Evening American, Smiley adopted large headlines, bold illustrations, and sensational copy. Hearst even sued Abbott in 1918 for stealing a mast design. Like Johnson at the Age, Smiley made the paper an "organ of racial propaganda."

At the same time that his paper protested racial injustice with a fury that rivaled Trotter's Guardian, Abbott


"Ottley quoted, Ottley, Lonely Warrior, 105. On mast suit, ibid., 140-1.
admired Booker T. Washington and endorsed the philosophy of self help and individual uplift, and he took conservative stands on issues unrelated to race. The Defender opposed female suffrage in the early 1910s, supported Washington's National Negro Business League, provided moral advice to black readers, and expressed deep faith in the economic system. At the same time, however, Abbott's editorials supported the NAACP and protested race inequality and oppression in strong language.

His most important difference with Tuskegee was his support for black migration out of the South. Through an ingenious scheme of distributing the Defender via black railroad porters, the newspaper became known to perhaps hundreds of thousands of Southern blacks and helped to guide the migration of an estimated 300,000 to the North during World War I. The paper lured migrants by sensationalizing and often exaggerating Southern lynchings, continually highlighting other examples of racial oppression in the South; and portraying Chicago and the North as a land of boundless economic opportunity and—at least in comparison to the South—racial justice.


While this message was designed primarily for blacks, the Defender still often addressed white America, and during the war, white America—especially the Federal government and Southerners who thought the paper was causing trouble in their communities—felt compelled to respond. In essence, the paper had re-opened the dialogue between blacks and the white South that had been cut off when Southern black newspapers were pacified.

Although many black newspapers were stifled by violence and diverted by Booker T. Washington, the black press as a whole never ceased using speech as a weapon to fight for the interests of blacks in America. Further, in 1915, the year of Washington's death, the black press was on the verge of a new era. Black migrants from the South expanded the Northern market for news, and sensational newspapers reached out for mass audiences. The war generated greater interest in national and international events and raised white concern about the black press, while Woodrow Wilson's idealistic war aims gave new leverage to those demanding rights at home. Through all this, black newspapers would continue to address white people, demanding from the nation the rights blacks deserved. This time, however, white people would pay greater

attention to the black press—perhaps more attention than they had ever paid before.
CHAPTER 3

TO MAKE AMERICA BLUSH:
LYNCHING AND THE NATIONAL DESTINY

How can any fair-minded American read these two headlines without blushing for the public sentiment that can suffer such things to be?

--James Weldon Johnson

The period of greatest proliferation of new black newspapers in America, 1880 to 1915, coincided with the worst period of lynching of African Americans. While the number of annual lynchings peaked in the 1890s, African Americans established more black newspapers in 1902—a whopping 99—than in any other single year.² While there may not be a causal relationship between lynching and the number of black newspapers published, the vigilante killings of thousands of African Americans in the South during those years became one

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of the chief preoccupations of black editors, especially in the North where they could protest lynching without fear of reprisal.

During this time, white opinion on lynching, at least in the Northern states, was ambivalent and fluid. On one hand, most Northerners tended to accept the racist rationalizations for lynching offered by Southern apologists. But on the other hand they were uneasy about the grotesque brutality of many lynchings and the impact it had on the nation's image. While white apologists from the South hoped to explain and justify the phenomenon of lynching to the rest of the nation and gain the complicity of white Northerners by portraying it as grim necessity, the black press rebutted these arguments, called attention to the savagery of lynching, and highlighted the way lynchings soiled America's world image. In this sense, the black press was involved in a battle for the moral destiny of America. Racist Southern whites hoped to nationalize the growing feeling of violent hostility toward black men then flourishing in the South. The black press hoped to stigmatize that region as outside the pale of American civilization, values, and ideals and to build an alliance with Northern whites and the Federal government against the South.

The term "lynching" derived from the name of Charles Lynch, who was the leader of a vigilante association formed during the Revolutionary War to rid Bedford County, Virginia,
of Tories. In the early nineteenth century, lynching was relatively common on the frontier and in places with dispersed population and weak law enforcement. Most victims were white until the Civil War, when many slaves were lynched to prevent rebellion. During Reconstruction, lynchers attacked both black and white Republicans, but increasingly chose black victims. In the first four years of record-keeping, 1882-1885, white victims outnumbered blacks 401 to 227, but from 1886 onward the number of white victims declined steadily. After 1915, when 10 whites were lynched, the number never amounted to more than eight in a single year.  

Theories of the causes of lynching have ranged from economic to psycho-sexual. Contemporary apologists claimed it was necessary to deter black criminals, and especially rapists who preyed on white women in sparsely populated areas. Other theories tied lynching to economic stress or class conflict, southern cultural ideals, or social control. Whatever the


2For an interpretation which sees lynching as a means to preserve the caste structure of Southern life, see Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern
cause of lynching, its impact on African Americans living in the South is clear. Richard Wright, who grew up in Mississippi, said that just hearing about lynchings second hand conditioned him "as though I had been the victim of a thousand lynchings."

Sex. Lynching. and Civilization

Apologists claimed lynching was aimed primarily at deterring black rapists. Yet African Americans were lynched for "refusing to say 'Mr.,'" "writing an insulting note to a _____


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white woman," "wearing a U.S.A. [army] uniform too long," "living with a white woman," and other violations of racial "etiquette." In many of the cases where the victim had been charged with rape, the crime was actually a violation of the taboo against consensual interracial liaisons between black men and white women. But there was a kernel of truth to the apologists' claim. Though any violation of racial etiquette could spur a lynching, sexual encounters between black men and white women, violent or consensual, were the second most common precipitating events of lynchings (after murder).

Sexual identity had been at the center of dominant racial thought and of the black press's attack on it since the first black newspaper appeared. In the Victorian world view, nonwhites, and especially black men and women, were uncivilized, irrational, and uncontrollably driven by sexual impulses. Antebellum black editors sought to discredit such beliefs by celebrating the moral strength and reporting on the respectable activities of blacks, especially free black women. By showing black women to be virtuous and pious, they placed the blame for miscegenation in the slave South squarely on the masters' shoulders. They also offered paternalistic advice

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'Relations between white men and black women, however, did not foster white rage.
encouraging black women to adhere to Victorian middle class standards of respectability in matters such as etiquette, courtship and marriage, and fashion—advice that mirrored the prescriptions in white women's magazines and was probably not relevant to the experiences of the vast majority of black women in antebellum America. The advice reflected the editors' acceptance of the belief that adherence to Western behavioral norms was the key to uplift of the race and that, as Freedom's Journal put it, "if we ever wish to be respected as a body . . . We must make it evident that our principal aim is the moral improvement of our people and youth." The Journal hoped to persuade blacks to act respectively, but more important to convince whites that they did.

After emancipation, black editors continued to defend black women's honor, but by the 1890s black men needed more defending. White supremacists had added to the general beliefs about black sexuality the fear that black men were naturally prone to become dangerously violent sexual criminals who preyed on white women. According to what Joel Williamson called the "radical" race doctrines of the New South, uncontrollable black male sexuality placed the safety of every white woman at risk. Lynching, according to this doctrine, was the only way black men could be discouraged from raping white women, who were seen as universally pure and chaste—

even asexual--and, in isolated rural areas, vulnerable to attack.9

Ida B. Wells, Gerard Manly, and other black editors from both the North and the South, opposed this mythology, not by assailing Victorian assumptions which undergirded them, but by turning those assumptions against lynching and the rape myth. They questioned the purity of white women and called attention to the transgressions of white men against black women--specifically, the rape of slave women by their masters and, after emancipation, the keeping by Southern white men of black mistresses. They also extolled the virtue of black men and women and attacked anti-miscegenation laws--not because they favored interracial marriages, they said, but because they believed the laws gave white men license to exploit black women outside of marriage. In short, they turned the rape myth on its head. Wells has been identified as the first to systematically and effectively attack the myth, which even Frederick Douglass said he had been inclined to believe before Wells convinced him otherwise.10 Shortly before her exile


from Memphis, she had conducted a study of lynching and reported that in most cases, lynchings took place after consensual relationships between black men and white women came to light. But it had become dangerous for black journalists to make such claims in the South, as Jesse Duke, R. C. O. Benjamin, Manly, and Wells herself discovered. Only after she moved North could Wells fully develop and disseminate her attack on lynching and the rape myth.

Organized Northern black agitation against lynching had begun in the 1880s when African-American political organizations in several states began putting the matter at the top of their agendas. These efforts were later taken up by two national organizations formed in the 1890s, the Afro-

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11 Streitmatter, Raising Her Voice, 54.

12 On Southern editors and Southern correspondents of Northern newspapers persecuted for their attacks on lynching, see Grant, Anti-Lynching Movement, 77. Like John Mitchell, Jr., of the Richmond Planet, most Southern editors probably adopted accommodationist strategies that allowed them to protest lynching without suffering reprisals. Mitchell published black eyewitness accounts of lynchings, countered white newspapers' justifications of the events and wrote scathing editorials pointing out the barbarity of lynching. "Southern white folks have gone to roasting Negroes," he wrote in 1891, "we presume the next step will be to eat them." Later, however, Mitchell spoke out less forcefully and worked behind the scenes with white liberals to prevent lynchings of individuals being held for controversial crimes. See W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "'To Howl Loudly': John Mitchell Jr. and his Campaign Against Lynching in Virginia," Canadian Review of American Studies 22 (Winter 1991), 325-41.
American League and the Equal Rights Council. Individual journalists, such as Frederick Douglass, who denounced the rape myth in two articles in the 1890s, and T. Thomas Fortune, who called on blacks to fight back against lynchers in the 1880s, also joined the fray. Harry C. Smith, publisher of the Cleveland Gazette and member of the Ohio General Assembly, sponsored an anti-lynching bill, which was made law in 1896 and became a model for other states. But Wells made the most effective case against lynching before the turn of the century. Once she reached the North, Wells attacked the rape myth relentlessly in the New York Age and elsewhere. In "Southern Horrors," a pamphlet published in 1892, Wells wrote that

there are many white women in the South who would marry colored men if such an act would not place them at once beyond the pale of society and within the clutches of the law. The miscegenation laws of the South only operate against the legitimate union of the races; they leave the white man free to seduce all the colored girls he can, but it is death to the colored man who yields to the force and advances of a similar attraction in white women. White men lynch the offending Afro-American, not because he is a despoiler of virtue, but because he succumbs to the smiles of white women.  

13Grant, Anti-Lynching Movement, 20ff.

In the North, Wells encountered the opposite problem of the one she had faced in the South. Now whites generally ignored her appeals. Only by travelling to England did she find a receptive audience. Her fame there forced some American journalists to write about her crusade.15

Wells "brilliantly and subversively manipulated dominant middle-class ideas about race, manhood, and civilization in order to force white Americans to address lynching," Gail Bederman has argued. At a time when American men were sensitive about "dwindling manhood," Wells put the South on the defensive by applying the Victorian dichotomy of civilized/savage to the practice of lynching. Black men were truly civilized and manly, while white Southern lynchers acted like uncivilized savages. Wells managed to shift the discourse on lynching and the rape myth in the Northern daily press, Bederman contends:

After 1894, most Northern periodicals stopped treating lynching as a colorful Southern folkway. They dropped their jokey tones and piously condemned lynching as "barbarous"--although they still implied one could do little to stop it. It became a truism that lynching hurt America in the eyes of the "civilized world."16

This strategy worked not because Wells demolished the thinking behind the rape myth, but rather because she turned that

15Zagrando, NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 12-14.

16Bederman, "'Civilization,' the Decline of Middle-Class Manliness, and Ida B. Wells's Antilynching Campaign," 22.
thinking against itself. She joined the battle on the linguistic territory of her enemy. The fear of a deterioration of Americans' image in their own minds and before the world became the wedge black journalism would henceforth use to split the lynching South from the rest of America.

While white uneasiness about lynching may have grown as a result of Wells' efforts, white Northerners never reached a solid anti-lynching consensus and most continued to accept, on some level, the Southern defense of the practice. Even prominent progressives like Theodore Roosevelt and muckraking journalists who sometimes spoke out against lynching also accepted Southern rationalizations. Roosevelt, for example, was careful to condemn both lynching and rape in the same speeches, since he believed that the latter caused the former.17 A study of muckraking journalism after the turn of the century shows that five leading magazines either ignored lynching or mixed their condemnations with rationalizations. Collier's, for example, could condemn it as "one of the worse blots on our civilization" but also print articles by Southern apologists like Thomas Nelson Page who justified lynching to prevent rape. In its harshest criticisms, Collier's never challenged the belief that lynching arose from a need to curb

black criminality and protect white women. Even Ray Stannard Baker, an opponent of *The Birth of a Nation* and one of the few muckrakers to concern himself with racial issues, attributed lynching to "poor enforcement of the law" in his two-part 1905 series on the subject. If black criminals were more successfully and swiftly tried and punished by the justice system, lynching would cease. In general, white progressives like Baker, who wrote about "the animal-like ferocity" of the Negro, failed to attack the racist notions underlying lynching because they accepted them.18

A few white progressives who held more enlightened racial views helped to form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1910, in part to attack lynching. Led by Oswald Garrison Villard, editor of the *New York Evening Post* and the *Nation* magazine, the organization conducted investigations of lynchings, sought court action against lynchers, distributed press releases, printed anti-lynching polemics in its monthly magazine, the *Crisis*, and lobbied state and Federal governments to enact anti-lynching legislation. But the group was unable to immediately discredit the notions that maintained a hold on the white northern press.19 Furthermore, some of the white members of


19Zagrando, *NAACP Crusade Against Lynching*. 78
the NAACP seem to have shared some of the racist notions of the day. A zoologist who spoke at the organization's founding conference said that Negro brains were more susceptible than Caucasian brains to defects that led to inferior "reason, judgement, self-control or voluntary inhibitions."\textsuperscript{20} W. E. B. Du Bois, the only black NAACP officer in the early years, believed Villard, the leading figure in the organization during that time, viewed blacks as inferior and opposed social equality. Villard never invited Du Bois to his home for a social visit and expected blacks to adopt an attitude toward him that was "humble and thankful or certainly not assertive and aggressive," Du Bois claimed. Du Bois said he feared that the unconscious prejudices of Villard and May Childs Nemey, the organization's secretary from 1912-1916, would lead to the demise of their experiment in interracial cooperation.\textsuperscript{21}

Thus, by 1915, even the most liberal of Northerners were not free of the kinds of beliefs about race which supported the practice of lynching.\textsuperscript{22} In a series of three editorials in January, following the lynching of a black family in

\textsuperscript{20}Elliott M. Rudwick, \textit{W. E. B. Du Bois}, 123.


\textsuperscript{22}Grant, \textit{Anti-Lynching Movement}, 77-82. Lynchings were not unheard of in the North. For an account of the lynching of a black man in a Northern town in 1911, see Dennis B. Downey and Raymond M. Hyser, \textit{No Crooked Death: Coatsville, Pennsylvania, and the Lynching of Zachariah Walker} (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).
Monticello, Georgia, the New York Times denounced lynchings as "exhibitions of barbarity," which had generated feelings of "shame and indignation . . . all over the country." Still, the editorials expressed understanding for the original purpose of lynching—to protect whites living in "sparsely settled" and "badly policed" rural areas against black criminality.

Where men's lives and women's honor are dependent almost entirely on the vigilance and courage of each householder, the moment a criminal element appears and begins to make life and honor insecure the veneer of civilization falls off and men become primeval.

Such conditions occurred more often in the South "because of the legacy of African slavery," the Times asserted. Northerners had therefore supported lynching until lately, when, in cases like Monticello—where women and a boy were lynched merely for resisting arrest—the practice had gotten out of hand. Because lynchings were no longer carried out primarily in retaliation for the "usual crime" of rape, the Times reasoned, they had to be stopped. The editorials also depicted lynching not as a defining element of Southern society, but as the work of a small unrepresentative minority. Most of the residents of the "thriving and growing State," of Georgia opposed lynching, according to the Times, and a


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Southern governor or judge could put an end to the phenomenon by "just once" standing up to the mob.2 The Times saw uncivilized behavior in the South on both sides of the color line.

The Battle over "Birth of a Nation"

With Northern opinion thus moving away from acceptance of lynching, yet still inclined to sympathize with Southern concerns about black criminality, a powerful defense of lynching, in the form of the ground-breaking film, The Birth of a Nation, hit the nation's theaters in 1915. Producer-director D. W. Griffith based his film on Thomas Dixon's 1905 novel, The Clansman, which had already been made into a successful play. Dixon wrote his "nightmare of interracial brutality, rape, and castigation," as one historian described it, to "teach the North . . . what it has never known--the awful suffering of the white man during the dreadful Reconstruction period . . . to demonstrate to the world that

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2 "New York Times, Jan. 22, 1915, p. 10, col. 3; and Jan. 19, 1915, p. 8, col. 3. For similar reasoning, in which Ray Stannard Baker accepted the notion that lynching was once necessary to prevent rape, but now had gotten out of hand and was contributing to general lawlessness, see, Beasley, "Muckrakers and Lynching," 88.
the white man must and shall be supreme." Though somewhat tamer than the novel, the film version conveyed the same message. It depicted Reconstruction as a disaster imposed by vengeful and misguided radicals in Congress who hoped to overturn the social order by forcing on whites a ruling class of blacks who became "drunk with wine and power," corrupted the government, refused to work, and worst of all pursued union with white women. In a climactic scene, a young white heroine jumps to her death to escape Gus, a white actor in blackface, who has proposed marriage—a code in the movie for rape. In the end, the South is redeemed by the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, which rescues not only the majority white population, but those good blacks who are content to remain in their places as loyal and powerless servants. As Du Bois put it, the film showed the Negro as either "an ignorant fool, a vicious rapist, a venal or unscrupulous politician or a faithful but doddering idiot." Dixon said he hoped the

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26Film quoted in Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 51.

film would "create a feeling of abhorrence in white people, especially white women, against colored men."  

But the filmmakers' central message was embodied in two surprising plot twists. In one, the former Confederate protagonists, the Camerons, are arrested for membership in the Ku Klux Klan, but manage to escape (with the help of their faithful former slaves) and flee to an old cabin in the woods. Inside, they discover the place is occupied by two Union Army veterans. Instead of driving the Confederates out, the veterans welcome them. An intertitle proclaims: "The former enemies of North and South are united again in common defense of their Aryan birthright," and they all prepare to fight to the death against the Reconstruction government's approaching black militia. Meanwhile, Austin Stoneman, a radical Republican who preaches total Negro equality throughout the story, changes his mind when, toward the end, the malevolent mulatto Lieutenant Governor Silas Lynch, tries to "marry" Stoneman's daughter. Thus North and South are reunited in their determination to protect white women, keep African Americans in their place, and assure the continuation of white supremacy in America. To a great extent, the film's vision of Northern and Southern whites united to keep blacks

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29D. W. Griffith, The Birth of a Nation, 1915, dist. by Republic Video; See also, Litwack, "Birth of a Nation," 139-40.
subordinated did reflect the reality of the post-Reconstruction period. Dixon and Griffith wanted to solidify the alliance and push blacks even farther down.

Few white Americans found anything to object to in the film. The Chicago Tribune said it was "in all essential episodes grounded on historical fact, representing the struggles of that terrible time in the south. . . . It presents what the south says and the north of our day, at least, is inclined to believe to be truth." Woodrow Wilson, his daughters, and the cabinet screened it in the White House just 10 days after its February release in Los Angeles. Though Wilson probably did not say, as historians enjoy reporting, "It is like writing history with lightning, and my only regret is that it is all so terribly true," the filmmakers used Wilson's White House screening as a way to lend legitimacy to their production. For the same reason,

30 Quoted in Cleveland Gazette, June 5, 1915, p. 2.

31 Thomas Cripps and Leon Litwack, for example, use the quote. See Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 52; and Litwack, "The Birth of a Nation," 136. According to the only attributed first-hand account of the White House preview, "Wilson seemed lost in thought during the showing, and . . . walked out of the room without saying a word when the movie was over." Wilson's alleged quote first appeared, without attribution, in a 1937 magazine article. See The Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 32, ed. Arthur Link, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 267, n. 1. Although Wilson asked that Dixon and Griffith not mention his viewing the film in the press, the filmmakers used the White House preview and the Supreme Court Chief Justice's viewing in their arguments against censorship in New York and Boston. See Arthur S. Link, Wilson: The New Freedom (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 253. Supreme Court Chief Justice Edward White and Margaret Blaine Damrosch wrote to the White House of
they arranged another showing for Supreme Court Chief Justice Edward White, other Justices, senators, and congressmen.32 One might expect Southerners like White and Wilson to agree with Griffith's slanted view of history. White allegedly confided to Dixon that he had ridden with the Klan in his youth. And Wilson, who believed black reconstruction policies had led to the "veritable overthrow of civilization in the South," had written some of the historical accounts Griffith used in his research for the movie. The film even quoted Wilson in intertitles.33

More surprising was the acceptance of the film by many liberal whites, some with a history of supporting blacks. George Foster Peabody, a generous philanthropist of black institutions, California Governor Hiram Johnson, critic Burns Mantle, explorer Richard Harding Davis, novelist Booth Tarkington, and S. S. Frissell, a supporter of the NAACP, all accepted the film as accurate. Watching the film, medical

rumors Wilson and White had "sanctioned" the film. Wilson told his personal secretary, Joseph P. Tumulty to "please say I have expressed no opinion about it." See Warren Forman Johnson to Woodrow Wilson, March 29, 1915, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 32, ed. Link, 454-55; and Edward Douglass White to Joseph Patrick Tumulty, April 5, 1915, ibid., p. 486; and ibid., vol. 33, p. 86, n. 1.

32 Michael Rogin, Ronald Reagan, the Movie and Other Episodes in Political Demonology (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 195.

reformer Dorothea Dix advised, would "make a better American of you." Some reformers thought its historical theme made a vast improvement over the sexual and slapstick titillation of most other films of the day. Reviewers praised the film and enthusiastic moviegoers flocked to see it in theaters.

Dixon's hope that the film would *revolutionize Northern sentiments* against Negroes seems to have been largely realized. Mary White Ovington reported that as she left a New York showing she heard a man exclaim: "I would like to kill every nigger. I would like to sweep every nigger off the earth." A white Indiana viewer shot and killed a black teenager after viewing the film. Houston audiences shouted "lynch him!" during the scene in which Gus chases the young woman over the cliff. The number of lynchings nationwide grew significantly in 1915, and a revived Ku Klux Klan emerged. The makers of the film seemed to be succeeding at unifying

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3 Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie*, 197.

3 Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 57.


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North and South against black, and spreading, in the words of Michael Rogin, "the screen memory, in both meanings of that term, through which Americans were to understand their collective past and enact their future." For African Americans, the consequences of this historical sensibility were literally deadly.

The danger in allowing such a message to enter the American psyche unchallenged must have been obvious to African Americans who undertook a major campaign to ban the film from theaters, or failing that, to discredit it with the public. Although the NAACP undertook much of the direct action, black journals undergirded the campaign from the beginning. Even before the film first opened at Clunes Auditorium in Los Angeles as The Clansman on February 8, the California Eagle demanded "that it be denied theatrical recognition in Los Angeles." In its campaign against the film, the Eagle threatened to withhold black votes from public officials refusing to support a ban and pointed to ways in which it made black and white people look bad. An editorial called the movie "the most diabolical and damnable prejudice-making play which has ever been produced by man." A judge ordered that it be shown with a few cuts. The film's widespread

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3"Rogin, Ronald Reagan, the Movie, 192.
3"California Eagle, Jan. 30, 1915.
4"California Eagle, Feb. 6, 1915.
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popularity in the next several months seemed to confirm the editors' worst fears and the filmmakers' fondest hopes: that *The Birth of a Nation* was spreading Southern sentiment on race and justifying lynching in white Northerners' minds. "Clunes' Auditorium is thronged each day with all sorts of cultured people applauding the glorification of mob-murder!" William Easton wrote in the *Eagle*. "Mr. Griffith and Thomas Dixon are conducting a day and evening school to teach all who will pay the price, how easy it is to 'lynch,' how gracefully it can be done, and what wonderful maneuvering it admits of." Moviegoers at one showing broke into "tumultuous applause, a sort of hilarious happiness," upon the entrance of the Klan, he reported.  

Opposition to the film became well-organized as the NAACP geared up for the March 3 premier in New York City. Protestors demanded first that certain scenes be removed, then whole sections of the film; called for a preview by black leaders; filed suit in court to prevent the film's opening; flooded the mayor's office with protesters; and mobilized widespread support among blacks of all ideological stripes and important liberal whites. Whites who lined up with the NAACP included not only its former chairman, Oswald Garrison Villard, publisher of the *New York Post* and the *Nation* magazine, but also muckraker Ray Stannard Baker, settlement house organizer Jane Addams, movie producer Lewis Selznick,  

"*California Eagle*, Sept. 4, 1915, p. 3."
Rabbi Stephen A. Wise, and reviewer Francis Hackett, who wrote a negative appraisal of the film in the *New Republic.* The film ran, but the opposition had again won a few cuts.

Protest culminated in Boston, where William Monroe Trotter used the leverage of black votes to pressure Mayor James Michael Curley to ban the film. Curley ordered the filmmakers to cut five of the most objectionable scenes before allowing it to open in a downtown theater on April 10. Trotter, still unsatisfied, led a group of protesters to the lobby of the theater; after club-wielding police officers arrested ten protesters, including Trotter, a few others managed to get in. During the climactic rape scene, one threw a "very ancient egg" into "the exact middle of the white screen." In the following days, Trotter led a protest gathering at Faneuil Hall and a march on the State House. The 2,000 angry blacks protesting on the State House steps won a promise from Governor David Ignatius Walsh to draft a new censorship law. Despite the law, which Walsh signed on May 21, *The Birth of a Nation* played to large audiences until mid-October. Still, Trotter's threats seem to have had an effect on Curley, who sought to win back black votes by appointing more African Americans to city posts and submitting an anti-lynching bill to U. S. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge."


Meanwhile, protests continued around the country and the film was banned at least temporarily in Chicago, and later throughout Illinois; Pasadena, California; Wilmington, Delaware; St. Louis; Massachusetts outside of Boston; and Ohio. In Ohio, editor Harry C. Smith of the Cleveland Gazette waged one of the most dogged campaigns against The Birth of a Nation of anyone in the black press.

In many ways, Smith's attack on the film mirrored the strategy of Griffith and Dixon. Where the filmmakers sought to unify North and South against black, Smith sought to unify North and black against South. They portrayed blacks and he portrayed Southern whites as uncivilized brutes. They portrayed Southern whites and he portrayed blacks as respectable and law-abiding victims. Both highlighted support of their positions by figures of authority.

A charter member of Fortune's "Afro-American Agitators," Smith was an uncompromising integrationist, an opponent of separate black institutions, Booker T. Washington, and the South, a wary observer and frequent opponent of the NAACP, and an ally of Trotter. A political activist, Smith had won three terms in the state legislature in the 1890s and formed the

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"See Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 63; Lewis, W. E. B. Du Bois, 507-8; Fox, Guardian of Boston, 197; Henri, Black Migration, 231; and "Wilmington Bars Photo-Play," Afro-American Ledger, June 5, 1915, p. 1. Henri claims that the film was banned in Cleveland, but not in the rest of Ohio. Evidence from the Gazette, however, indicates the film was banned in the state for at least a year. See also, David A. Gerber, Black Ohio and the Color Line, 1860-1915 (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 467.
Interstate League of Independent Colored Voters in 1902; he would receive 60,000 votes in the Republican primary for Ohio secretary of state in 1920, and he perpetually endorsed and worked for candidates for local, state and national offices. “During 1915 he gave more space to his campaign against The Birth of a Nation than to any other political topic.” Most of his coverage revolved around efforts to persuade state and city officials--especially Gov. Frank Willis--to censor the film. He printed letters to and from Willis and other officials, editorials, petitions, news accounts, official pronouncements, and reprints from other papers relating to the film and his campaign to ban it. Smith portrayed the white governor as aligned with blacks against the outrageous film even before Willis had taken decisive action. He praised Willis so extensively for supporting censorship that editor Calvin Chase of the Washington Bee


"Based on a content analysis of twelve editorial pages, one randomly selected from each month during 1915. Other topics include national, state, and local party politics, Booker T. Washington, economic policy, proposed legislation, and the Supreme Court's ruling overturning the grandfather clause.
called Smith the Sancho Panza of Ohio. Willis was an important authority whose opposition gave greater credence to Smith's own criticisms of the film. Further, the governor's stand with blacks against the white South stood as proof against the Birth of a Nation's assertion of a unity of whites against blacks.

Smith also printed articles written by white authors who affirmed the humanity of African Americans and attacked Griffith's film. When the state attorney general, E. C. Turner, upheld the censor board's decision on Birth of a Nation, Smith reprinted it in full. Turner focused more on the film's slander of the North than of blacks. He criticized the historical absurdity of portraying Northern leaders consorting with Negro mistresses when white slaveowners had caused most race mixing, scenes unflattering to Union Generals Sherman and Grant and to Union soldiers, the portrayal of the South as superior to the North, the representation of black soldiers as rapists, and the portrayal of the outlaw Ku Klux Klan as heroic. "This picture is neither of a moral, educational, amusing nor harmless character," Turner

concluded."

The article put the lie to Dixon's notion of a unity of whites against blacks.

The Gazette also attacked the historical accuracy of the film. An article by John R. Lynch, who had been a Mississippi Congressman during Reconstruction, called Birth of a Nation a "fiction pure and simple, painted from a diseased and prejudiced imagination . . . , calculated to incite crime and general disorder in the community." Lynch hoped that "the eyes of the people will eventually be opened" to the truth. In his own criticisms of the film, Smith, like Turner, did not dwell on the way the film injured African Americans.

"The Birth of a Nation" is not only vile in parts but positively a dangerous film because it ridicules and reviles sacred historical figures (soldiers and statesmen) of this country, attacks loyalty, praises rebels and their organizations like the infamous Ku Klux Klan, and promotes the mob spirit wherever it is exhibited.

He framed the film as an attack on the North and on America's best ideals rather than on blacks. This was a conscious strategy to influence Northern white opinion.

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"Cleveland Gazette, Feb. 5, 1916, p. 2. Smith also reprinted an article written by a "white friend" in the Moving Picture World, which called another film Smith sought to ban, "The Nigger," a "repulsive, harmful" film "that never should have been made." See Cleveland Gazette, April 3, 1915. For another example of white criticism of the film, see "The Birth of a Nation," Cleveland Gazette, May 12, 1917, p. 2.

"Cleveland Gazette, June 5, 1915, p. 2.

"Cleveland Gazette, May 13, 1916, p. 2."
Advising local black activists in 1917 how to most effectively attack the film, he explained that instead of stressing blacks' gripes they should focus on how the film "ridicules the loyal Federal soldier of the war of the rebellion, insults the North and does far worse in the case of such abolitionists as Lovejoy. . . . Make it clear that somebody else's 'ox is gored' besides ours."

In this case and others when Smith addressed blacks in relation to the film, he usually offered suggestions on how best to turn whites against it. In addition to showing how the film offended whites, black opponents should show greater unity in their protests and, most importantly, behave respectably during demonstrations. When in early 1917 a court ruled that the film must be shown, Smith blamed the decision on a last-minute protest by a "mob" made up of the "lowest Negroes," some recruited from saloons. Not only did the protesters make a "weak demonstration," but on their way home they vandalized a street car and tailor shop windows. "The decent respectable, law-abiding Afro-Americans of this city repudiate them," he declared, while calling for the "arrest and punishment" of the mob members. According to Smith, a judge, who heard the case on Monday afternoon, handed down his decision against censorship on Tuesday morning in

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"The Infamous Film 'the Birth of a Nation,'" Cleveland Gazette, March 3, 1917, p. 1; and "The Beatty Bill," ibid., p. 2.
part because of the actions of the unruly black protesters the night before." The unruly protesters, it seems, had reinforced the filmmakers' claim that blacks were lawless and uncivilized, the labels Smith and the rest of the black press were trying to pin on the South.

Like black editors going back to antebellum times, Smith encouraged and publicized respectable behavior among blacks to both qualify them for citizenship and prove to whites that they deserved it. Smith turned against Willis early in 1916 because he appointed as oil inspector a black saloon owner--someone Smith thought would not be a "satisfactory representative" of the race. In the context of lynching and The Birth of a Nation controversy, proper black behavior became even more important. After all, Smith was arguing that African Americans were not prone to uncivilized violence, that lynching was not necessary to keep them in order. Efforts such as these to emphasize black accomplishments and respectability should not be explained away merely as reflecting the class biases of bourgeois editors, or as part of an attempt to compensate middle class blacks for feelings of inferiority, as E. Franklin Frazier argued."

Rather they


"Cleveland Gazette, March 4, 1916, pp. 1, 2.

were part of an effort to mold and "shape public opinion about ourselves," as James Weldon Johnson put it."

Smith hoped to counter Griffith's attempt to portray a unity of interest of Northern and Southern whites against blacks. Instead of portraying the South as victim of the North in the Civil War and Reconstruction, Griffith had portrayed the entire nation as the victim of blacks and radical Republicans, who formed an evil alliance and seized power after the assassination of Lincoln.9 In contrast, Smith portrayed the film, white supremacists, and the South as the enemy of loyal Union soldiers, fundamental American ideals, and true Americans. Smith and Griffith were engaged

"New York Age, Feb. 11, 1915, p. 4. Not every black newspaper used the same tactics as Smith did against The Birth of a Nation. The Baltimore Afro-American, for example, focused more on how the film injured blacks than how it insulted whites. The paper also optimistically exaggerated the degree of white opposition to the film, arguing that "no thinking man" accepts its historical premise, and that praise of the film focused mainly on its production techniques while its message received "universal condemnation." But like the Gazette, the Afro-American tried to use the black vote to convince local officials to censor the film, and sought to discredit Dixon, calling him a "criminal vicious," "yellow dramatist." The Afro also reprinted critiques of the film from white publications, including the Congregationalist and Christian World, which confronted Dixon in an interview with the fact that white Southern men more often crossed the color line for sex than black men; the National Tribune, which wrote a scathing indictment of the "cowardly and infamous" Ku Klux Klan; and the Boston Herald, which quoted Moorefield Storey's criticisms of the film. When the "Hate of a Nation" left town, an editorial advised theater owners to "fumigate" the theater. See Baltimore Afro-American, Aug. 7, 1915, p. 4; March 4, 1916, p. 4; April 1, 1916, p. 4; June 5, 1915, p. 4; May 6, 1916, p. 4.

9On this reading of the film, see Rogin, Ronald Reagan, the Movie, 211-12.
in a struggle over the meaning of key events in American history with direct bearing on the character and meaning of America in the present. Where the filmmakers set up a duality in American life between civilized whites and inferior, uncivilized blacks, Smith sought to establish a different one, between the true and the false America. On one side, humanistic, democratic, and civilized, stood the North, the (loyal) Union, the Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and abolitionism; on the other, inhuman, undemocratic, and violent, stood the South, the (disloyal) Confederacy, racism, disfranchisement, and Jim Crow."

Although some localities barred The Birth of a Nation, the censorship campaign mostly failed to achieve its major objective." Thomas Cripps sees the campaign, at least in its later phases, as misguided because it put blacks in the dubious position of opposing free speech and because their protests actually boosted the popularity of the film. In Oakland, promoters allegedly paid a group of blacks to boycott

\[\text{\textsuperscript{59}}\] For example, Smith compared Harriet Beecher Stowe, the antebellum, Northern anti-slavery author, Dixon was a greedy hack who distorted historical conditions and viewed the world through "prejudiced eyes." Stowe, on the other hand, adhered to "actual conditions as they existed," and had earned a lasting place in the hearts of Americans. She was a humanitarian, Dixon was "the exact opposite," "a mischief maker, [and] an agitator" whose work injured "ALL" the people. See Cleveland Gazette, March 10 1917, p. 2.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{60}}\] In addition to the localities already mentioned, some other officials banned the film during the war to prevent race riots and assure the loyalty of blacks.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{61}}\] Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 66-69.
the film to generate publicity. Griffith predicted the "silly legal opposition . . . will make me a millionaire if they keep it up." Some black newspapers, including the Washington Bee and the Chicago Defender, opposed continued protest for this very reason—though not before condemning the film and answering its argument. Booker T. Washington and his followers adopted this stance early on, and his personal secretary, Emmett J. Scott, put his energies behind production of "The Birth of a Race," a film which would present the opposing view. Underlying these different tactics, however, lay a basic similarity—a belief in the absolute necessity of answering Griffith. Black journalists could not sit idly by and allow such a negative statement to go unanswered, and so sought to answer it in some way even if only, as the Washington Bee proposed, by letting "our conduct be of such a nature that [it] will put a quietus on the indictment." And while The Birth of a Nation had a devastating impact on race relations, the campaign against it did have a mitigating affect. Important liberals like George Foster Peabody reversed their early endorsement of the film, Hollywood producers in the future shied away from negative black roles, and Southerners like Justice White and some of Griffith quoted in Henry, Black Migration, 230.

his congressional friends came to be embarrassed by their early sanctioning of the film. Even President Wilson felt it necessary to leak to the press the news that he disapproved of the "unfortunate production." Such recriminations may have become necessary because the protests had changed the climate and made it unrespectable—or at least politically inexpedient—to support the film. Black opposition may have prevented The Birth of a Nation from fully nationalizing Southern race sentiment. At the very least, African Americans had their say and Griffith's racist justification of lynching did not go unanswered.

Lynching, the South, and America

Although other black newspapers did not spill as much ink as Smith did on The Birth of a Nation, they tried to accomplish similar ends with their comments on a series of gruesome lynchings that took place in the South during the long run of the controversial film. They sought to show that

"See Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 61, 67. Hollywood also shied away from positive portrayals of blacks. Cripps says this was a negative impact of the film. This seems doubtful; Hollywood may well have dropped unflattering black roles because of the protest against Birth of a Nation, but flattering roles did not exist in any case.

"Rogin, Ronald Reagan, the Movie, 195; Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 62; Henri, Black Migration, 231. See also, Woodrow Wilson to Joseph P. Tumulty, April 28, 1915, in Wilson Papers, vol. 33, ed. Link, p. 86."
lynching violated the nation's ideals and set the white South apart from the rest of the country and that indifference to the practice jeopardized the nation's moral well being.

The first of these lynchings took place in January 1915 in Monticello, Georgia. As mentioned above, the New York Times condemned the lynching not so much because the practice was fundamentally wrong, but because it had gone too far. Don Barber, his son Jesse, and Ella and Bulla Charles had been arrested for forcibly ejecting from their home a police officer who suspected they were making moonshine. An "infuriated mob of hellish demons," as the New York Age described the lynching party, broke into the jailhouse dragged the four outside, hanged them from a tree, and riddled their bodies with bullets. Monticello "stripped bare" the Southern defense of lynching, leaving nothing but "naked brutality and savagery," James Weldon Johnson wrote. Unlike the Times, which attributed the lynching to an unrepresentative minority of Georgians and took seriously the Governor's offer of a $500 reward for the lynchers, black newspapers depicted the event as the "pleasant pastime" of the community's "BEST CITIZENS" and ridiculed the offer of a reward as disingenuous. "Whoever heard of [a] white man being convicted for lynching a colored person in Georgia?" the Afro asked. Where the New York Times saw "shame and indignation"

all over the country, the *Age* and the *Afro* saw indifference. Except for a voice here and there, *Age* editorialist James Weldon Johnson wrote, America was, as usual, silent. "It is as though the nation's moral senses are numbed and paralyzed." Lynching thus could not be ignored by Northerners—all Americans were implicated."

Monticello began one of the worst years for lynching in the twentieth century. With 50 blacks and 10 whites lynched in the South, 1915 saw the most lynchings since 1908. Black newspaper accounts often attempted to show how the practice had become a part of Southern culture, participated in by most whites. In its report on the lynching of Will Stanley in Temple, Texas, the *Chicago Defender* reported that

> hundreds of men, women, boys and girls . . . cheered as the victim went up in smoke . . . The streets were filled with pedestrians and

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*"Booker T. Washington, whose comments on the Monticello lynching had been solicited by the New York World,* took an approach that was closer to that of the *Times.* He praised liberal Southerners who opposed lynching, allowed that the lynching victims had committed a crime that required punishment, and unlike black commentators who portrayed the lynching as yet one more in a long line of outrages, said he was "shocked beyond measure." He even suggested that the lynching did more harm to whites than blacks. See *New York Age,* Jan. 21, 1915, p. 1.

*"Tolnay and Beck, Festival of Violence, Appendix C-3.*

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automobiles loaded with fascinated onlookers. Trees fringing the street on the side of the square nearest the burning were filled with boys, while scattered through the throngs were many young girls."

This was no secretive crime committed under cover of darkness off in the woods, but a public event that took place in a "well lighted public square" with the entire community participating. In the Afro-American, Col. J. O. Midnight, a traveling correspondent, whose columns appeared in several black newspapers under different names, described the cold calculation with which the crowd went about gathering wood for the fire to burn Stanley."

The year's most sensationalized lynching--of a white man--took place in Georgia that summer. In mid-August, a mob broke into the jail cell of Leo Frank, whose death sentence for the murder of a teenage girl had recently been commuted to life in prison, drove him to a secluded spot and hanged him. The 1913 trial and conviction and subsequent appeals of the Jewish factory manager had received much attention in the nation's press, and by the time of his lynching, his case had become a cause celebre. The lynching received enormous attention in daily newspapers across the country, appearing as the lead story in most northern dailies, including the New York Times, which devoted several pages to the story on August

18. An editorial called the crime "the most atrocious lynching ever committed in any Southern state." Frank's skin color likely contributed to the editor's judgement, since no other aspect of the lynching set it apart."

Ambivalent black editorialists, reporters, and columnists welcomed the great attention now focused on the crime of lynching while scolding the white press for caring more about the murder of one white man than the lynchings of thousands of blacks. Some of these commentators saw the Frank lynching as a medium through which black feelings and ideas about lynching and the South would be conveyed to white audiences. The *New York Age* said the lynching would serve the "great purpose" of fixing "the eye of the nation upon this bold fact, that Georgia and several of her sister states are not civilized, in the modern sense of the word. And this is something which innumerable lynchings and burnings of colored men, women and children have failed to do." Perhaps Americans would now be willing to do something to address the failure of the South to measure up to the ideals of American democracy. At the same time, editors could not help but criticize the white press's


greater interest in the lynching of a white man. Johnson compared the "bold" columns in the white press "crowded with every detail" of the Frank lynching with three "modest" lines about the lynching of three African Americans who had been arrested for poisoning mules. "The lynching of the three Negroes attracted no wider attention than did the original offense of poisoning the mules," Johnson added with bitter irony."

The Chicago Defender blended its criticisms of the white press with its satisfaction that mainstream newspapers finally recognized the South as "a region of illiteracy, blatant self-righteousness, cruelty and violence." Welcoming the attention the case brought to lynching and the story's prominence on nearly every front page and on the lips of many prominent Americans, the paper ridiculed the Chicago Tribune's belated criticism ("notwithstanding five-thousand Afro-Americans . . . lynched") of the state of Georgia. Columnist W. Allison Sweeney accused the Tribune of "RIDICULOUS hypocrisy."" Black newspapers generally disagreed with those who criticized Frank's trial and protested his innocence, since the only other suspect was a black man. Sweeney and Johnson both said that it seemed unlikely that a


75 "Lynching a Real Crime at Last!" Chicago Defender, Aug. 21, 1915, p. 1; and W. Allison Sweeney, "The South Has Always Been Backward," ibid., p. 8.
Southern jury would convict an innocent white man of murder with a black scapegoat so close at hand. In their comments on the Frank lynching, Sweeney, Johnson, and others were pleased not simply that the case would bring outrage against lynching, but that it would call attention to the deviance of the South from American civilization and ideals. The Cleveland Gazette reprinted an article on the lynching from a Milwaukee daily headlined "The South at the Bar." Black editors welcomed the outrage of Northern whites at Southern practices because it suggested a coming over to the belief that the South stood outside of and opposed to the norms of American civilization.76

White newspapers again paid some notice to a lynching—this time of a black man—nine months later when 15,000 citizens of Waco, Texas, turned out in broad daylight on the city's central square to watch or participate in the burning alive of Jesse Washington, a 17-year-old boy who had just been convicted of raping and killing a white woman. The event attracted more attention than any previous lynching, according to an NAACP official, and became a centerpiece of that organization's antilynching campaign.77


77 Zagrando, NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 30.
Yet the media did not give Washington's lynching nearly as much attention as it gave to the killing of Frank. The *New York Times* reported on the Washington lynching only briefly the following day, on page four, and expressed its usual ambivalence in a May 17 editorial. The editor condemned the Waco community for bringing "disgrace and humiliation on their country as well as themselves," but added that Washington's alleged crime was "the one that goes furthest toward justifying resort to any measures of no matter what severity, so long as they are reasonably held to promise a deterrent effect." The worst aspect of the lynching, the editorial continued, was that outside observers would conclude that such things could take place in no "other land even pretending to be civilized... The assertion is probably not true, but to disprove it will be difficult."*78* Black editors hoped to exploit such sensitivity to the impact of lynching on America's image.

The *Cleveland Gazette* played to that sensitivity by linking all of American culture in the Waco horror. A front page account told how the lynchers dragged Jesse Washington's body through the streets, dismembered the corpse for souvenirs, and left its disembodied head to a group of "little boys" who sold the gold teeth for $5 apiece. "Waco is a center of American 'culture' in Texas, a great Southern

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*New York Times*, May 16, p. 4, col. 3; May 17, p. 10, col. 5.

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College Town," the article continued. Yet in this "Christian city of 40,000 . . . no responsible voice was raised in protest that bloody Monday." Institutions of religion and higher education were implicated in the deed because of their failure to stop it. Children were taught from an early age to act like fiends. The Gazette saw mob violence not as an aberration, but as part of the normal activity of Southern communities.

Lynching and American Foreign Policy

In their comments on Waco, the Defender and the Age juxtaposed lynching with America's foreign policy. The Wilson administration had landed troops in Haiti in 1915, starting an occupation that would last until 1934. Meanwhile, the administration was poised for an invasion of Mexico to restore order and would eventually enter the World War in Europe under the banner of promoting values of democracy, rule of law, and international justice. Before seeking to bring civilization abroad, the Defender suggested, the country should consider bringing it to Texas. "Why Mexico? Why bother about Germany or Japan? No civilized nation has disgraced itself with the above scenes in the past fifty years." In an editorial


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addressed to the presidential nominees, the writer suggested that the whole South be placed under martial law and appealed to the national sense of justice and honor in the eyes of the world. "Shall the American Republic be pointed at with scorn by the foreign powers as a barbarous nation?" James Weldon Johnson added:

We talk about helping Haiti and Santo Domingo and Mexico to rise to a higher level of civilization and development; it is enough to make the devil gasp in astonishment, seeing that we have in our own country such a community as Waco, Texas.80

Despite such sentiments, when the United States invaded Haiti in 1915, black newspapers actually gave cautious support, hoping the nation's good (Northern) side would prevail, but warning that its bad (Southern) side might make matters worse. The Age's Johnson favored intervention but warned that, given its own racial problems, the United States would have to take special care to convince the Haitians of its benevolent motives and that the mission would succeed only if guided by "American officials who are free from narrow and bitter race prejudice." Johnson was something of an expert on

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Latin American affairs, having served as a U. S. consul in Venezuela and Nicaragua from 1906-1913. While supporting the intervention, Johnson could not help but wonder why Americans would seek to "abolish atrocities in Mexico and Nicaragua and Haiti, with examples of such inhumanity [within] our very doors." Like Johnson, the Defender approved of the U. S. occupation, but expressed doubts. Domestic racial policies proved that the action was not taken "for the love of the black man" in Haiti. "We await with interest the finale of the affair." African Americans would draw the parallels between domestic race relations and foreign policy even more forcefully and persistently during World War I, asking America to make the "south safe for the Negroes" instead of worrying about democracy in Europe. In drawing this parallel, editors sometimes seemed to veer toward the pessimistic conclusion that the racism that spawned lynching could not be overcome. The Savannah Tribune warned that "The Soul of America is dying from repeated and continued inertia" regarding lynching. The practice "de-humanized" the entire country, betrayed its political values, revealed the practice


of Christianity to be a farce, even brought into question the nation's right to call itself civilized." In depressed moments like these, writers expressed a weariness and a sadness about it all. Roscoe Dunjee, editor of Oklahoma's *Black Dispatch*, could not look at an American flag "without remembering 4,000 blacks had been lynched" or hear a patriotic song without realizing that "the only portion which applies to blacks is that which says 'Land where our fathers died.'" But such flights of pessimism never fully overcame optimism about America. Though ever critical of America's role as world advocate for democracy, most black journalists never dismissed it out of hand.

Embedded even in the editorials on lynching was a reverence for national ideals as articulated in the law, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution, and a guarded optimism--or at least the hope--that the North, Northerners, or the Federal government might apply those ideals to African Americans. Newspapers expressed these hopes by advocating and taking seriously the possibility of solutions to these problems like Federal antilynching laws and black migration to the North; by addressing appeals for action against lynching to Northerners or the Federal government; and

"Savannah Tribune, April 1, 1916.

by heaping most of the blame for lynching on Southern culture and "Southern gentlemen" rather than on all white Americans. Further, by assuming that American involvement in Mexico and Haiti could be beneficial for those countries—especially black Haiti—editors like Johnson showed faith in the positive possibilities of America's true ideals while acknowledging and warning against the damage that its racist realities could do. Finally, by endorsing black participation in World War I at the same time they saw so clearly the nation's potentially fatal flaw, African-American newspapers showed a fundamental but hard-headed optimism about America.

In an editorial in the spring of 1918, the Age reprinted two headlines from the New York Tribune, one about the horrific lynching in Georgia of a pregnant black woman named Mary Turner, the other about the heroic actions of two black soldiers, Henry Johnson and Needham Roberts, on the battlefield in France.

The shame and the glory of America are at once strikingly set forth in the two articles printed under these diverse headlines. . . . How can any fair-minded American read these two headlines without blushing for the public sentiment that can suffer such things to be?"

Johnson and other black editors relied on the optimistic proposition that "fair-minded" Americans could be made to blush, not simply out of sympathy for black victims, but at

"James Weldon Johnson, "Two Headlines," New York Age, May 25, 1918, p. 4."
seeing how summary executions of black people made a mockery of what America pretended to be and at seeing the contrast between lynching and the patriotic loyalty of African Americans. World War I would give these arguments greater weight than they had ever had before.
CHAPTER 4

NATIONAL LOYALTY AND THE BLACK PRESS

The ideological becoming of a human being, in this view, is the process of selectively assimilating the words of others.

--M. M. Bakhtin

As America approached and eventually entered World War I, national leaders began preparing the nation for participation by promoting a definition of loyalty which called individuals to place national duty ahead of personal desires or group considerations. Men like Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt began preaching about self sacrifice and undivided loyalty and railed against selfishness and self-indulgence. How were African Americans to respond to these appeals? On one hand, they might reject the notion that they had a duty to a nation in which they experienced second class citizenship and often lacked the protection of the law. More likely, as they had done in all past American wars, African Americans might participate fully in the war, hoping that a grateful nation would return the favor by advancing black interests. After all, black participation in the Revolution had led the Northern states to abolish slavery, and black soldiers

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fighting for the Union Army had helped to justify the Emancipation Proclamation. Again in World War I African Americans would contribute admirably to the war effort. It was not clear, however, what reward, if any, they would receive in exchange. The black press tried to show that African Americans conformed to a demanding standard of loyalty that subordinated all other interests to national duty, yet still demand something in return.

This chapter looks at the way black newspapers handled "loyalty" and related words and concepts, like "preparedness," "unity," and "Americanism," which became central to all discussions of national issues during the period of World War I. They selectively assimilated those words, in Bakhtin's phrase, transforming them and deploying them in ways that would serve their own interests. The extent to which they succeeded is the extent to which they made the war itself an instrument of black advancement. But it was no easy task, because the white leaders who coined the phrases that would lead America into war never meant for them to advance the interests of weak minority groups. In fact, quite the opposite. In transforming "loyalty" and "Americanism" to their advantage, then, blacks faced an uphill struggle.

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The Demand for Loyalty and the Black Response

After the outbreak of war in Europe in August of 1914, some Americans began to worry about the loyalty of the nation's so-called hyphenated Americans, the approximately 30 million first- and second-generation European immigrants. In particular, some feared, eight million German-Americans might not be willing to fight a war against their former homeland. Such worries added fuel to a campaign that had been underway since the 1890s to "Americanize" these new immigrants. Institutions as diverse as the Daughters of the American Revolution and Hull House had guided the Americanization campaign from a variety of motives, from helping the immigrants adjust to their new home to eradicating radicalism among the new population. Until the start of the European war, Americanization advocates like Frances Kellor focused mainly on offering night classes in the English language to new immigrants and lacked broad popular support.

By the summer of 1915, however, the divided loyalties of "hyphenated Americans" had become a major concern and Kellor headed up a new organization, the National Americanization Committee, supported by businessmen and political leaders and


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dedicated to "stimulating naturalization, breaking the immigrant's ties with the Old World, and teaching him an American culture." The phrase "Hyphenated Americanism" became associated with disloyalty. "There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American," former president Theodore Roosevelt told the Knights of Columbus at a speech in Carnegie Hall in October of 1915. "The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else." Though somewhat less zealous, Woodrow Wilson, too, sounded the alarm about hyphenates. In his annual message to Congress in December of 1915, he warned that foreign-born citizens "have poured the poison of disloyalty into the very arteries of our national life. . . . Such creatures of passion, disloyalty, and anarchy must be crushed out." Congress applauded these remarks enthusiastically.

The issues of loyalty and Americanism became major themes of the presidential election of 1916. First as a candidate himself and then on the stump for Republican nominee Charles

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Evans Hughes, Roosevelt advocated a military buildup, American entry into the war, and an extreme brand of nationalist conformity. Roosevelt saw something "sinister" in identification with any but American nationality and argued that "hyphenated Americans," along with pacifists, war profiteers, and those who advocated peace at any price, came "perilously near being treasonable to this country." He declared, "I do not believe in hyphenated Americans. . . . We have a right to ask all of these immigrants and the sons of these immigrants that they become Americans and nothing else." Wilson, too, called for national unity. Just before the Democratic convention in July, Wilson outlined his definition of loyal citizenship in a speech on "The American Spirit" to the Citizenship Convention, a meeting organized by the Bureau of Naturalization in Washington. Though concerned about German-Americans when he criticized "certain men" who "draw apart in spirit and in organization from the rest of us to accomplish some special object of their own," Wilson's message could be interpreted to apply to any ethnic minority with its own exclusive organizations. He asserted that forming ethnic organizations

is absolutely incompatible with the fundamental idea of loyalty, and that loyalty is not a self-pleasing virtue. I am not bound to be loyal to the United States to please myself. I am bound to be loyal to the United States because I live under its

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'Theodore Roosevelt, Fear God and Take Your Own Part, 330-31, 328.
laws and am its citizen, and, whether it hurts me or whether it benefits me, I am obliged to be loyal. Loyalty means nothing unless it has at its heart the absolute principle of self-sacrifice. Loyalty means that you ought to be ready to sacrifice every interest that you have, and your life itself, if your country calls upon you to do so. And that is the sort of loyalty which ought to be inculcated into these newcomers—that they are not to be loyal only so long as they are pleased, but that, having once entered into this sacred relationship, they are bound to be loyal whether they are pleased or not; and that loyalty which is merely self-pleasing is only self-indulgence and selfishness.9

In a speech a few days later at the Washington Monument, Wilson added: "Disloyalty . . . must be absolutely crushed." At the same time, the Democratic national convention adopted a platform plank, drafted by Wilson himself and conceived as the centerpiece of the campaign, which promoted Americanism and denounced hyphenism.10

On some level, Wilson's and Roosevelt's formulations of national loyalty as incompatible with ethnic identity and superior to every other interest was antithetical to the interests of African Americans—if not downright impossible to implement. Oppressed as a group, they needed to agitate for redress as a group. Set apart because of their ethnic


identity by whites, they could not simply decide to renounce their blackness or their African-ness. Yet, black newspapers strove to adopt as far as they could the language of Americanism and loyalty so pervasive in America during the years before and during World War I. African-Americans, they argued, had no divided loyalties, no homeland other than the United States to whom they owed allegiance, and no reason to be disloyal. Journalist Ralph Tyler, writing in the Appeal, a black weekly in St. Paul, called on blacks to use the term "colored American" rather than "Negro" or "Afro-American" as a way of de-emphasizing difference. "We are not Africans because we are native born and native sired Americans." The editor of the newspapers agreed, and called on all ethnics to "wipe out forevermore the hyphen in American citizenship."11 The Baltimore Afro-American speculated that, "in view of the bad odor attached to hyphens," it might soon have to rename the paper "simply THE AMERICAN."12

In general, however, the black press saw the hyphen issue not as one requiring a change in black identity, but as one that highlighted the difference between the recent European immigrant, with his foreign languages and customs and

11 Ralph W. Tyler, "Proper Name for Race Discussed," The Appeal, March 6, 1915, p. 1; ibid., p. 2. The discussion of the issue continued. See also, ibid., May 1, 1915, pp. 1, 2; June 5, 1915, p. 2; Aug. 7, 1915, p. 2; and Oct. 2, 1915, p. 2.

12 Baltimore Afro-American, Dec. 11, 1915, p. 4. See also, ibid., March 31, 1917, p. 4.
attachments to European states, and the African American, who
"is an American first, last and always."  The New York Age
came out in favor of forcing immigrants to learn English.  Hyphenated European immigrants, the Chicago Defender argued,
had "sworn allegiance [to America] as a matter of form and .
. . would on the slightest provocation aid their fatherland
against their adopted home."  African Americans, others
argued, were farther removed from old world culture and
politics, and could thus give their undivided loyalty to
America. "Its language is our only tongue, and no hyphen
bridges or qualifies our loyalty," one editorialist wrote. Also unlike recent immigrants, African Americans had proven
their loyalty by participating in all the nation's past wars,

14New York Age, March 15, 1917, p. 4.
15"Our Defense Plan," Chicago Defender, Sept. 18, 1915,
p. 10.
16Louisville Courier-Journal, quoted in Chicago Broad Ax,
March 17, 1917, p. 1. See also, Baltimore Afro-American,
March 31, 1917, p. 4. The Cleveland Gazette labeled Wilson's
adoption of the hyphenate issue a transparent political ploy,
but joined most other black newspapers in accepting the
language of Americanism. The Gazette's criticism of hyphenism
was itself driven by partisan politics, since it singled out
the Democrat Wilson while ignoring the far more impassioned
rhetoric of the Republican Roosevelt. See Cleveland Gazette,
Cleveland Gazette, July 29, 1916, p.2.
creating "the splendid illustrious record of the 'black Phalanx' from Crispus Attucks and Bunker Hill to Carrizal."

During the tense years leading up to American entry into the war, many black papers also supported preparedness, the campaign for a military build-up. Though the campaign was led by the politically conservative National Security League, which sought "to militarize American society" by building up the Army and Navy and instituting universal military training, some progressives, led again by Roosevelt, also clamored for preparedness. Roosevelt noted that abolitionists who were also peace advocates came to support the Civil War, and he compared opponents of preparedness to Tories in the Revolution, Copperheads in the Civil War, and even John Wilkes Booth, Lincoln's assassin. Patriotism required preparedness. "We must prepare ourselves against disaster by facing the fact that we are nearly impotent in military matters," he warned.

17 California Eagle, March 17, 1917, p. 1. The desire to keep the black war record intact was another reason for many editors to support the war effort. On similar themes, see also, for example, Baltimore Afro-American Ledger, Aug. 8, 1914, p. 4; Appeal, June 24, 1916, p. 2; Savannah Tribune, July 1, 1916, p. 2; New York Age, April 5, 1917, p. 4; and Chicago Broad Ax, April 21, 1917, p. 1.


Initially opposed to the idea, Wilson adopted in the summer of 1915 a policy of "reasonable preparedness," which called for a $500 million shipbuilding program, a small expansion of the regular Army, and the creation of a new reserve Army--distinct from the National Guard--of 400,000.\(^2\) His preparedness address of Nov. 4, 1915 was met with opposition from some leading progressives and a group of about fifty Congressmen, most of them former Populists from the South and West.\(^2\) Most of the black press, however, supported preparedness in one form or another.

Shortly after the President's proposal was submitted to Congress, the Western Negro Press Association issued a resolution "unqualifiedly" endorsing "reasonable preparedness." The same conference called for the training of black officers and soldiers and promised that blacks "can be trusted to come to the Nation's defense at any time."\(^2\) The New York Age, the Cleveland Gazette, and the Chicago Defender all endorsed preparedness while accusing some of those who opposed it of un-American sentiments. Pro-preparedness essays appearing in these newspapers tended to ignore the anti-preparedness stand of Northern peace activists--who also often supported racial equality--while focusing their criticisms on

\[\text{Fear God and Take Your Own Part, 349.}\]
\(^2\)Link, Wilson: Confusions and Crises, 15-18.
\(^2\)Chicago Broad Ax, Jan. 8, 1916, p. 1.

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the Southern Democrats in Congress who threatened to block Wilson's plan. The *Defender* lumped the "non-American 'solid South'" together with "hyphenated Americans" whose opposition to preparedness was making the nation a coward in the eyes of the rest of the world." Similarly, the *Gazette* claimed that the main opponents to preparedness were Southern Democrats and that only the "patriotic action of the republicans in congress" would provide for the nation's defense. Editor Smith, who favored preparedness, also argued that Wilson himself lacked the patriotic fervor to challenge Congress and push through the preparedness bill." Nonetheless, Congress approved Wilson's preparedness legislation substantively intact during the following summer." By standing on the side of military preparedness these editorialists situated themselves in a position of loyalty to the country, while placing their mostly Southern enemies on the side of disloyalty, with the "hyphenated Americans."

These black writers were trying to bend to their own purpose words that were intended to crush dissent, bolster


25The major alteration Congress made was to eliminate the proposed national reserve force in favor of strengthening the existing National Guard. Southern Democrats had opposed the national force because they "feared formation of Negro volunteer units." See Link, *Wilson: Confusions and Crises*, 327-38.
national unity, militarize the nation, and facilitate the process of making war. They showed blacks were more American than most citizens, were prepared to fight and die to defend their country, and had an unblemished record of loyalty that they intended to keep intact in the current crisis. Yet, if these words proved to be of use to blacks for their own cause of equal rights, they also retained some of the intent of the white leaders who used them first. They placed their black users squarely behind a war they might legitimately have opposed and in some cases led them to put the cause of the war ahead of black freedom and civil rights.

Some editorial writers gave the impression that they were supporting the war against their better judgement. Just before the declaration of war in 1917, for example, The Appeal expressed hope that America had the "wisdom" to stay out of the "horrible, inhuman, unnecessary war." But if it did not, the editorial continued, blacks would participate, "as they have never been disloyal to their native land." Similarly, the California Eagle opposed the war but promised blacks would nevertheless be loyal. Even before Wilson's declaration of war, the Eagle, which would later condemn Du Bois's editorial calling on blacks to "close ranks," warned that "this is not the time for adverse expressions of non-patriotic

26"Are We to Get Into the War?" The Appeal, March 3, 1917, p. 2.
sentiments." 27 Rev. William A. Byrd wrote in the Cleveland Gazette that the war was being fought "not for national honor but for gain and sordid greediness" and that "the right or wrong of the matter has never entered the consideration." Yet, Byrd continued, African Americans "are going to take our part in this damnable war . . . to keep this country in safety from the foe without." 28 The Chicago Broad Ax denounced the war as economically motivated, but, in an echo of Wilson's "American Spirit" address called on blacks "in this hour of peril" to "forget--all thoughts of self or race." 29

That call was in keeping with Wilson's claim that a citizen had to subordinate "every interest that you have" to national loyalty. But most African American writers could not really do it. A month after calling blacks to forget all thoughts of race, the Broad Ax said that if blacks were to fight in Europe, "we must be given some assurances of better treatment at home." 30 This dilemma dogged black writers throughout the war. How could they live up to Wilson's

27 California Eagle, Feb. 3 and March 17, 1917.


demanding standard of loyalty while continuing to work for the advancement of black human rights?

The *New York Age*, the *Crisis*, and the *Chicago Defender*, supported the war from the beginning and advocated unqualified black participation.\(^1\) Still, even these publications could not "forget--all thoughts of self or race" (though the *Crisis* advised doing so in 1918). They struggled to distinguish their group actions from those of disloyal hyphenates and the unreconstructed South or to justify them as at one with the war aims. In reality the two things sometimes came into conflict. Just before the election of 1916, the *New York Age*’s James Weldon Johnson violated Wilson’s principle of national unity and Roosevelt’s dictum that to vote in an ethnic block is "to be a traitor to American institutions" by advising blacks to cast their votes solely on the basis of racial interests. "Nevertheless," Johnson added,

> in taking up this issue, we are not guilty of hyphenism. We are not seeking the advantage of any outside power at the expense of the United States. We are simply seeking, as Americans of undivided loyalty, to maintain our status and rights as citizens. If we do not succeed in doing that, all other issues will be of no importance to us.\(^2\)

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\(^1\)See, for example, "First in Everything America," *Chicago Defender*, May 6, 1916, p. 8.

Johnson tried to make a distinction between black group interests and hyphenates' divided loyalties and to find a way to fulfill the requirements of the prevailing definition of national loyalty, which became increasingly powerful as the war approached, while still making the case for black advancement.

Throughout the nineteen-month period of America's participation in the war, situations arose which highlighted the conflict between national and group interests. Like Johnson's explanation of his voting strategy, the black press tried each time to reconcile the two things, but never fully resolved the contradictions. The rest of this chapter investigates three situations in which one or more black newspapers confronted this dilemma and examines the way that they tried to resolve it.

**A Rumor of Rebellion**

Around the time of America's entry into World War I, newspapers began to report that German agents were attempting to foment rebellion among African Americans. Such reports might hurt or help African Americans. On one hand, they threatened to contradict the black press's claims of black loyalty. On the other, they highlighted the sources of blacks' frustrations, showed that the nation could not take
their loyalty for granted, and might lead the Federal government to do something to ease those frustrations to ensure black loyalty. Indeed, these and other reports of black "unrest" would finally lead the government to just such a strategy. As America entered the war in the spring of 1917, black newspapers faced a dilemma over how to cover this story. Should they dismiss it as false, thereby preserving blacks' reputation for loyalty to the Federal government, or should they use it as a lever to argue that some kind of action must be taken to assure black enthusiasm for the war effort. Black editors handled the story in a variety of ways, but some tried simultaneously to dismiss the story of a German plot among the black population and use it as evidence of the need for racial justice. Among these, the efforts of the Baltimore Afro-American were most prodigious.

The Afro was typical of many black newspapers in terms of its unenthusiastic support of the war, its continued demands for black rights during the war, and its celebration of black loyalty. After the outbreak of war in Europe in August of 1914, the Afro, like many other black papers, condemned the war, seeing in it evidence of Western "barbarism" and of the failure of European Christianity.3

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3Baltimore Afro-American Ledger, Aug. 15, 1914, p. 4. For an example of a similar reaction to the outbreak of war in 1914, see editorials written by T. Thomas Fortune, New York Age, Aug. 3 & 27, 1914, p. 4. Both Fortune and Afro editorial writer George Bragg were replaced by editorialists with more secular viewpoints during the following year.
"The present war ought to teach us that only that nation is blessed who has the Lord for their God, not on their tongue but in their hearts and lives."34

The Afro's moralistic response to the war was in keeping with the tone of the editorial page under the supervision of George F. Bragg, Jr., a veteran newspaperman and Episcopal minister, "whose religiosity suffused the newspaper from 1900 to 1915."35 But although Bragg saw the war as a travesty, he also saw from the beginning its potential as a vehicle to publicize black loyalty. Days after the outbreak of war in Europe, a black "subject of the British crown" stopped by the newspaper's office on his way to the front. An editorial described the visit and concluded that "when the call is made to defend the honor of the flag, whether it is in America, England, or elsewhere, the colored man can be depended upon to answer when his name is called."36 Bragg was typical of black editors who sought to display the loyalty of blacks not only to the United States, but to the Allied nations as well.37

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3"Baltimore Afro-American Ledger, Sept. 5, 1914, p. 4.


3"Baltimore Afro-American Ledger, Aug. 8, 1914, p. 4. Another editorial on the same page cites blacks' loyalty in past U. S. wars.

With Bragg's departure in 1915, the Afro's tone became "decidedly less religious." Nonetheless in the 32 months between the outbreak of the war and America's entry, the Afro-American continued to see no particularly compelling justification for the war, even while applauding and encouraging black support of or participation in it. An editorial asserted that the European War had won "increased respect" for the fighting abilities of Africans--France and other participants had called up troops from African colonies. Their loyalty and effectiveness in battle would "do more to bring about universal brotherhood than anything that has happened during the past century," the editorial continued. The good of the war could be found not in beating the Germans or saving the Allies, but in advancing black interests by putting black loyalty on display and winning national goodwill. The Afro consistently demanded that blacks be guaranteed the right to serve in the armed forces, and yet even after Wilson had outlined his idealistic war aims and on the eve of a declaration of war, the Afro continued to see the war itself as senseless. In March of 1917, an editorial declared that it was "too bad" that U. S. participation had

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"On demands that blacks be allowed to fight, see "A Negro Regiment," Baltimore Afro-American, June 3, 1916, p. 4; and "Let Us Unite," ibid., April 14, 1917, p. 4."
become inevitable and that "all able bodied men would be called for a useless sacrifice on European battlefields."\textsuperscript{114}

While praising blacks' unconditional loyalty in past wars, the Afro began to suggest they would demand better treatment before fighting this time. In 1916, the paper suggested that some blacks were unwilling to fight in the war with Mexico because "'a country good enough to die for ought to be good enough to vote in.'"\textsuperscript{112} In February of the following year, the paper suggested that before "thoughtful colored people" rushed to volunteer in the war they were waiting to see if the Federal government would take any action against mob violence and lynching in the South. They were asking: "'Why should I be shot in protesting against ruthlessness on the European continent, when there is ruthlessness in my home town that I cannot protest too loudly against?'"\textsuperscript{113} In March, the paper went even further, suggesting that blacks had "'no duties where we have no rights.'"\textsuperscript{114} Unconditional loyalty, it seemed, had meant

\textit{"Baltimore Afro-American, March 10, 1917, p. 4.}\textsuperscript{115}

\textit{"The editorial quoted the Los Angeles Tribune. Unwilling to Fight," Baltimore Afro-American, July 8, 1916, p. 4.}\textsuperscript{116}

\textit{"Ruthlessness," Baltimore Afro-American, Feb. 10, 1917, p. 4.}\textsuperscript{117}

"By putting the phrase in quotation marks, in both the headline and the text, the Afro seemed to be quoting the "patriots of 1776," who recognized their duties to England only so long as England recognized American rights. See "'We Have No Duties Where We Have No Rights,'" Baltimore Afro-American, March 17, 1917, p. 4.\textsuperscript{118}"

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little to the government in the past, and this time blacks should stop acting "puppy-like." The lessons of the Jews in Russia and the Irish in the United Kingdom seemed clear now. They were "endangering" the war effort in those countries by employing the opportunity while the nation is at war to get themselves heard on the question of human rights.

In the United States there is no better time than now for the Negro to urge his claims as never before."*

Each African American should "regard his loyalty as an asset, to be sold at the price of citizenship."*

It was around the time of Wilson's war message that reports began circulating that German spies were seeking to incite rebellion among African Americans, and again the Afro tried to use the story both to reaffirm black loyalty and to point out that blacks would not follow their white fellow-citizens into war like loyal puppies." The Afro reported that German spies had met with blacks in Greensboro, North

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""Why This Particular Honor?" Baltimore Afro-American, March 31, 1917, p. 4.

Carolina, and New York City in order to carry out the "Plan of San Diego," a plot allegedly devised sometime in 1915 by a group of Germans, unnamed African-American leaders, and Mexicans in San Diego to seize the state of Texas and hand it over to blacks. Articles in the Afro argued that the attempt to generate a rebellion among blacks had failed miserably. One article quoted J. Thomas Newsome, a black attorney from Newport News, Virginia, who pointed out that blacks had even been loyal to the Confederate South during the Civil War "when the Negro had his greatest opportunity to strike at the very heart of the South." The recent selection of a black regiment to guard the capitol, black soldiers' service in the war with Mexico, and the recent pledges of support of the war by black leaders and black organizations also demonstrated the loyalty of African Americans and the unlikelihood of any disloyal activities among them during the war. Though the newspaper did not dispute the story that German agents had approached blacks, it condemned any attempt to use the story "to make the great mass of colored people in this country appear disloyal to the United States."48

But at the same time the Afro asserted black loyalty in the face of foreign agents, it simultaneously pointed out that simmering resentments among blacks had made the German plot plausible. If blacks were the most loyal of any ethnic group

"Baltimore Afro-American, April 7, 1917, p. 1; April 14, 1917, p. 1; April 21, 1917, p. 1; and May 5, 1917, p. 1."
in America, they were "also the most proscribed against," and had more reason than any other group to rebel. In an editorial, the Afro listed the many reasons blacks would have to be disloyal, and even reported that "some few colored men in Georgia and Alabama have grown sick and tired of repression, and accepted the offer of the German agents to stir up a rebellion in the Southern States with the hope of winning complete franchise, freedom and political and social equality." But the author quickly added that most African Americans remained loyal and rejected the enticement "as far as can be ascertained." Further, the editorial claimed that

> the larger number of sensible people recognize the folly of a rebellion that is not sure of success. Now is the time to continue our insistence upon right, and now is the time to demand guarantees before going to war willingly, BUT NOW IS NOT THE TIME FOR REBELLION."49

The Afro's response to rumors of black rebellion reflected a deep ambivalence about whether to characterize black loyalty as rock solid or in danger of erosion. Harry Smith's Cleveland Gazette also took the occasion to reaffirm black loyalty, pointing out that any German agents working among blacks in the South would "have found, and quickly too, that, 'Negroes' have too much pride in the flag, for which they have given their life's blood, to give such traitorous

49 "No Time Now for Rebellion," Baltimore Afro-American, April 7, 1917, p. 4. For a similar response to the German Agent story, see the National Equal Rights League statement, ibid., April 21, 1917, p. 1.
action any serious consideration." Blacks supported the war out of pure national loyalty: "Because we stand for the flag and our nation and because here is our home." Smith also pointed out, however, that African Americans had good reason to rebel: "Underlying the reasons for the attempts of the Germans to stir up Southern 'Negroes' against the government, is the fact that they have not been accorded near all to which they are entitled as American citizens." Further, Smith seemed to contradict his simple "pride in the flag" theory of black loyalty by characterizing black support of the war as a means of self-preservation and group advancement. African Americans, he said, would not be "so unwise as to allow discretion to be cast to the winds and seek an unpropitious moment to show resentment." Smith concluded that "every Afro-American" viewed the war as an opportunity for "bettering our position" by showing "the metal of which we are made," and thus shaping public "sentiment." Thus, the Gazette argued that blacks supported the war out of both pure national loyalty and group interest, while at the same time warning that they might not support it at all. Like the Afro, the Gazette's contradictions regarding the rumors of rebellion reflected an ongoing tension between conditional and unconditional loyalty, between pledges of loyalty and threats of rebellion.50

50 "The Afro-American Loyal," Cleveland Gazette, April 14, 1917, p. 2. William Monroe Trotter of the Boston Guardian also both discounted reports of black disloyalty and warned
Such tension was glossed over in the Crisis's one editorial on the subject. In the editorial, "Loyalty," Du Bois wrote off the rumor as a plot by the "Bourbon South" to stop the black migration to the North. Fearful of losing its cheap labor supply, Du Bois argued, "the slave-thinking South" hoped to persuade the nation that blacks were a menace and that martial law must be declared to keep them in their place. Du Bois then deflected the accusation of disloyalty back onto the white South, saying Negroes had been far more loyal to the national government. The African American "never has been a disloyal rebel. He never fought for slavery in a land of Liberty. He never nullified the basic principles of democracy because he hated the people whom he had hurt!" Du Bois wrote. Blacks would remain loyal despite being "enslaved, raped and despised." Unlike the Afro and the Gazette, he did not hint that they might be disloyal for those reasons.51

The tension between loyalty and discontent reappeared in the Afro in other contexts during the early months of the war. Some editorials expressed a lack of enthusiasm for the war or poked fun at exuberant expressions of patriotic sentiment. When Roscoe Conkling Simmons, a traveling promotor of the Chicago Defender, said he "'would rather be an American colored man, waving about my head the Red, White and Blue, that discrimination would affect the level of black participation. See Fox, Guardian of Boston, 215-16.

51"Loyalty," Crisis, 14 (May 1917), 8.
than sit at the feast of a king,'" the Afro remarked that "he can only be speaking for himself. Most people would rather eat with a king than wave a flag." Blacks generally stayed away from the local Fourth of July celebrations that year, an editorial explained, because "only the lighthearted and frivolous in times like these can 'overflow with patriotism for a government that is so chary in protecting its citizens.' . . . Thru their tears they [blacks] cannot see the difference between German Frightfulness and American Frightfulness." But the author added that African Americans were nonetheless doing their share for the war effort." When Secretary of War Newton Baker announced that black men would be drafted into segregated units, and at the same time appealed to them to enlist as non-combatant laborers, the Afro advised them to refuse.

We believe that the colored American . . . should be the first to enlist to take his part and do his share. But if the government he would serve is willing to bow to a hated prejudice and treat him as less than a man, then there is nothing else for him to do but stay at home and go on with his usual work. . . . He need not be in a hurry when his country refuses to accept that service except under

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"Baltimore Afro-American, May 25, 1917, p. 4. See also, ibid., May 19, 1917, p. 4.

"Baltimore Afro-American, July 7, 1917, p. 4. For an editorial that calls Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels' proposal to name a warship after Frederick Douglass "a hollow mockery" because blacks would not be allowed to serve on it, see "Secretary Daniels' Joke," Baltimore Afro-American, August 9, 1918, p. 4.

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conditions which would make him less a man, much less a soldier."

As late as June of 1918, Contributing Editor William H. Weaver warned that continued lynchings threatened to erode blacks' "commendable" patience, loyalty, and patriotism."

But the Afro also called for a "universal upholding of hands" against the common enemy in Europe, and ran front page stories on Negro groups pledging loyalty, examples of black patriotism which appeared in the white press, and the eagerness of black men to volunteer for the Army." In the fall of 1917, an editorial said "there must be no slackers." The time had come for "hard work" and "service and sacrifice . . . to carry on the war." In that first year of the war, the emphasis in the Afro was on the threats to black loyalty. But as government surveillance increased, the emphasis shifted to displaying and encouraging black loyalty. By mid-1918, the tone of the editorial page had changed dramatically. By the late summer of 1918, the Afro was urging its readers to help


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the war effort in any way they could, whether by subscribing to the liberty loan or opening their homes to stateside soldiers. "Help--or by not helping handicap your boy at the front," the paper declared. The paper even recommended drafting striking workers into the Army to force them to do their part." Unlike many black newspapers, the Afro defended Du Bois's "Close Ranks" editorial."

Government surveillance and threats of censorship and even prosecution clearly had an impact on the Afro, whose publisher, John H. Murphy, was visited by government agents late in 1917. As one editorial put it, the Afro and other black newspapers had been muzzled by the Federal government and it was "sensible to recognize that the colored publications must leave many things unsaid until after the war." Thus, threats of black disloyalty disappeared from the newspaper in the latter half of the war. But in the absence of blatant coercion, and during months immediately preceding and following American entry into the war, the Afro walked a narrow line between affirming loyalty and threatening rebellion, hoping in this way to make the war an instrument of black advancement.

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"Baltimore Afro-American, Aug. 9, 1918, p. 4; ibid., Sept. 27, 1918, p. 4; ibid., Sept. 20, 1918, p. 4.

"Baltimore Afro-American, July 26, 1918, p. 4.


"Baltimore Afro-American, July 26, 1918, p. 4.

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The "Jim Crow" Officer Training Camp

A second dilemma also took shape well before censorship became a factor. Early in 1917, Joel Spingarn, the white NAACP chairman who had become a major in the Army intelligence service, persuaded the military brass to establish a camp to train African Americans as Army officers. Promoting the camp in letters to black newspapers, Spingarn argued that the Army was not likely to integrate the officer corps in time for the war, so blacks had to choose between segregated officer training and no such training at all. As leader of America's most influential civil rights organization, Spingarn opposed segregation, but he believed the advantages of the camp outweighed the evils of establishing one more separate institution. Blacks could not afford, he argued, to miss out on opportunities for advancement that came with military service. He reassured militant black editors like Harry Smith that "common sense and patriotism need not be inconsistent with the most radical conception of the rights of every group of American citizens." Editors who criticized the camp

opposed separate institutions, but they were even more incensed that it had been proposed by blacks (and their representatives) themselves.

Like Spingarn, Du Bois defended the camp as an imperfect means to a worthwhile end. African Americans regularly made such bargains, he argued, by participating in "Jim Crow" institutions when they were banned from white versions. "We continually submit to segregated schools, 'Jim Crow' cars, and isolation because it would be suicide to go uneducated, stay at home, and live in the 'tenderloin.'" In this case, the choice was between the "insult of a separate camp and the irreparable injury" of getting no black officers. Another reason for accepting the camp was to bolster claims of black loyalty while countering the rumors that African Americans were plotting with German spies. Opposition to the camp would "add treason and rebellion to the other grounds on which the South urges discrimination against" blacks.63

The training camp presented a "damnable dilemma," as Du Bois put it, which characterized nearly every effort by African Americans to participate in the American war effort. Whether they tried to join the Army as soldiers or officers, serve in the Red Cross as nurses or doctors, or take part in the liberty loan, blacks faced segregation and discrimination.

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Why should black people subject themselves to such humiliations to support a war against a distant enemy? some wondered aloud. On the other hand, how could black people lay claim to self-sacrificing loyalty if they did not participate in the war fully? And as Du Bois pointed out, the rumors of rebellion made it even more important to affirm such loyalty. But the camp controversy involved more than the principle of when and how to accept segregated institutions. Individuals who generally agreed in their opposition to segregation disagreed over the issue of how to make a public response to the camp proposal. Most of the mainstream civil rights advocates (including most black editors) were integrationists who nonetheless supported separate black institutions. All could agree, for example, that public transportation and Federal offices should be integrated. On the other hand, no one denounced the black press or black colleges as Jim Crow institutions. Other institutions caused greater disagreement, however. Both Harry Smith and William Monroe Trotter denounced the establishment of black YMCAs and Hospitals in Northern cities." Most other integrationists, including

"Trotter opposed and helped to keep out of Boston an all-black hospital, a black hotel, and a black YMCA. "The minute we accept a separate branch or place, the segregationists get the argument on us that we practice and accept it when we can get money or position out of it. We ruin our cause by advising separation," he said. See William Monroe Trotter to A. P. Russell, June 9, 1920, box 3, A. P. Russell papers, Boston University. On Harry Smith's opposition to separate YMCAs and hospitals, see "The 'Jim Crow' Y.M.C.A.," Cleveland Gazette, March 3, 1918, p. 2; and "New Segregation Efforts," ibid., July 3, 1915, p. 2.

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Robert Abbott of the Defender, James Weldon Johnson of the Age and even an agitator like Calvin Chase of the Washington Bee, using the same logic as Du Bois, usually supported the formation of such institutions as necessary evils which would contribute to the quality of black life as long as African Americans were excluded from white institutions. Du Bois's response to the segregated Officer Training Camp is in line with the latter approach."

But other black newspapers which often tolerated black institutions demurred in this case. The Chicago Defender responded to Spingarn's proposal with an editorial entitled "'Jim-Crow' Training Camps--No!"" But the emphatic "No!"

"According to one editor, the black YMCA was "a blessing to the community and should receive the unbiased support of every race-loving Negro in the city and country." See Pittsburgh Courier, Nov. 11, 1911, p. 4. See also, "Opposes Colored Y.M.C.A.'s," Indianapolis Freeman, Feb. 11, 1911, p. 4. For an editorial which supported the segregated camp, see Norfolk Journal and Guide, May 12, 1917, p. 4. On Johnson's support of a separate YMCA, see Eugene Levy, James Weldon Johnson: Black Leader, Black Voice (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 156. The Bee was ambivalent about the training camp: "colored people should never accept any separation or distinction based on race alone, except where they must do so, in spite of objection and protest, and then only with the understanding that they do so until they can change conditions." See "The Summer Military Camp," Washington Bee, March 24, 1917, p. 4. But the paper consistently defended segregated public schools. See Hal S. Chase, "Chase, W[illiam] Calvin," Dictionary of American Negro Biography, ed. Rayford Logan (W. W. Norton, 1982), 100.

"Henry Louis Gates, Jr. talks about how, in African-American literature, writers repeat phrases "inside quotation marks in order to reverse or undermine pretended meaning, constituting an implicit parody of a subject's complicity." As Bakhtin puts it, "the word with a sideward glance at someone else's hostile word." Gates calls the process "signifyin(g)." Gates and Bakhtin quoted in Dale E. Peterson,
masked a keen ambiguity. Less than a year earlier, the paper had supported the "lesser evil" of training black officers for black troops, and throughout 1917 it called on blacks to volunteer for military service in the segregated Army. The newspaper even chastised blacks for not showing more enthusiasm. Yet in April of 1917, the Defender not only rejected Spingarn's "Jim Crow" camp, it also rejected separate black regiments led by white officers. Since the paper did not also call for blacks to oppose the war, or refuse to participate, it is unclear what the editorial intended that black men should do." The Defender's position was therefore more rhetorical than practical. It let white America know that Afro-Americans opposed this kind of segregation.

The Defender and the Cleveland Gazette both suggested that if blacks declined to sign onto the O. T. C., the government might end segregation in the armed forces once casualties began to mount and black help became more crucial." Smith also argued that instead of training new recruits, the Army should promote black career soldiers to the


"Dr. Spingarn's Army Call," Cleveland Gazette, March 10, 1917, p. 2; and "'Jim Crow' Training Camps--No!," Chicago Defender, April 7, 1917, p. 10.
But Smith opposed the camp mainly because he did not want blacks to be perceived as endorsing segregation. It was "bad enough to have segregated . . . military training camps FORCED on us by the government, but infinitely worse to ASK for them." Like the Defender's opposition to the camp, Smith's was incongruous with his otherwise generally strong support for the war. He backed preparedness fully, cheered Ohio's Army recruitment campaign, and publicized evidence of black loyalty—including participation in the military and the purchasing of war bonds. Smith openly discussed his dilemma back in the beginning of 1916 when he expressed a "lack of desire to plead" with Wilson for a greater number of blacks regiments and a reluctance to see black troops participate in Wilson's war with Mexico. Yet, he noted, if they did participate in that war, he would be proud if they performed well; and he was not inclined to oppose the NAACP's efforts to expand black

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""Dr. Spingarn's Explanation," Cleveland Gazette, March 10, 1917, p. 2.

"Untitled editorial, Cleveland Gazette, June 9, 1917, p. 2.

"On Smith's cheerleading Ohio recruitment and pushing war stamps, see Cleveland Gazette, May 11, 1918, p. 2. On comparison of loyal blacks with disloyal socialists and members of the Industrial Workers of the World, see "Patriots Disfranchised," ibid., April 13, 1918, p. 2. Smith also endorsed the governor of North Carolina's statement that "in this crucial hour," the African American could be "'counted upon to do his full part.'" See "Patting 'Ham' on the Back" Cleveland Gazette, April 14, 1917, p. 2.
participation in the Army." In fact, the Gazette came to accept and support the camp once established, calling it "historic" and predicting it would give each participant a "proud heritage to pass down to one's children's children."

Another initial opponent of the camp, the Baltimore Afro-American, reconciled opposition to it with national loyalty by comparing opponents to patriots of the Revolutionary War, who were loyal citizens until "England disfranchised her colonies, so to speak and treated them in much the same way that Uncle Sam treats his colored citizens." At that moment, the Revolutionary generation proclaimed:

"We have no duties where we have no rights, it were cowardly to believe otherwise." . . . In the spirit of those same patriots, whose children we are, we say the Negro who speaks of duties where he has no rights, places himself in the position where he may deserve the name--a moral coward.

Until they got their rights, blacks' only duty would be to fight for their own freedom." Like the Defender and the Gazette, the Afro predicted that when the nation needed blacks badly enough, it would be forced to give them equal opportunity in the military service." However, once the

"Army Enlistment Barrier," Cleveland Gazette, April 1, 1916, p. 2.


"We Have No Duties Where We Have No Rights," Baltimore Afro-American, March 17, 1917, p. 4.


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separate training camp became a reality, the Afro, too, began to support it. If black officers fought for democracy in France and then returned home to fight for it in the South, "then the 'Jim Crow' camp will not have been tolerated in vain," a May editorial conceded. Again, the real problem with the camp had been that blacks and their advocates had asked for it themselves: "Better to be forced into it than to ask for it. The people will accept this sub-citizenship, not because they want to, but because they must." 76

Similarly, the Washington Bee, the New York News, the Appeal, the Indianapolis Freeman, and the New York Age objected less to the camp itself than to the fact that blacks themselves or their white friends would advocate segregation. "We do not deem it wise on our part to voluntarily segregate ourselves or permit our white friends to segregate us," the Age explained. A recent War Department bulletin on military training had said nothing about segregated training and neither should the NAACP. Those opposed to the camp seemed to fear that if they asked for segregated officer training themselves, it would legitimize the practice of "Jim Crow." Opposing the camp rhetorically, while supporting it in

practice, these black writers sought to protest segregation while maintaining their loyalty as American citizens."

By May of 1917, 470 black college men had applied for admission to the black officer training camp, located in Des Moines, Iowa. Prominent black colleges like Hampton Institute and Fisk University cooperated with the call for volunteers, and the camp opened in Des Moines in July with 1,250 candidates."

Like the Afro, most opponents seemed to come around to the camp after it had become a reality. Even William Monroe Trotter's newspaper, the Guardian, for example, proudly announced later in the war that 107 colored men, one from nearly every state, had received commissions." Even Spingarn had to admit that the black press's "bold and manly" denunciation of the camp was necessary. "I should not want the first reaction to be anything else than what it is," he told Du Bois. The critical response let America know blacks did not accept unequal status and opposed the principle of segregation and that the segregated camp was no favor of America to blacks, but rather the other way around. In light

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"Boston Guardian fragment, Oct. 31, 1918, Trotter Papers.
of this stated opposition, their eventual support of the camp highlighted the self-sacrificing nature of black loyalty to the nation.

\textit{Houston!}

Soon after the training camp controversy faded, events again tested the black press's ability to find just the right balance between militancy and loyalty. On the evening of August 23, about 100 black soldiers marched in formation from Camp Logan toward downtown Houston, Texas, intent on revenge.\textsuperscript{80} Since they had arrived in the city on July 28 to guard the camp during a construction project, the 654 black members of the Third Battalion, Twenty-fourth Infantry had chafed at racist epithets hurled by workers at the camp, Jim Crow restrictions in streetcars and other public facilities, and, especially, police brutality. On the afternoon of the twenty-third, a black soldier was badly beaten and arrested after he tried to rescue a black woman from an assault by a notorious police officer, Lee Sparks. When Corporal Charles W. Baltimore, a provost guard and a "model soldier," inquired about the arrest, Sparks struck him over the head and then

\textsuperscript{80}On the Houston riot, see Robert V. Haynes, \textit{A Night of Violence: The Houston Riot of 1917} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976).
fired his gun as the soldier tried to run away (Sparks denied striking Baltimore and said he had fired into the ground).”

The story of the two soldiers' arrests—embellished by rumors that Baltimore had been killed—quickly filtered back into camp and ignited resentments that had been smoldering for weeks. After Corporal Baltimore had been returned to camp, the officer in charge, Major Kneeland S. Snow, ordered the men confined to camp until morning. When Snow ordered the men to turn in their weapons, some refused, seized supplies of ammunition, and began firing in the air. Fearful that a mob of white rioters was approaching, the soldiers fell in line behind Sergeant Vida Henry and marched out of camp.

Unlike the white rioters in East St. Louis a month earlier, the soldiers did not wantonly destroy property, but marched deliberately into town with a specific purpose in mind—to take revenge on police officers and street car conductors.” Before the march finally ended in disarray and with the deaths of several unintended victims, including a teenage boy and two white soldiers mistaken for uniformed police officers, the rioters killed four police officers, including Sparks' partner, Rufus Daniels, and two civilians who were acting as police. In two hours of marching and shooting, the soldiers killed 15 whites and seriously injured

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"Haynes, A Night of Violence, 96.

"Haynes, A Night of Violence, 140-41.

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12 others, one of whom, another policeman, later died."
When the mutineers disbanded, some slipped back into camp while others found shelter in black homes or otherwise sought cover. Eventually, authorities rounded up all the soldiers and sent the entire battalion by train to a camp in Columbus, New Mexico, to await courts martial.

Some of the soldiers were unrepentant. Anonymous notes dropped from the train on its way to Columbus, picked up by dutiful citizens and passed on to military authorities, express righteous satisfaction at having shot up Houston. "We done our part in Houston and are on our way to Columbus, New Mexico," read one note, picked up by a resident of Fort Bend and passed along to the military. Another such note warned:

The people of Houston--Remember the 23rd of August, 1917. At 8:30 the Twenty-fourth Infantry gave Houston their first military blowout. The citizens didn't know what a volley was until that night. They didn't know that a 30 U.S. magazine rifle could shoot so hard. Volley fire! Volley fire!"

It is easy to imagine that African Americans throughout the country, accustomed to reading in sickening detail about white attacks on blacks or regularly subjected to the same kinds of insults that Camp Logan soldiers encountered in Houston, might share the satisfaction expressed in these notes.

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"Quoted in Haynes, A Night of Violence, 193.

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At the same time, however, most of the white American media condemned the soldiers actions. Even nominal allies of African Americans saw Houston as "one of the most disgraceful mutinies of American troops in our history." The Outlook, "Theodore Roosevelt's editorial spokesman," urged that the offending soldiers be executed swiftly so as to obtain the maximum deterrent effect." The journal also advised "Negro leaders" to speak out forcefully in condemnation of the mutiny, to "visit upon these Negro mutineers the same unanimous condemnation which the white race, North and South, visited upon the white rioters of East St. Louis." If black leaders failed to so "vindicate their loyalty," America might decide against entrusting the defense of the nation to black officers and soldiers." Even Oswald Villard's Nation asserted that the conduct of local authorities did not justify the Houston mutiny and called for the "severest punishment." Lamenting that "innocent persons were slaughtered," the New York Times advised the government to show "no sign of leniency" toward the mutineers. While the Times offered mild criticism of the South for persecuting black soldiers, it recommended avoiding the problem by sending


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black troops to camps in the North, a solution frequently offered by whites and sometimes by blacks."

In formulating a response to Houston, black newspapers encountered one of the most excruciating dilemmas of the war. "It is difficult for one of Negro blood to write of Houston," Du Bois agonized. On one hand, black soldiers had demonstrated in practice the kind of defiant militancy that many newspapers had advocated in theory. On the other hand, their actions seemed to belie the papers' persistent claim that the loyalty of black citizens in general and black soldiers in particular could be utterly relied upon. Du Bois dared to suggest only obliquely that African Americans might approve of the mutiny. "Our hands tremble to rise and exult, our lips strive to cry," he wrote. But to exult at the mutiny of a battalion of American soldiers would certainly undermine the image of loyalty Du Bois and others wanted to foster. Thus he added: "And yet our hands are not raised in exultation; and yet our lips are silent."

Most editors in the black press knew that commenting on Houston was for them a dangerous proposition and so treated it gingerly. After the execution of 13 of the mutineers in

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""The Houston Outbreak," New York Times, Aug. 25, 1917, p. 6. See also, House Resolution 131, by Rep. McLemore, which asked the secretary of war to return the mutineers to Houston for trial and protested against sending black soldiers to the South, in Congressional Record 65th Cong., 1st sess., 1917, 55, pt. 6-8:


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December in San Antonio, Texas, Harry Smith expressed what must have been the sentiment of many African Americans: "We simply dare not start to try to express our feelings and those of our people as a result of that terrible affair." It was a wise choice. When the Baltimore Afro-American referred to the soldiers executed in December of 1917 as martyrs, the Justice Department called editor John H. Murphy into a local office where he promised to "eliminate such stuff hereafter from his paper." The only case of a black publisher jailed under the Espionage Act came as a result of an article on the Houston affair. In the Nov. 24 edition of the San Antonio Inquirer, editor G. W. Bouldin published a letter from a black Austin, Texas, woman in support of the soldiers. C. L. Threadgill-Dennis, a student and some-time instructor in domestic science at Tillotsen College in Austin, urged the soldiers to "rest assured that every [Negro] woman in all this land of ours . . . reveres you, she honors you." The letter continued:

We would rather see you shot by the highest tribunal of the United States Army because you dared protect a Negro woman from the insult of a southern brute in the form of a policeman, than to have you forced to go to Europe to fight for a liberty you can not enjoy.

Negro women regret that you mutinied, and we are sorry you spilt innocent blood, but we are not


sorry that five southern policeman's bones now bleach in the graves of Houston, Tex.

It is far better that you be shot for having tried to protect a Negro woman, than to have you die a natural death in the trenches of Europe, fighting to make the world safe for a democracy that you can't enjoy. On your way to the Training Camps you are jim-crowed. Every insult that can be heaped upon you, you have to take, or be tried by court-martial if you resent it.

The author went on to list a number of recent instances when blacks were insulted by whites in Austin and could have used the protection of the 24th Infantry. She reassured the condemned soldiers that they were dying for "the most sacred thing on earth to any race[, even the southern white man, his daughter's, his wife's, his mother's[, his sister's[, his neighbor's sister's[, protection from insult." Like other blacks who commented on the riot, Threadgill-Dennis expressed regret at the loss of innocent life. Unlike them, however, she ignored Du Bois's warning against exultation. Crossing this boundary proved too much for the authorities. The newspaper's editor, Bouldin, was found to have made "an unlawful attempt to cause insubordination," a violation of Title I, Section 3 of the Espionage Act, and was eventually sentenced to two years in Leavenworth Federal penitentiary. His plight likely served as a warning to other black editors."


For the most part, the black press suppressed the impulse to praise the mutineers, or to laud their actions. Nor did black writers unanimously condemn the mutineers. Instead, they walked a narrow line, condemning the mutiny while also explaining it.

A few, including the Chicago Broad Ax and the Cleveland Gazette, declined to condemn the mutiny, but most echoed the white press's denunciation of it. As Du Bois put it, "We ask no mitigation of their punishment. They broke the law. They must suffer." The Chicago Defender, so eager to praise blacks who fought back against lynchers or rioters, condemned the soldiers' actions and counseled blacks in general to turn the other cheek. "Because a white man stoops to throw mud at us is no reason why we should roll in the mire with them," an editorial advised. In a foreshadowing of Du Bois's "Close Ranks" editorial, the Defender called on blacks to "put our whole heart and soul into the task of aiding our government to crush the enemy." Unlike most of the black press, the


"To confuse matters more, the same editorial concluded with an oblique warning to whites who provoke mob violence: "what the white man starts, the Colored man unquestionably will finish." See "In the Enemy's Camp," Chicago Defender, Sept. 1, 1917, [p. 12]. The Cleveland Advocate said every colored man in America regretted the mutiny, but at the same time was "tired" of the "wholesale" executions of black soldiers who allegedly participated. "Yet," an editorial added, "we are standing and will continue to stand by the flag, ready to protect its graceful folds with the last drop of our blood. . . . Was there ever a more sublime patriotism?" See "That Texas Affair," Cleveland Advocate Sept. 1, 1917, p. 6; and "Tired of Wholesale Killing," ibid., Jan. 12, 1918 p.

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Pittsburgh Courier did not object to the execution of 13 of the accused mutineers that December. "Mutiny and murder are crimes that merit death upon conviction," an editorial proclaimed. "Soldiers who participate in lawlessness must take the consequences." Even the militant, socialist Messenger, while arguing that "taunts, insults and abuses" had been "unsparingly heaped upon" black soldiers, added: "We do not advocate or condone criminality or lawlessness among Negroes. We condemn it."

But the obligatory condemnations of the mutiny were scarce compared to the explanations of how the soldiers were provoked. Editorialists and reporters sought to show that the soldiers had been pushed to a point where any normal person would have retaliated. While it was "regrettable that the soldiers so far forgot themselves as to spill innocent blood," the Afro-American conceded, "yet there is another side to the controversy." The participation of so many soldiers illustrated "how great the provocation must have been."

8. "In the same editorial, the Courier also criticized "crackers" for abusing black soldiers in every southern town. Quoted in Andrew Buni, Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 105.


than actually existed by claiming that the mutiny had been preceded by the killing of a black soldier by a white mob."

The *Chicago Defender* speculated that, if white soldiers had suffered the same insults as blacks soldiers in Houston, the response would have been much more "horrible and ghastly." Blacks could tolerate more because of "a bigger and more generous heart" than most men. But despite the *Defender*’s attempt to reassert the press's claim of black tolerance and almost superhuman loyalty and patriotism, that paper and several others had to concede that African-Americans were "just human" after all, and that their national loyalty and tolerance of indignities had limits. "A man," the *Age* pointed out, "whether he be black or white, is a human being before he is a soldier."100

If black soldiers had been so mercilessly provoked, greater condemnation should be heaped on the provokers than on the soldiers. Black newspapers tried to pin the guilt for the mutiny on racist Southerners—not only in Houston, but all

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over the South. They opposed the calling up of black soldiers and had goaded black troops in a number of places. In its long editorial on Houston, the Defender linked Houston's provocateurs to those in the South who had failed to reconcile themselves to the Union's victory in the Civil War. These Southerners were not only hostile to blacks' rights, but also lacked loyalty to the Federal government. "The true patriots are found in the north; the south has a handful." It was this lack of true patriotism that led Southerners to goad into mutiny "one of the most efficient and orderly forces in the regular service." The Pittsburgh Courier argued that black soldiers suffered "unbearable abuse" in every Southern town in which they were stationed. The Gazette, one of the least apologetic of the papers in responding to the riot, blamed it on a "Texas mob of lynch-murderers." Editor Smith even blamed the executions, carried out by the Federal government, on the South, which was "determined to drive every bit of loyalty and patriotism from us with all these 'military hangings.'" "Quartering Negro troops in the South is equivalent to sending them into the enemy's country with the

101 On tensions between black soldiers and civilians, see Barbeau and Henri, Unknown Soldiers, 38ff.

102 "In the Enemy's Camp," Chicago Defender, Sept. 1, 1917, [p. 12].

103 See Buni, Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier, 105.

104 "Five More Sentenced to Die," Cleveland Gazette, Jan. 1, 1918, p. 2.
difference that they are forbidden to exercise the right of self-protection," the Age editorialized. Persecution of black soldiers came as a result not only of the South's hatred of blacks but also of its lingering hatred, dating back to the confederacy, of the Federal government.

There is no use in seeking to disguise the fact that the United States uniform is not held in high favor in all parts of the South. Despite recent protestations of patriotism there remains a remnant of the spirit of Secession, carefully fostered, which cannot abide the flavor of Federal authority. When that authority is embodied in the black soldier, the combination brings to the surface all the venom and bitterness of the unreconstructed rebel and domineering slave driver of the past assiduously instilled into the present generation.  

Clearly, the South had not sacrificed "every interest" to the national good, as Wilson had demanded in the presidential campaign of 1916. Thus, Houston became not an attack of black soldiers on American citizens, but an attack by the unreconstructed and disloyal South simultaneously on the Union and African Americans. As they sought to reinterpret the war to show black loyalty, the black press sought to reinterpret Houston to show the disloyalty of the South.

Editors and writers in the black press who selectively assimilated the words of American wartime loyalty sometimes managed to turn that language to their own uses and against

the racist South. They highlighted a long tradition of black loyalty to the Federal government which contrasted sharply with the South's longstanding opposition to it. At the same time, the use of words which implied unconditional loyalty shaped the "ideological becoming" of editors' in ways sometimes contradictory (or at least extraneous) to the pursuit of racial justice. It led some to back the war despite principled opposition to it; to assert that all blacks would be loyal though they may have little reason to be; to underplay signs of growing black militancy; to call for participation of African Americans in every aspect of the war, no matter how ill treated they were in the process; to hedge in their defense of black soldiers who struck out at Southern racism.

The more extreme examples of accommodation and the more unequivocal proclamations of loyalty, especially after 1917, were likely the result not simply of editors' freely choosing to display black loyalty, but also of the government's coercive censorship program (which will be discussed in chapter 6). But even in the face of coercion, the black press continued to use such weapons as it could to bend the war to black purposes. As the threat of black disloyalty became an increasingly untenable lever for demanding racial justice during the war, another important strategy--one which carried fewer dangers and caused less ambiguity--remained feasible and useful. When America entered the war in 1917, President
Woodrow Wilson defined the conflict as a crusade for human rights and gave black journalists a new set of words to assimilate into their own ideology of racial equality. If America wanted to be taken seriously as world guardian of humanitarian values, black editorial writers argued, it could not continue to deny basic human rights to its own people. By the summer of 1918, Wilson himself would have to admit that they had a point.
CHAPTER 5

MAKING THE WORLD AND AMERICA SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY

If America defeats the south, the world will believe what we are preaching, a world made safe through democracy.

--William A. Byrd

As America moved toward war in January of 1917, Woodrow Wilson appeared before the Senate to outline his vision of what would become his stated war aim: "Peace without victory." Speaking "on behalf of humanity" and a nation that had been established to "show mankind the way to liberty," he outlined a path to a just and lasting peace, a peace between equals, not one imposed by victors on the vanquished. Underlying Wilson's vision of a new world order was the principle that "governments derive all their just powers from the consent of the governed." Wilson saw in these "American principles" "no breach in either our traditions or our policy as a nation, but a fulfillment, rather, of all that we have professed or striven for." Three months later he asked Congress to wage a war "for the ultimate peace of the world and for the liberation of its peoples. . . . The world," he said, in perhaps the most memorable phrase of the war, "must be made

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safe for democracy.2 It was a phrase the black press would make ample use of.

Despite serious Republican opposition to the notion of "peace without victory" and Wilson's plans to establish a League of Nations, most Americans reacted favorably to both speeches. "Never before, it seemed, had a single speech evoked such overwhelming and almost unanimous praise in the United States," Wilson's biographer, Arthur S. Link, wrote of the first speech. "Never before, it seemed, had a single speaker succeeded so well in enunciating the political ideals and principles by which the American people in their better moments had tried to live."3

Though the black press did not join in the "unanimous praise" of Wilson's vision, black writers came to embrace the idea that in better moments Americans could champion democratic principles. At the same time, black writers did not lose sight of Americans' worse moments, when they mocked these principles with their treatment of African Americans. Still, the act of fighting a war for democracy might force America to see the contrast between its better and worse


moments and the contradictions between its ideals and its racial practices. In short, like other groups, including progressives, conservative organizations, "and special interest groups of all kinds," in David M. Kennedy's phrase, the black press "sought to invest America's role in the war with their preferred meaning, and to turn the crisis to their particular advantage." Wilson had given black writers, publisher, and editors a powerful weapon for doing so. They were able to highlight the gap between Wilson's wartime rhetoric and the treatment of African Americans; conflate the war against autocracy in Europe with their war against racism at home; paint the oppressors of blacks--especially white Southerners--as enemies of America no less than Germany and the Central Powers; and lay claim to being part of that America which upheld true democratic principles and was the source of Wilson's war aims. Thus, the war could simultaneously defeat Prussians in Europe and wipe out "Prussianism" in the South.

The enthusiastic response of so many Americans to Wilson's humanitarian idealism encouraged blacks in their hope that the war would awaken the dormant spirit of justice in America. Then again, few white commentators connected democracy and self-determination in Europe with justice for

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blacks in America. Theodore Roosevelt, who had thought a peace without victory would "set back the march of civilization," called the war declaration "unanswerable" and on a par "with the great state papers of Washington and Lincoln." Conservative Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, also an opponent, in January, of both peace without victory and the League of Nations, now thought Wilson had "expressed in the loftiest manner possible the sentiments of the American people." Only six senators and fifty representatives voted against the declaration of war, despite opposition among the general population that Link described as "deep and wide."

White editorial writers ignored or glossed over the contradictions—which were painfully obvious to black writers—between America's war aims and its treatment of African Americans. The New Republic, in proclaiming in the wake of Wilson's war address that "the cause of the Allies is now unmistakably the cause of liberalism," conceded that the allied nations "have much to do before their own houses are put in order, and democracy is by no means secure among those who proclaim it." But the editorial did not dwell on or specify the Allies' faults—much less America's. Instead, it predicted that the entry of the United States along with the participation of a now Czar-free Russia would "be a stimulus


[Link, Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 269, Lodge quoted, 426, 430, 429 n. 103.]
to democrats everywhere" and called Wilson the world's "most liberal statesman in high office"--notwithstanding his regressive race policies." The liberal Nation agreed that the President was qualified to make the world "a fit place for civilized man to live in." The New York Tribune, usually a critic of Wilson, praised the address lavishly as coming near to "the ideal of the American people, the ideal of a President who should lead." The World's Work compared the World War to the American Civil War--both were struggles for human freedom. But the magazine did not address the incomplete nature of the humanitarian aspects of the North's victory in that earlier struggle.10

Democracy for Whom?

African Americans, on the other hand, saw the supreme irony in the prospect of the United States fighting a war for democracy. The failure of the Civil War to provide full freedoms for blacks, along with Wilson's own dismal record on


"The Decision for War," Nation, 5 April 1917, 388.

'Quoted in Link, Wilson: Campaigns for Progressivism and Peace, 428.

10"America in the Battle Line of Democracy," World's Work, April 1917, 581-86. See also, "Why This is America's War," ibid., May 1917, 9.
race, made the administration's war aims dubious. Even so, black newspaper editors, columnists, and reporters did not reject outright the idea of an American crusade for world justice. Instead, they sought to expand the scope of Wilson's aims to include democracy for all peoples, especially for blacks in America. Black newspapers' editorials exposed the irony of Wilson's messages by pointing out the hypocrisy of exporting to Europe democratic freedoms that Wilson himself had a hand in denying to African Americans at home. Further, they seized on Wilson's language of rights and equality, appropriating it and the war itself for their own interests.

After Wilson's January "peace without victory" speech, the Chicago Defender and the Baltimore Afro-American noted the discrepancy between Wilson's pledge to bring government by consent of the governed to Europe and the disfranchisement of blacks in the American South. Wilson himself held office "because in more than a dozen states colored men [who could be expected to vote Republican] were prevented from casting their ballots," the Afro claimed, and added "'physician heal thyself.'"11 The Defender seized the language of both Wilson and the American Revolution, by pointing out that because they were denied the right to give "their consent to the way that they are governed," African-Americans in the South were


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victims of "taxation without representation." The author called attention to the difference between pledging democracy to peoples in foreign lands and applying it "locally," where Wilson actually had the power to enforce it. "Somehow it doesn't seem quite consistent to wash someone else's clothes and leave your own soiled." The practice of lynching in the South also made dubious any claim that America could represent the forces of justice and democracy on the world stage.¹²

Developing the lynching theme, the New York Age pointed out that Wilson's claim to speak for "humanity" rang hollow in light of his failure to "utter one word against this outraging of humanity within the territory over which he presides." Not just Wilson, but all Americans deserved censure for "their smug hypocrisy," in expressing "horror at German 'atrocities,'" or the Turks' "treatment of the Armenians" while they ignored the lynchings of blacks in the South. A month later, the Age noted that in order to fulfill his "desire to be known as the 'President of Humanity,'" Wilson would have to "show that his definition of 'Humanity' is broad enough to cover the submerged tenth of the citizenship, who are striving to reach their full status as American citizens."¹³


¹³"Well Worth Thinking About," New York Age, Feb. 15, 1917, p. 4; "The President's Opportunity," ibid., March 8, 1917, p. 4. For a similar critique of Wilson's role as
After the declaration of war on April 2, black papers continued to express skepticism about the "humanitarian" nature of Wilson's motives. "When President Wilson uses fine words about going to war for the protection of humanity abroad, thinking Americans recall the humanity at home that craves protection," the Afro sniped." Yet black writers now began to embrace the Wilsonian idea of a war for democracy—not because America could credibly make such a claim, but because blacks could use such a war to their own benefit. Three weeks after its initial response to the war message, the Afro-American called Wilson's promise to fight a war to establish democracy in Europe "a beautiful theory."

It is well that [at] the close of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century such noble words should be uttered, and that the fetters of those people who have been bound hand and foot for centuries should be stricken off and that the reign of freedom should begin; that every man should have the chance to be an[d] to do and to assist in the government under which he lives; that all men should have the "inalienable right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

But from all appearances, the editorial continued, Wilson did not believe this theory should be applied to the United States. To credibly carry this fight to Europe, America itself must practice "real democracy," and for those unclear

humanitarian, see "No Time Now for Rebellion," Baltimore Afro-American, April 7, 1917, p. 4.

""No Time Now for Rebellion," Baltimore Afro-American, April 7, 1917, p. 4.

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on the concept, the Afro printed a lengthy definition from the dictionary.\textsuperscript{15}

The New York Age began to print a picture of the American flag on the editorial page each week. Editor James Weldon Johnson called Wilson's war message a "convincing" and "inspiring" document, one that, if followed up with action, could heal racial and ethnic divisions. "We, as a race, might take the President up on some of the references to 'humanity,' and point out their inconsistencies, as we so well know them; but, for the present, we pass that over." Wilson's message struck "a responsive chord in the great American public," Johnson argued, and the war would provide a "great trial" for the nation, to determine if it could live up to its democratic ideals.\textsuperscript{16}

The Crisis embraced the war effort enthusiastically, urging blacks to "join heartily in this fight for eventual world liberty." An editorial, drafted by an NAACP conference of May 17-19, claimed that "permanent peace" depended on "extension of the principle of government by the consent of the governed, not simply among the smaller nations of Europe but among the natives of Asia and Africa, the Western Indies and the Negroes of the United States." The editorial acknowledged that blacks, of course, had a right to resent

\textsuperscript{15}"Democrat," Baltimore Afro-American, April 28, 1917, p. 4.

their treatment in America and to feel ambivalent about participating in the war, but they should "never forget that this country belongs to us even more than to those who lynch, disfranchise, and segregate."17

These writers warmed to Wilson's war message as they realized that they could redirect its principles for use in the cause of black civil rights at home. Wilson had provided the black press with an effective yardstick by which to measure the humanitarian record of America and even the administration itself.18 The South, they found, was not safe for Negroes, who did not enjoy self-determination because they


18In 1913, Wilson had overseen the segregation of federal offices by race and the wholesale firing and demotion of black political appointees and civil service workers in the South. When William Monroe Trotter led a delegation to the White House in 1914 to protest the segregation, he exchanged heated words with Wilson, who "affirmed his belief that the total separation of the races was the policy that would bring the greatest benefit to the Negroes." See Arthur S. Link, Wilson: The New Freedom (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 243-54, esp. 252. On Trotter's meeting with Wilson, see also Stephen R. Fox, The Guardian of Boston: William Monroe Trotter (New York: Atheneum, 1970), 179-85; and Christine A. Lunardini, ed. "Standing Firm: William Monroe Trotter's Meetings with Woodrow Wilson, 1913-1914," Journal of Negro History, 64 (Summer 1979), 244-60.
could not vote. Throughout the war, the black press continued
to point out the fundamental contradiction between America's
war aims and its actual practice of democracy. It sought
persistently to remind America of the "finer objects of this
world battle," which included "world peace and self-
government" and the elimination of lynching and
disfranchisement in America."

The Real Enemy

At the same time that black editors sought to fuse the
cause of democracy in Europe with democracy for blacks at
home, they also attempted to conflate the enemy in Europe with
the enemy of blacks in America. Southern "Huns" undermined
the American war effort by lynching blacks, thus hurting the
morale of loyal blacks who were crucial to the war effort and
nurturing national divisions at a time when national security
required solidarity. "Kaiserism" in the South also hurt
American's ability to credibly fill its self-appointed role as
guardian of world democracy. Southern racism, according to
black newspapers, was disloyal because it hindered the war
effort.

"Resolution of the Washington Conference," Crisis, 14
(June, 1917), 59-60.
At a time when the national mood tolerated only utter loyalty to the Federal government, the black press sought to point out the white South's inherent disloyalty and un-Americanness. Black writers sought to show the South was disloyal and un-American in four ways: first, by recalling that the South had once rebelled against the Federal government and still opposed it in many ways; second, by pointing out examples of Southern opposition or indifference to the current war; third, by drawing parallels between the South and the European enemies; and fourth by showing that the South was eroding the morale of blacks and otherwise hindering black contributions to the war effort.

Black newspapers sometimes recalled or alluded to the fact that the former slave states had once rebelled against the Federal government. The Age suggested that the "spirit of succession," still reigned in the South, where "fossils of the rebellion" sought to help the German cause by attacking loyal blacks.20 The Defender claimed that Southerners hated president Lincoln; the Afro called anti-Negro politicians "Southern copperheads"; and the Gazette repeatedly returned to the theme of the rebel South.21

21"This Is No Soldier!" Chicago Defender, May 4, 1918, p. 16; see also, "Mr. Phillips of Memphis Would Like to Know," ibid., Jan. 5, 1918, p. 12.
Black newspapers pointed out the South's failure to fulfill recruitment or liberty loan quotas, and cited evidence of the region's low enthusiasm for the war. One editorial writer classified Southern politicians who opposed black recruitment "with the anti-conscriptionists and anti-draft agitators." Others highlighted any opposition to measures deemed necessary for the war effort. The *Afro* criticized as "obstructionists" Southern Congressmen James K. Vardaman, John Sharp Williams, and J. Thomas Heflin when they opposed a measure which President Wilson "regarded as necessary for the quicker winning of the war." "Usually it is the Negro problem in the national Congress that so inflames Southern copperheads that they cease to be patriotic." This time it had to do with women's suffrage. The *Gazette* found Southern states' recruitment of soldiers to be lagging behind. The *Defender* noted that though they were outnumbered by white boys, blacks in many Southern towns had enlisted in greater numbers than white Southern "loafers."

Black newspapers attacked the South perhaps most effectively by drawing parallels between the former slave

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24 *Cleveland Gazette*, May 4, 1918, p. 2; *ibid.*, May 11, 1918, p. 2.

states and the European enemy. Black newspapers connected the two, first by simply applying to the South the words that the nation had used to dehumanize the enemy. "American 'Huns'" committed violence against blacks in the South. Harry Smith conflated "southernism" with "'Prussianism,'" as if they were equally damning labels.26 The Chicago Defender called Jim Crow railroad cars the "KAISER ON WHEELS" and Southern politicians the "Kaisers of America." The "mailed fist and iron heel of crazed southerners have borne down just as mercilessly on our women and children" as the "mailed fist and iron heel of the kaiser," a columnist argued.27 Several newspapers described Southerners as "mobocrats," a play on "autocracy," the term often used to describe Central Power governments.28

Black editorialists found numerous examples to support this comparison. The South practiced autocracy by denying blacks a say in their own government. Editors borrowed language from both the American Revolution ("taxation without representation") and Wilson (rule without "consent of the


28See for example, "Bourbonism and Progress," New York Age, Sept. 6, 1917, p. 4.
governed") to condemn this practice.29 Southern governments imposed autocratic controls on individuals by mandating racial segregation in public places. And Southern mobs committed atrocities against blacks in the South worse than those committed by Germans against the Belgians or the Turks against the Armenians.

In condemning the autocracy of the South, black editors did not always let the North off the hook. Northerners shared the blame for refusing to act against Southern "Hunnishness." As the Gazette's William A. Byrd wrote, "Race prejudice and bias have warped our national conscience." But Byrd and most writers in the black press pinpointed the source of that prejudice in the South. In "THE WAR," a decidedly anti-war response to Wilson's war address in April, Byrd argued that America had been "un-American toward our race for hundreds of years" and was clearly unqualified to fight a war for world democracy: "America, having learned to be unjust toward colored people with impunity is now ready to follow its habit with other nationalities." America should make one of its war aims the democratization of the South, Byrd argued in a July editorial. He called the Southern white man "America's worst enemy." In his pre-election page-one editorial of 1918, Byrd catalogued the South's un-American qualities and equated a

29 In an untitled editorial, Harry Smith said "The South favors a maximum of representation with a minimum of taxation and it comes pretty near getting it." See Cleveland Gazette, July 27, 1918, p. 2.

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defeat of the Southern-based Democratic Party with a defeat of the European enemy. The South must be repudiated in the election, he argued, because it did not respect the Constitution, was "the most barbarous spot in Christendom," had opposed the administration's war effort, had a poor grasp of governmental and legal matters and was "unfit to govern a country that is now the ruling nation of the world." Byrd now placed the South outside the pale of what he considered "American." "If America defeats the south," he argued, "the world will believe what we are preaching, a world made safe for democracy."30

Gazette publisher Harry Smith similarly conflated the enemy with the South, and called for a simultaneous defeat of both. "A little 'democracy' is sadly needed these days, in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee and indeed the entire south," he wrote. In response to a presidential speech calling for social justice in America, Smith wrote:

It will indeed be a happy day for America when the territory south of Mason and Dixon's line, as well as foreign territory, is made safe for its down-trodden Democracy, a Democracy of humble, long-suffering, patient and patriotic people.31


31 "Humanity and the Negro," Cleveland Gazette, April 6, 1918, p. 2.
Adapting Wilson's words, Smith and Byrd depicted the South—no less than Germany—as foreign territory and the object of American war aims.

Other newspapers similarly tried to place the South outside the pale of American civilization, equating it with German autocracy. The *Afro* argued that "real democracy" existed in the South for only a brief time (presumably during Reconstruction), and that the leadership of individuals from this section in the Federal government created the nation's poor record on race.²² An *Age* editorial argued that the South had "no civilized order of government", was "ruled by an oligarchy or mob," and "gravitates between a state of autocracy or anarchy."²³ The *Defender*, perhaps more critical of the South than any other black newspaper, constantly urged black readers to leave the South for the more hospitable North.²⁴ An editorial called the South "the land

²²"Roosevelt's Opportunity," Baltimore *Afro-American*, July 14, 1917, p. 4. The *Afro* also aimed the charge of "unpatriotic and un-American" against the mayor of Baltimore when he signalled his support of a new residential segregation ordinance. The mayor, the *Afro* suggested, should "lose sight of caste and autocracy for a while and get into his system a mite of the kind of democracy we are trying to beat into the Huns." See "Segregation Fever Again in the Air," Baltimore *Afro-American*, July 5, 1918, p. 4.


²⁴Yet in the context of the war, the paper often blamed the nation as a whole for race problems, thereby highlighting the hypocrisy of the war effort. See, for example, "A Pertinent Question," Chicago *Defender*, May 12, 1917, p. 10; "Not Belgium--America," *ibid.*, Sept 8, 1917, p. 1; and "And a Lady Applauds," Chicago *Defender*, March 2, 1918, p. 12.
of the barbarians" whose greatest contribution to world
civilization was "'Jim Crow,' disfranchisement, and
lynching."35

Southern racial practices placed the region on the side
of the enemy not only because they resembled the enemy's
autocratic ways, but also because they hindered black support
of the war effort. African Americans subscribed to the
liberty loan, volunteered for the Red Cross, and enlisted in
the Armed forces often at higher rates than white
Americans.36 Not only did Southerners sometimes hinder these
efforts, they also threatened to weaken the morale of blacks
and even turn them against the war effort. Every time a black
person was lynched, Jim Crowed, or otherwise discriminated
against during the war, it weakened black enthusiasm for the
war effort and thus weakened America's fighting force, black

35 "The Jim Crow Car or the Kaiser on Wheels," Chicago

36 On black contributions to the liberty loan and other
voluntary war work, see Henry Lewis Suggs, P. B. Young,
Newspaperman: Race, Politics, and Journalism in the New South,
1910-1962 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia,
1988), 37; Andrew Buni, Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh
Courier: Politics and Black Journalism (Pittsburgh: University
of Pittsburgh Press, 1974), 103. On enlistment in the
military, see Jane Lang Scheiber and Harry N. Scheiber, "The
Wilson Administration and the Wartime Mobilization of Black
Americans, 1917-18," Labor History, 10 (Summer 1967), 433-58,
esp. 440-42.
editors argued." Thus, anti-black activity turned out to be anti-war and anti-American.

It was unpatriotic and it certainly discouraged black participation in the war, according to the Gazette, when black contributors to the Liberty Loan drive, and heroes on the battle field—including Sgt. Henry Johnson, who became the first American to be awarded the French croix de guerre after almost single-handedly fighting off a German raiding party—were treated as second class citizens in the South. Despite winning the highest honors for bravery, men like Johnson still "cease to be citizens when they cross Mason and Dixon's line going South," the Gazette lamented. Not all blacks could be expected to continue to act as patriots under such circumstances, and in fact, the Chicago Defender noted, Southern blacks were right to remain aloof from the Jim-Crow

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"German Propaganda," Cleveland Gazette, July 27, 1918, p. 2. The Gazette also argued that the Birth of a Nation should be banned during the war because of its "baneful effect upon the enthusiasm, patriotism and loyalty of the Afro-American whom it harms greatly wherever it is exhibited." See Cleveland Gazette, Feb. 16, 1918, p. 2.


A black physician attending a liberty loan meeting in Houston Texas was punched in the head by a white man. "Police refused to arrest the brutal and cowardly Texan ... and yet this country is helping to fight for world democracy and calling on the Afro-American to help." See "Southern Democracy," Cleveland Gazette, May 4, 1918, p. 2.
Red Cross there.40 The Baltimore Afro-American proclaimed that the "SOUTH OPPOSES NEGRO SOLDIERS. . . . Despite the fact that Uncle Sam will need the services of the colored men, as well as white . . . , certain Southern Congressmen say they will bitterly oppose any bill that includes the Negro."41 Such a stand by the South clearly hampered the country's war effort.

James Weldon Johnson saw treason in South Carolina Rep. Samuel Nicholls' promise of a war on the home front if the government tried to integrate Southern white soldiers with black men from the North.42 Johnson and another Age editorialist also argued that the South placed preservation of "'Jim Crow' Democracy" ahead of pro-war measures; that white Houstonians demonstrated the disloyalty of the South when they goaded black soldiers into mutiny; that a Southern Colonel made "seditious utterances" when he claimed blacks were unfit for military duty and should be drafted solely for manual labor; and that ridicule of black soldiers amounted to German propaganda.43 Johnson argued that lynching "and other
aggravated forms of hatred and prejudice against the Negro" were "nothing less than a certain degree of treason" because such actions caused divisions within the nation's fighting forces and threatened to deny the service of blacks for the war effort."

The Afro accused the South of diverting black labor from useful war work. The war and the northward migration of blacks had led to a shortage of agricultural labor and in some localities, including Memphis, Tennessee, "work or fight" vagrancy laws imposed fines and imprisonment or military service on people without work. Though the laws supposedly applied to both blacks and whites, the black press noted that Southerners enforced them only against blacks. Even worse, the Afro charged, the laws were being used to force black women to work as domestics for white Southern women. "There is only one name for a woman who considers her own convenience ahead of winning the war," the Afro concluded. "She is a traitor of the rankest kind."**

**ibid.. Sept. 7, 1918, p. 4.


"Baltimore Afro-American, Sept. 27, 1918, p. 4. On the work or fight laws, see also, James Weldon Johnson, "'Work or Fight' Laws for Women," New York Age, Nov. 2, 1918, p. 4; Barbeau and Henri, Unknown Soldiers, 9-10. An Arkansas law aimed at forcing women to work in cotton fields was unpatriotic, Defender columnist W. Allison Sweeney suggested, because it was aimed only at black women. If cotton is necessary for the war effort, then white and black Arkansas women should get together and pick the crop to "prove that patriotism is not onesided," Sweeney argued. See "The Last
True North

While black newspapers found many ways to show the South did not live up to American ideals, it often overlooked or excused the North's significant lapses, creating a picture of a nation divided between a good North and a bad South. The North seems to have functioned as a stand-in for the "real America," against which the autocrats, mobocrats, and Prussians of the South might be judged. Thus, the syndicated column "Afro-American Cullings" could quote without irony Kelly Miller's characterization of the North as "a section of complete public and civil freedom." In reality, however, racial problems plagued both North and South, and the race riots in East St. Louis, Illinois in the spring and summer of 1917 reflected long-simmering racial tensions in Northern cities.

In May and June of 1917, the resentments of white unionized laborers in East St. Louis broke out in scattered violent incidents against the city's black population, which had been growing during the war as rural Southerners migrated

Straw," Chicago Defender, Oct. 5, 1918, p. 16.


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North--pushed by the declining cotton economy of the South and pulled by a boom in Northern war-time manufacturing. When the Aluminum Ore Company broke a strike in April, workers blamed blacks for having crossing picket lines. Though most of the strike-breakers had been white, the blacks provided a convenient scapegoat. Tensions continued to mount until the early morning hours of Monday, July 1, when two police officers were killed in their squad car as they drove through a black neighborhood. Local news reports depicted the shooting as an act of naked aggression by a crowd of "200 rioting negroes." In fact, a car resembling the squad car had earlier driven through the black neighborhood firing shots into homes along the way and those who fired at the police car thought they were acting in self defense. Parked in front of city hall, the bullet-ridden police car served as a rallying point the next morning for an angry mob of white laborers.

For more than twelve hours that day, bands of marauding rioters attacked, beat, and shot black residents, burning others out of their homes. An estimated 39 blacks and nine whites (some killed by errant shots from white rioters) died in the rioting; well over 100 were injured. The rioters destroyed 312 buildings, most by fire, and burned 44 freight

cars." Even some white observers could not help but notice the irony of the riot, coming as it did merely three months after Wilson had launched his war for democracy and the rule of law in Europe. A cartoonist for the New York Evening Mail asked: "Mr. President, Why Not Make America Safe For Democracy?" while the New York Evening Post saw parallels between the riot and alleged German atrocities. The Nation concluded from the affair that Americans must "show that when they say democracy, they mean it."

Black newspapers sounded this theme also. "We sympathize with the Belgians and with the Armenians, then proceed to lynch and burn at the stake one or more of the most loyal citizens the country affords, simply because of color," the Defender complained." But the black press also struck a surprisingly optimistic note after the riot. Editors seemed to believe the riot would force white America to confront the contradictions between the war aims and the treatment of black citizens here at home. They were bolstered in their optimism when Congress agreed to hold hearings on the riot, Theodore Roosevelt denounced the "brutal infamies imposed on colored

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49 Rudwick, Race Riot at East St. Louis, 50-53.
50 Rudwick, Race Riot at East St. Louis, 59.
51 "The Negro and the Nation," Nation, 26 July 1917, 86.
52 "The White Man's Burden," Chicago Defender, July 14, 1917. "Can we base our armed forces on democracy and liberty as against a background so replete with the heritage of barbarism and slavery?" another newspaper asked. See the Savannah Tribune, July 7, 1917, p. 4.
people" at a much-publicized meeting in Carnegie Hall, and various white newspapers made the connection between the riot and the democratic war aims. The *Age* proclaimed:

> Public sentiment, under the stimulus of the public utterances of Theodore Roosevelt, has been roused as seldom before to the growing spirit of lawlessness in this country. The necessity for the enforcement of law and order at home, while fighting for the democracy of the world abroad, is realized by most thinking people.

The *Afro* praised "thoughtful men" who had come to see that "'America must be made safe for Americans.'"53

Nor did the East St. Louis riot cause the black press to lose faith in the North. Rather than view the riot as evidence of racism there, black editors blamed the catastrophe on the South. Harry Smith said "southern sympathizers" who wanted to discourage "the exodus of our people from the South

53"Roosevelt Scores Gompers," *Cleveland Gazette*, July 14, 1917, p. 1. "Will Congress Act," *New York Age*, July 26, 1917, p. 4; see also, Philip G. Peabody, "Hypocrisy and 'Democracy,'" *ibid.*, July 26, 1917, p. 4. "Must Settle Race Issue," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 14, 1917, p. 4. Du Bois was willing to forget Roosevelt's previous sins against blacks because of his "strong word" on East St. Louis. The *Defender* focused on less enlightened responses of whites to the riot in a July 28 editorial, but had earlier expressed faith that the American legal system ultimately "cannot fail" to redress black grievances and that "surely the good people must predominate." See "East St. Louis Aftermath," *Chicago Defender*, July 28, 1917, p. 12; and "The White Man's Burden," *ibid.*, July 14, 1917. During a congressional inquiry into the riot, a *Defender* reporter wrote: "The St. Louis papers keep a watch on these things and give them much needed publicity and it all adds to the justice which the Negro may get out of the thing." See *ibid.*, Nov. 3, 1917, p. 1.
to this section of the country" started the riot." The Defender alleged the riot was caused by a "southern cracker" who taunted a black resident about a lynching in Memphis." James Weldon Johnson defended the North and white Northerners against an attack by an ailing Sen. Ben Tillman of South Carolina, who saw the East St. Louis riot as evidence of the same unity depicted in the Birth of a Nation--of all whites against blacks. Johnson disagreed, pointing to "the thousands of northern communities in which colored people are not abused" and the "mutual respect and kindly feelings" that have existed between northern whites and Southern blacks. Johnson was not so much interested in the facts of the East St. Louis Riot as in the contest for the soul of the North. He was not ready to concede defeat to the Tillmans of the South."

Writers like Johnson depicted a true America represented by ideals of liberty and democracy, which were embodied in sacred documents like the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, and must be upheld by decent Americans of the North against the threats posed by an undemocratic and un-American South. Thus, the complex and intractable nature of American race relations was reduced to a simple morality tale

"Cleveland Gazette, June 2, 1917, p. 2.


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of democratic versus autocratic, North versus South. But the accuracy of the tale did not matter—it was not meant to describe reality so much as mold opinion, win allies, and spur action against racism.

But to what extent did such strategies, and the strategies associated with loyalty, have an effect on white Americans? Did white Americans receive these messages and, if so, how did they interpret them? In fact, during World War I, white people paid more attention to black newspapers than usual. They often interpreted them in ways not sympathetic to the editors' intentions and responded in ways antithetical to their aims. On the other hand, in the summer of 1918, the highest officials of the Federal administration—including the president himself—would conclude that the demands of the black press should be addressed.
CHAPTER 6

A "FINE PHILOSOPHY OF DEMOCRACY": WHITE AMERICA RESPONDS TO THE BLACK PRESS

"They are a little too subtle perhaps to object to."

--L. How, postal censor

In most times the white response to the black press was sporadic, broad, and diffuse, but during World War I, the Federal government organized a concerted, concentrated reply to black newspapers. Feds monitored the black press, punished some publishers for "seditious" statements, and warned others. But most black newspapers could not be classified as seditious. Censors thought the "bitter tone" of many newspapers indicated a lack of patriotism, but they had to concede that these newspapers supported the national government and the war effort and that their criticisms were usually "too subtle" to warrant censorship. As one critic of the Defender put it, black newspapers pushed their case right to "the limit," but it was difficult to tell whether they went

1LH to U.S. Asst. District Attorney, March 22, 1918, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925): The First World War, the Red Scare, and the Garvey Movement, ed. Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1986, microfilm), reel 13, frame 1125. Sources are cited as marked on the original documents. Evidence suggests that LH and L. How were the same person and I have assumed this to be the case in the discussion that follows.
over it or not. In most cases, officials decided they did not.

Thus, most black newspapers continued to protest for their rights during the war, yet avoided the kind of wholesale repression that put many socialist publications out of business, by neither caving in to government demands for unconditional participation in the war, nor by refusing to accede to those demands at all. As shown in the previous chapter, black newspapers generally straddled the line between capitulation and unequivocal protest. They emphasized the loyalty and patriotism of black folks, yet stressed the volatility of the black population; they praised American ideals and criticized continuing racial injustice not as a failure of those ideals, but as a betrayal of them by one unrepresentative, un-American segment of the nation. Though it offended many white Americans, this approach seems to have succeeded not only in heading off government persecution of African Americans and the black press, but also in forcing the nation to take their demands seriously. Worried about the unrest of African Americans, the Federal government called a conference of three dozen black editors designed to address their demands and assure their continued loyalty. The editors represented black unrest as a demand for Federal action and the government responded. Though the early end of the war prevented the government's fully carrying out its promises, high level officials, including Secretary of War Newton Baker
and the president himself, accepted the notion that the loyalty of black Americans required some acts of good faith by the nation and that lynching hurt America's credibility as self-professed guardian of world democracy. The editors, understandably, thought their strategy had succeeded.

Thus, in a dangerous time, the black press served as a mediating forum between blacks and the white-controlled government. Black editors and writers used it to present black demands and arguments and to interpret black "unrest" to white America in the ways most likely to be heard and responded to positively. And government officials sought to promote loyalty to the war among the black population by censoring and prosecuting black newspapers, by delivering verbal and written warnings to publishers, and by calling black publishers to Washington.

This chapter examines the tug-of-war between the government, trying to use the black press as a means of domination, and African Americans, attempting to use it as a tool of resistance. I will begin by looking at the most coercive government actions and move toward the most accommodating. As government efforts became less coercive, I argue, black editors, publishers, and writers, had a greater chance to bend the war to their own purposes. Finally, with the editors' conference, the government seemed actually to give in to black demands.
The Censor's Heavy Hand

All publishers faced the dangers of censorship during the war. Under the Espionage Act, which became law on June 5, 1917, persons convicted of interfering with the prosecution of the war could be fined up to $10,000 and sent to prison for up to 20 years. More significantly, those convicted of using the mails for seditious purposes could receive fines of up to $5,000 and up to five years imprisonment. An amendment, known as the Sedition Act, broadened the scope of governmental powers to enforce loyalty in May of 1918. This act prohibited "any disloyal, profane, scurrilous, or abusive language about the form of government of the United States, or the Constitution of the United States, or the flag of the United States, or the uniform of the Army or Navy." Armed with these laws, United States Postmaster Albert Burleson, the man who initiated racial segregation in Federal offices in 1913, ordered the surveillance of all publications suspected of disloyalty, especially immigrant newspapers, socialist publications, and the black press. The socialists fared the worst at the hands of the censors. In the summer of 1917, the Post Office banned more than a dozen socialist publications from the mails. Although some socialists supported the war,


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the effect of government repression devastated the movement.3 Meanwhile, although they were suspected of disloyalty, few black publications lost second class mailing privileges, and the publishers of only two black periodicals spent any time in jail as a result of the Espionage and Sedition Acts.

Black newspapers faced several different kinds of censorship. The Justice Department could arrest and prosecute editors for violation of the Espionage or Sedition Acts; the postal service could revoke second-class mailing privileges, a devastating blow to monthly and weekly publications that relied on the mails for distribution; local postal officials could temporarily delay the mailing of a publication deemed disloyal, awaiting a ruling on its mailability; and military, postal and Justice officials could issue verbal or written warnings to African-American editors to try and control the content of their newspapers. Most black newspapers did not encounter censorship directly in any one of these ways, yet all knew of the danger of censorship.4


4"We simply dare not start to try to express our feelings and those of our people as a result of that terrible affair," wrote Harry Smith after the execution of 13 Houston mutineers. Gazette, Dec. 15, 1917, p. 4. On editors' awareness of censorship, see also, William Jordan, "'The Damnable Dilemma': African-American Accommodation and Protest during World War I," Journal of American History, 81 (March 1995), 1562-83, esp. 1578
Only two black newspapers faced serious legal consequences for their position on the war. San Antonio Inquirer editor G. W. Bouldin received a jail sentence after the war for printing Mrs. C. L. Threadgill-Dennis's praise of the Houston mutineers. According to prosecutors, she went too far when she excused the actions of the soldiers, called on other black soldiers to imitate them, and derided the notion that blacks should defend Europe. According to the Justice Department, her letter "advocated insurrection and forceful resistance to the laws of the United States" while attempting to "cause insubordination, disloyalty, mutiny and refusal of duty in the military forces."

Like many other socialist publications, the Messenger forthrightly opposed the war, criticized America's motives, and called for peace. It criticized military spending and war profiteers; printed statistical evidence that blacks opposed conscription; and said that black leaders, like Du Bois and Kelly Miller, who supported the war, should sign up for service themselves. "We would rather make Georgia safe for the Negro," than fight for democracy in France, the Messenger concluded. Thus, unlike most black editorialists, A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen opposed the war and supported and

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encouraged black opposition to it without equivocation.' Unlike other black newspapers which embraced the war and connected it to the elimination of racism, Randolph and Owen used racism as a reason for blacks to oppose the war and even questioned the legitimacy of the war machine's methods. Agents broke into the *Messenger*’s Harlem offices, confiscated back issues, and ransacked files. During a speaking engagement on Aug. 4, 1918, Justice department officers seized Randolph and Owen and charged them with violating the Espionage Act. After they had spent two days in jail, a judge inexplicably released the pair and dropped the charges. When they finished their speaking tour, the Army drafted Owen into service and the Post Office revoked the *Messenger*’s second class mailing privileges. Only the end of the war prevented Randolph's being drafted that fall.' Ultimately, the *Messenger*’s suppression may have had more to do with its being a socialist than a black publication.

The *Messenger* explicitly opposed black participation in the war effort. But support of the war—the policy of most other black newspapers—did not guarantee immunity from government surveillance and coercion, as several editors found out, most conspicuously, W. E. B. Du Bois.

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‘See various articles and editorials in *Messenger*, Nov. 1911, pp. 7, 9, 10, 11, 20, 31.

Closing Ranks at the Crisis

Government attention to Du Bois's Crisis, combined with his own patriotic enthusiasm, led him to abandon his defense of protest in June of 1918. Du Bois perhaps faced greater and more persistent pressure to moderate his approach than any other black editor. He faced not only military censors, but an internal NAACP censorship committee as well. His famous "Close Ranks" editorial, in the July 1918 Crisis, advised blacks to quit agitating for their own rights and concentrate on winning the war. "It is necessary in the time of war to be careful of one's utterances," Du Bois confessed to a correspondent that summer. "THE CRISIS will never say anything that it does not believe: but there are a great many things which it does believe which it cannot say just now."

The War Department kept a detailed file of Crisis editorials dating back to 1916. The file included material that might have come from any black weekly: criticisms of Wilson administration policies; denunciations of lynching; pleas for equal treatment of blacks during the war; a comparison of Wilson's eloquent denunciations of German atrocities with his silence on lynchings of African Americans in the South. Even immediately after Du Bois published "Close

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Ranks," the official who assembled the file held the *Crisis* "responsible for a great deal of the present negro unrest and disaffection." The magazine, he concluded, aimed at "exciting the colored races to acts of violence against the whites."

Others also accused the journal of inciting blacks to violence against whites. YMCA officials at Camp Gordon, Georgia, banned the magazine for allegedly inciting a riot between black and white soldiers there in the spring of 1918. A Justice Department investigator in Waco thought the publication had had something to do with the Houston Riot the previous year. Assistant U. S. Attorney Earl B. Barnes said he intended to "prevent propaganda" in the magazine that was "calculated to create a feeling of dissatisfaction among colored people," and asked to be sent a complete run of the *Crisis* since the previous April, as well as all future issues.10 Despite Du Bois's decidedly pro-Allied slant, the

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10 Howell B. Jackson, "'Crisis,' Possible Pro-German Publication," May 10, 1918; and Albert Neunhoffer to A. Bruce Bielaski, May 10, 1918, in *Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925)*, ed. Kornweibel, reel 19, frame 640; and reel 9, frame 111. See also, James L. Bruff, "Memorandum re. Officers and Directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," July 13, 1918, p. 3, in *ibid.*, reel 19, frames 802-04.
chief of Justice's Bureau of Investigation, A. Bruce Bielaski, hinted that the Crisis was a tool of German propagandists.\textsuperscript{11}

Pressure on the journal became greatest just around the time Du Bois composed "Close Ranks." Both the Department of Justice and the military met with NAACP officials in May of 1918, threatening censorship if the rhetoric of Crisis editorials were not toned down.\textsuperscript{12} Col. Marlborough Churchill warned white executive board member Charles Studin that the government would "not tolerate carping and bitter utterances likely to foment disaffection and destroy the morale of our people for the winning of the war." NAACP officials agreed to appoint Studin to review each issue before it went to press "to eliminate all matter that may render the paper liable to suppression in the future."\textsuperscript{13} "[N]o pains will be spared to make all future issues of this magazine comply with the wishes of the Government," Studin assured Churchill on June 12. Helping to win the war had become the Crisis's "paramount purpose."\textsuperscript{14} Around the same time, NAACP board chairman Joel

\textsuperscript{11}A. Bruce Bielaski to Charles DeWoody, June 4, 1918, in \textit{Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925)}, ed. Kornweibel, reel 19, frame 646.

\textsuperscript{12}Charles H. Studin to W. E. B. Du Bois, May 1, 1918, Du Bois Papers.

\textsuperscript{13}Marlborough Churchill to Charles H. Studin, June 3, 1918, in \textit{Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925)}, ed. Kornweibel, reel 9, frame 636; Minutes, NAACP Board of Directors meeting, June, 10, 1918, Du Bois Papers.


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Spingarn had offered Du Bois a job as captain working with him in the Army intelligence service. Spingarn and Du Bois believed that in that capacity they would be able to work from within the government to bring about measures for the improvement of racial conditions.

Accordingly, Du Bois composed his "Close Ranks" editorial for the July Crisis:

We of the colored race have no ordinary interest in the outcome. That which the German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes and all darker races for equality, freedom and democracy. Let us not hesitate. Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy. We make no ordinary sacrifice, but we make it gladly and willingly, with our eyes lifted to the hills.

When the editorial hit the newsstands in late June, Spingarn sent a copy to Churchill as "evidence of the effect of M.I.B. policy." Churchill found it "very satisfactory." The government managed to affect a change at the Crisis without using direct force. A combination of friendly persuasion and implied threats did the trick. In the cases of the Messenger and the Crisis, government officials managed to silence black demands that the war be accompanied by fulfillment of black rights. In the former case, they simply made it impossible to publish the journal, in the latter, they convinced its editor,

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through a combination of threat and enticement, that he should stop agitating. Among black publications, the *Crisis* was unique because of the control of white NAACP executives and Du Bois's close personal relationship to the super-patriot Spingarn.16

**A Little Too Subtle**

Censorship did not have such dramatic effects on other black newspapers. Most did not, like Du Bois, forget their "special grievances." Instead, they made a case for black rights that was just provocative enough to raise concerns among government officials that blacks might not participate fully in the war, yet not quite provocative enough to warrant censorship. Postal, Justice, and military officials responded to and argued with what they read in the black press, literally entering a dialogue about race, America, and the

16 For an interpretation which argues that Du Bois wrote "Close Ranks" as a condition for receiving a commission as captain in the Army, see Mark Ellis, "'Closing Ranks' and 'Seeking Honors': W. E. B. Du Bois in World War I," *Journal of American History*, 79 (June 1992), 96-124. For an opposing view, which argues that "Close Ranks" was in keeping with Du Bois's accommodationist approach to the war and that he would not have required a quid pro quo to write it, see William Jordan "'The Damnable Dilemma': African-American Accommodation and Protest during World War I," *ibid.*, 81 (March 1995), 1562-83. Ellis's rebuttal is in Mark Ellis, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Formation of Black Opinion in World War I: A Commentary on 'The Damnable Dilemma,'" *ibid.*, 1584-90.
patriotic duty of black citizens." This dialogue reveals the nature and size of the gulf dividing dominant white conceptions from subordinate black conceptions. What may seem to late 20th century eyes like reasonable comments on racism, lynching, and the unreconstructed South, seemed "vile, nefarious," and seditious to white censors in 1918.18 Thus, most of the black press seems to have tested the limits of acceptable racial discourse in America, while at the same time generally avoiding suppression and prosecution.

The Postal Service's New York "translation bureau" watched closely over the New York Age and another black weekly, the New York News. Offended by the "unbridled bitterness" of the papers, bureau readers passed along to the local United States Assistant District Attorney and Post Office Solicitor William H. Lamar a series of memos making the case that these two newspapers were disloyal, had violated the

17 The act of participating in this dialogue likely modified the view of censors. "One is required to take account of the positions of others in discussing an issue or subject-matter with them. Here, even if one holds to one's initial point of view one has nevertheless to deal with the objections, considerations and counter-examples that others introduce. In the end, whether one changes one's position or maintains it, the view that results is more developed than the one with which one began." Georgia Warnke, Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition and Reason (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987), 169-70.

seditious Act, and ought to be "suppressed."" But these officials were frustrated in their attempts to find a smoking gun—statements that clearly amounted to sedition and justified censorship. Censors like Robert A. Bowen and L. H. How seem to have been offended by black newspapers which challenged their own attitudes about race. Bowen objected to a page-one Age article on the barring of black soldiers' wives from sleepers on Pullman railroad cars, saying "the matter boils itself down to the degree of reluctance or its reverse, one may feel in sleeping with and after negroes. Chacun a son gout!" ("every man to his own taste"). Another New York censor sympathized with those who "do not relish" the "contiguity" of African Americans. Comments like these suggest that the New York censors shared the racist assumptions of most white men of the day. Their memoranda on the Age and the New York News read like defenses of those assumptions combined with a generally hostile attack on the black press, and by extension, the African-American population.

The feelings of How, Bowen and some other censors toward the black press were clearly antagonistic and their statements

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often dripped with sarcasm. "I do not often have the pleasure of reading the negro papers," Bowen wrote, "and the denial is the greater pleasure." \(^2\) Bowen described the attitude of the black press toward the South as "very offensive" and one Age editorial on the subject as "preposterous," another as full of "sweeping assertions." \(^3\) How said the News was "bitter and vicious on the race question" and he could condescendingly reduce its advocacy of basic justice and human rights to a wish to be "treated more politely." \(^3\) If the newspapers did not violate the law, they could be shown as simply inferior and ridiculous. In one letter, How penciled the letter "u" over an "i" in "insidious," which he had inadvertently spelled correctly with his own typewriter, so the word could appear as "insiduous (sic)" in his report quoting the News. \(^4\) Under the crisis conditions of wartime, it is striking that he would take the time to make this minor adjustment. How was no neutral observer making objective reports on his subject, but


\(^3\) Robert A. Bowen to Wm. H. Lamar, July 18, 1918; and RAB to U. S. Asst. District Attorney, June 6, 1918 in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 13, frames 1141, 1135.


a combatant in hostile dialogue with the black press, using any weapon at his disposal. Yet, despite his generally negative view of these newspapers, How referred once to the *Age* as "reasonable enough" and another time as "decidedly patriotic." At least in comparison to the readers of the *New York News*, he added in another letter, *Age* readers tended to be "rather decent." Bowen had to admit he agreed with black newspapers that lynching was "a very lamentable situation." Such statements suggest a tone of reluctant concession, not hearty agreement.

Despite their hostility, How, Bowen, and others were never able to build a case of sedition against either of these papers, hard as they tried. One censor, for example, tried to argue that the *New York News* acted seditiously when it suggested the Federal government act against lynching "as a measure for winning the war." The plea implied that blacks would not give their full support to the war "except under certain conditions" the censor wrote. "This is no time for

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bargains. This is the time for suppressing newspapers that maintain such an attitude." In reading the News, censors occasionally found veiled encouragement of black retributive violence or rebellion. An August 14 editorial suggested that on returning home from the war, "BRAVE BLACK BAYONET FIGHTERS" would be ready to fight more boldly for their rights at home. Such "incendiary" statements were deemed "legally objectionable" by How, Assistant U. S. District Attorney George L. Thompson, and others, but no action was taken. The black press's talk of retribution was indirect enough to avoid censorship, but it continually piqued the white censors. A few months later, Robert A. Bowen told the solicitor's office that two black papers were "deserving of censure if not suppression" because of "their covert threat of violence when the negro soldiers return." He continued: "I know that they [black newspapers] are very influential among their readers, and I wish there might be found some way in which their entirely wrong attitude could be rectified." Yet Bowen did not "hold" them up in the mails because so much other more

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"obnoxious . . . Bolshevik-revolutionary stuff" required immediate action. Bowen's comments reflect the sentiment common among government monitors who were rubbed the wrong way by black newspapers and thought they were disloyal. Ultimately, however, black newspapers were not only loyal, but were unassailably loyal.

Usually, complaints about the News and the Age came down to the vague notion that they were "stirring up race antagonism," which interfered with the war effort, and therefore should be censored. Emphasizing the racial element of news stories tended to perpetuate antagonistic feelings between the races, according to L. How, as did reprinting racist screeds by white Southerners; describing the war for democracy as a two-front campaign in Europe and the South; portraying black people as better than whites; equating Southern whites with the "Hun"; dwelling on the horrors of lynching; and criticizing Bulletin 35, a general's order that his black troops should not challenge Jim Crow accommodations outside their training camp.10


Even in weeks when the New York News was "less blatantly objectionable," How wrote, its editors continued "to adopt an attitude which cannot but nourish the [bad] feelings between white races and the colored race." He worried that "some chance white readers of these papers might have their feelings against the colored people vividly stirred up," if by nothing more than the papers' habit of "contemptuously ignoring the white race." A story about a crowd of white onlookers who were unable and unwilling to assist a black man who had collapsed at an elevated train station was "calculated to irritate" because it implied "that the non-colored crowd was both heartless and incapable." How even argued that the newspaper's attacks on lynching, which stirred "feeling[s] of hatred and envy" might "almost directly" have caused the recent rise in lynchings. Even more troubling to How was the black press's potential for arousing black "prejudice" against whites. The New York Age, for example, printed a story on page one about a white soldier's attack on a black

Kornweibel, reel 13, frames 1155, 1145, 1148-9, 1129, 1136, 1160-61, 1132-33, 1154, 1167.

31 Here, How was referring the practice of "race angling," by which black papers emphasized the racial aspects of the news by paying particularly close attention to the doings of African Americans.


girl and boy, "purely for the purpose of arousing race prejudice."\textsuperscript{34}

In some cases, censors were clearly grasping at straws in searching for reasons to ban the two newspapers. One censor even listed the biennial lynching statistics (merely a state-by-state accounting with no commentary) from R. R. Moton, Booker T. Washington's successor at Tuskegee Institute, as a potentially seditious item, though he didn't say how.\textsuperscript{35} Other censors filed reports on items they admitted did not violate the law, but were "of interest."\textsuperscript{36} Often, they seemed to suggest that black newspapers were speaking in some kind of code, hiding disloyal sentiments behind patriotic words. How wanted to suppress the March 22, 1918, \textit{New York Age} on the basis of three objectionable editorials, which violated the Espionage Act in spirit, he said, if not in fact. In one of them, James Weldon Johnson said blacks had "never lost faith in . . . the Government of the United States." Its spirit had been "often thwarted and defeated," but could never be destroyed. On the other hand, "our faith in the spirit of


\textsuperscript{36}Robert A. Bowen to Wm. H. Lamar, July 18, 1918, in \textit{Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans} (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 13, frame 1141.
the country will not deter us from pointing the accusing finger at those individuals and groups of individuals who are striving to defeat and destroy that spirit," Johnson continued. No one should doubt the Negro's loyalty during the present crisis, but they should know that he would do "his duty with his eyes wide open; and when that duty is done he will demand that this nation live up to the protestations of democracy that it is now making." How quoted the last sentence disapprovingly, but had to admit Johnson's editorials were "a little too subtle perhaps to object to."[37]

Comments of the censors about the Chicago Defender and some other black newspapers reveals still more ambivalence. Army intelligence officer Roy F. Britton defined a May 3, 1918 editorial in the St. Louis Argus as "insidious and dangerous propaganda" because it sowed "seeds of discontent" and "coupled" the buying of liberty bonds with support for a Federal anti-lynching bill. But Britton had to admit that the editorial also advocated only "legitimate, legal and patriotic means" of protest. Britton visited Argus city editor Herbert Meadows and "warned him about saying anything in his paper that would make the negroes discontented or make them want to avoid service." Meadows asserted the Argus's "loyalty and patriotism" and assured Britton "that his paper was behind the


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government." Britton may have been persuaded by the arguments that appeared in the newspaper. In June, he responded to an article about a black draftee ejected from a train in Arkansas by suggesting an investigation of the incident to his superior.

Government officials called the Chicago Defender "the most dangerous of all Negro Journals," yet could not agree on whether it needed to be censored or not. Distribution of the first mass circulation black newspaper reached deep into the South and was credited with helping to inspire—or at least influence—the migration of hundreds of thousands of blacks from South to North during the war. According to government estimates, Abbott sold 92,000 issues in Chicago each week by mid-1918 and thousands more throughout the country, including 2,000 in New Orleans alone. Abbott may have been somewhat less vulnerable to threats of lost mailing privileges because he distributed many of his newspapers

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³Roy F. Britton to Chief, Military Intelligence Branch, May 6, 1918, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 19, frame 684. See also, Britton to E. J. Brennan, May 27, 1918, in ibid., frame 697.


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through a network of black Pullman Porters who dropped bundles of papers off at railroad stations for local agents.

Most of the critiques of Abbott's paper came not from postal censors in Chicago, but from Southerners who thought the Defender was stirring up trouble in their neighborhoods. M. E. Nash, postmaster of Belcher, Louisiana, told the Post Office solicitor in Washington that every issue of the Defender "contains a libel on the South. . . . The sentiments expressed in it were unknown in this section previous to its appearance," and threatened to "inflame" a "heretofore peaceful section" where "the negroes have always been well and equitably treated." Just as the black press portrayed Southern racism as unpatriotic, these white Southerners portrayed the black press as hindering the war effort. The newspaper's advocacy of migration threatened to deplete the South's supply of agricultural labor, Nash wrote, and "anything that interferes with the agriculture of the South is a menace to the whole Nation and such influences should be closely watched." Whites from Denison, Texas; Tucson, Arizona; Little Rock and Pine Bluff, Arkansas; New Orleans; Jacksonville, Florida; Memphis, Tennessee; and Mobile, Alabama, argued that the Defender had threatened wartime national unity by poisoning otherwise harmonious race

"M. E. Nash to Solicitor, U. S. Post Office, June 22, 1918, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 13, frame 769. On the threat to Southern agriculture, see also, E. J. Kerwin to A. Bruce Bielaski, May 2, 1918, in ibid., reel 9, frames 70-71.

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relations." The Denison postmaster tried to convince the Solicitor that not only did the Defender inspire "rank race hatred" and show signs of a "German conspiracy" and "anti-Americanism," it was also plain wrong in its interpretation of racial violence. "Inhumanities," he wrote, did not occur "only between the white race and the negro race" but among people of the same race as well. Thus, "the occurrence of trouble occasionally between the two races is no special sign of exclusive inhumanity from one or the other."

Officials of the government were sympathetic to the Southern view of reality and the Defender. A Federal postal official agreed with M. E. Nash that the June 1 and 22 issues of the paper should be barred from the mails because they


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interfered with the supply of Southern labor and intensified "racial prejudices and animosities."

In the military, Col. R. H. Van Deman regarded the Defender as "undoubtedly disloyal in most of its utterances" because it contained "repeated attacks on the Government," and tended to encourage "disloyal acts" among blacks. Yet he did not recommend any particular actions against the paper.

Most other officials concluded the Defender, however objectionable, had done nothing illegal and, like Van Deman, could find no particular reason to censor it. The Post Office ruled that the page-one story "SOUTHERN STUNTS SURPASS HUN," which the Denison, Texas, postmaster had criticized, did not warrant suppression, though it did tend to "stir up race hatred and race prejudice" and encourage mob violence. The Justice Department investigated charges that Germans were conspiring to distribute the newspapers to all the Negroes in Tucson, Arizona, and concluded that "since the war began, [the Defender] has been loyal to the core. There is nowhere


connected with it the slightest evidence of German influence."48

Even two Southerners who hoped to silence the journal had to admit it generally stayed within (or at least did not go far beyond) the bounds of acceptable discourse. Bolton Smith, a white Tennessee banker who had formed a pro-war, anti-lynching Law and Order League in his state, said the Defender should be suppressed because it stirred up "violence and strife," but admitted there was probably "no harm" in the newspaper. He could not decide whether the newspaper stayed within or went "a little beyond the limit."49 Mississippi's segregationist senator, John Sharp Williams, conceded that his quarrel with the Defender amounted to conflicting views of the truth. He complained to postmaster Burleson that the Defender's "tissue of lies [were] all intended to create race disturbance and trouble. . . . If there is any provision of law whereby you can exclude a paper from the mail on the ground that it is a liar, of course, you can exclude this one, but I don't know of any such provision."50


50 John Sharp Williams to Albert S. Burleson, June 22, 1918, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 13, frame 768.
Although the government did not take official action against the Defender, several government officials met in person with Abbott between April of 1917 and the summer of 1918. Abbott assured Justice Department agents just after the start of the war that he was actively supporting the war effort and that "the colored people throughout the country" would be loyal.\textsuperscript{51} An employee of the postal solicitor's office warned Abbott to avoid printing material that tended to "cause friction between the two races" or which suggested that blacks had "no part in the struggle against the Imperial German Government."\textsuperscript{52} He also, however, expressed "no doubt as to the loyalty of" the Defender and certainty that Abbott would perform his patriotic duties in the prescribed manner.

Major Walter H. Loving, a black intelligence official, met with Abbott in person to inform him "officially that the eye of the government is centered upon his paper" and that "he would be held strictly accountable."\textsuperscript{53} In a remarkable reply to Loving, Abbott cast himself as absolutely loyal to the Federal government and supportive of the war effort, and explained that the Defender had been outspoken only "from a

\textsuperscript{51}J. E. Hawkins, memorandum on Chicago Defender, April 15, 1917, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 9, frame 41.

\textsuperscript{52}C. E. B. [to Robert Abbott], June 13, 1918, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 13, frames 756-57.

\textsuperscript{53}W. H. Loving to Chief, Military Intelligence Branch, May 10, 1918, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 19, frame 611.
southerner's point of view." Abbott pointed out that he was vigorously supporting the war by subscribing to the Liberty Loan to the tune of $12,000, speaking for the Committee on Public Information, and contributing a regimental flag to the 365th infantry division. Second, "in exposing the injustices done our race in" the South, the Defender had tried "in every case . . . to avoid placing our criticism on the national administration." Abbott said he had "more than once advised my staff writers to refrain from expressing their views on problems that would precipitate national strife, or inculcate in the heart of any member of my race the spirit of revolt against the laws of the national or state governments."

Clearly, Abbott concluded, his enemies were "taking undue advantage" of his delicate wartime position.

Abbott's strategy generally followed that of the entire black press from the beginning of the war. Though the pressure of censorship may have reduced the Defender's criticism of the Federal government, his staunch and active support for the war was a natural and uncoerced response. Meanwhile, he continued to equate the South with the enemy, to demand civil rights for African Americans, and to advocate migration out of the South. Government officials who actually read the Defender and other black newspapers may not have agreed with them, but they found little basis for suppression.


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Indeed, a few seem to have been swayed ever so slightly by black newspapers' arguments. More importantly, their reports on black newspapers reached the highest levels of government where officials were persuaded to respond--partly out of anxiety over the unrest among the black population and partly in response to the legitimate demands of the black press.

The Washington Conference and its Fruits

On May 28, 1918, Major Loving told Argus publisher J. E. Mitchell that "the officials at Washington are being daily acquainted with facts of the real grievances of the American negro [sic] through the colored press, private letters and such a great journal as the New York World." The war, it seemed, had created an opportunity for black concerns to be heard by major press outlets and in the halls of power, and the key channel was the black press. Eight days after Loving penned his letter to Mitchell, Joel Spingarn and Emmett Scott met to plan a conference of black editors in Washington D. C. to impress on them the importance of leading "Negro public opinion . . . along helpful lines rather than along lines that make for discontentment and unrest." But this statement, in a letter to George Creel, chairman of the wartime Federal

propaganda agency, the Committee on Public Information, did not reveal the whole purpose of the conference. Scott and Spingarn, both advocates of African American equality, hoped not to silence the black press, but give it a hearing with the Federal government. They hoped to make the press more pro-war, but also to alter Federal policies on race. Spingarn explained to the head of the Military Intelligence Branch, Col. Marlborough Churchill, that "constant complaints from Intelligence Officers and others" had indicated "that the colored press was spreading disaffection among negroes." The conference would modify the "bitter tone" of the newspapers while at the same time stimulating "negro morale." It would also obtain "information [from the editors] in regard to the negro situation and the means of improving it." Had black newspapers been militant enough to warrant outright censorship, Spingarn's and Scott's strategy would have been unnecessary, the conference would not have taken place, and this channel to white America would never have been opened.

The government paid traveling expenses for thirty-one editors and ten other black leaders to come from all over the country to meet in the Federal Interior Building at 18th and F Streets from June 19 to 21 for three secret four-hour sessions. Participants included Fred Moore of the Age, John Murphy of the Afro, Harry Smith of the Gazette, Robert Abbott

of the Defender, W. E. B. Du Bois of the Crisis, George Knox of the Indianapolis Freeman, Calvin Chase of the Washington Bee, George Harris of the New York News, and J. E. Mitchell of the St. Louis Argus. Trotter was invited but did not come, and the publishers of the California Eagle and the Chicago Broad Ax were not invited. The editors listened to speeches by Secretary of War Newton Baker, CPI Chairman George Creel, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Franklin D. Roosevelt, a general and two majors from the French Army, and representatives of the Shipping Board and the Food Administration. Clearly, the government succeeded in scoring propaganda points with the editors. Simply holding the conference and giving the editors a chance to "let off steam," as Spingarn put it, may have siphoned off some of their anger. Baker presented evidence to disprove rumors that black soldiers were being sacrificed to save white soldiers in France. The presentation by the French officers on the treatment of African troops by their country "made a very deep impression" and generated "enthusiasm" among the editors. Spingarn concluded that the conference "conformed" to the military's "original plan," that the demands of the editors

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required no "fundamental social readjustments," and predicted "an excellent effect on the colored press." 58

At a "Liberty Congress," held later that week by William Monroe Trotter, Hubert Harrison, and other mavericks, participants scorned the government-sponsored conference as an attempt to buy off the black press. Editors were "wined and dined at the government's expense for the sole purpose of muzzling them," said one Liberty Congress speaker.59 But the more conciliatory editor's conference undoubtedly accomplished more. Harry Smith, who was sympathetic to the Liberty Congress, said there was "no possibility of comparison" between the two in terms of results.80

The participants of the editor's conference were not simply dupes. Their pledge of national loyalty and support for the war did not contradict their general stand on the war. In Spingarn's and Churchill's reports to superiors, in the conference's official declaration, and in press accounts, the editors' wartime themes came through: African Americans were loyal and patriotic citizens, yet the failure of government to


address legitimate grievances, particularly over lynching, could prevent blacks from giving their best effort. In a masterful statement, drafted by W. E. B. Du Bois, the editors began by expressing their "belief that the defeat of the German government . . . is of paramount purpose" and recalling African Americans' "untarnished record" of national loyalty. Their goal at the conference, they said, was to find a way to keep black patriotism "at the highest pitch, not simply of passive loyalty, but of active, enthusiastic and self-sacrificing participation in the war." The editors were deftly solving the problem of how to affirm black patriotism while at the same time illustrating the need of government to address black grievances. The editors said:

We believe today that justifiable grievances of the colored people are producing not disloyalty, but an amount of unrest and bitterness which even the best efforts of their leaders may not be able always to guide unless they can have the active and sympathetic cooperation of the National and State governments.

"German propaganda among us is powerless," the editors continued, making a telling point, "but the apparent indifference of our own Government may be dangerous."

The statement then enumerated three ongoing problems, which they wanted the Federal government to address. "First and foremost," they urged "a strong, clear word on lynching from the President of the United States," and legislation that would allow the Federal government to use its war powers "to
stamp out this custom which is not only holding our Nation up to just criticism, but is seriously affecting the morale of 12,000,000 Americans."

Second, the editors called for an end to discrimination against blacks who offered their services to the nation as Red Cross nurses and physicians, stenographers and clerks in the Federal government, and seamen in the Navy. Finally, they sought an end to Jim-Crow travel restrictions on the now-government-controlled railroads. All of the demands were important, but the plea for action against lynching stood out, mirroring the editorial emphasis of black newspapers."

The head of military intelligence, Colonel Churchill, got the message. After the conference, Churchill concluded in a memorandum to the Army chief of staff that "the leaders of the race are intensely loyal, but feel keenly their inability to carry the great mass of their race with them in active support of the war unless certain grievances receive immediate attention. The most important of these is lynching." Churchill also sent along to the Chief of Staff a bill of 14 "Particulars," a list of all the demands adopted by the conference. Attention to them "would stimulate negro morale to an extraordinary degree," Churchill wrote. The bill was


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It reads, in full:

(1) National legislation on lynching.
(2) Colored Red Cross nurses
(3) Colored able seamen
(4) Colored volunteer soldiers to the extent of their volunteering
(5) Colored physicians for colored troops
(6) Training of larger number of colored officers
(7) Unlimited promotion of colored officers according to proven efficiency
(8) Utilizing the services of Colonel Charles Young (retired)
(9) An attempt to equalize among black and white troops the proportion of draftees assigned to stevedore regiments, service battalions, etc.
(10) Systematic getting and dissemination of news of Negro troops at home and abroad.
(11) Systematic attempt to correct ridiculous and misrepresentation [sic] of the Negro and omissions of his achievement in the white press.
(12) The consideration of a Government loan to the Negro Republic of Liberia, now actively aligned with the Allies.
(13) Executive clemency for the Negro soldiers recently tried and sentenced at Fort Sam Houston, Texas
(14) Condition of travel among colored people.83

News of the conference found its way, finally, to President Wilson. George Creel had told the chief executive about the conference of "loyal and enthusiastic" editors


"Punctuation same as in original. See Conference of Editors, June 19 to 21, 1918, Bill of Particulars, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 19, frame 742."
before-hand." Recalling "several delegations of negroes" who went away dissatisfied from meetings with him, Wilson declined Creel's invitation to meet informally with the editors. The program, he said, should go on without him until he could "act in a way that would satisfy them." After the conference, Wilson received letters from Creel and Emmett Scott. Scott enclosed the conference resolution and asked for "a word from you . . . addressed to colored Americans." Around the same time, Newton Baker told Wilson of his growing "anxiety" over what he thought to be unprecedented unrest among the black population. He passed along the judgement of editors' conference participants that the cause of the unrest was the increase in frequency and barbarity of lynchings. He then asked Wilson to take action. Two weeks later, Baker again prodded Wilson to act on the matter, at least by replying to Scott."

In the wake of the conference, black editors were guardedly optimistic. Not perhaps since Reconstruction had the Federal government devoted so much attention to blacks'.

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"George Creel to Woodrow Wilson, June 17, 1918, in Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 48, ed. Link, 341-2.

"Woodrow Wilson to George Creel, June 18, 1918, in Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 48, ed. Link, 346.

"George Creel to Woodrow Wilson, July 5, 1918, and Emmett J. Scott to Woodrow Wilson, June 26, 1918, in Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 48, ed. Link, 528-30.

"Newton D. Baker to Woodrow Wilson, July 1, 1918, and Baker to Wilson, July 14, 1918, in Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 48, ed. Link, 475-6, 607.

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concerns. Since war had proved the catalyst for black progress then, it seemed reasonable to assume that another major advance would accompany this war. "Defender" columnist Ben Baker called the conference "one of the greatest events in the history of the Race" and believed it marked "an epoch in Race progress."

Their optimism became a little less guarded a month after the conference as some of the editors' demands began to be met. The Baltimore Afro-American reported that the Department of War had ordered the employment of black nurses by the Red Cross and was about to reinstate Col. Charles Young, the highest ranking black officer in the Army, who had been discharged because of an alleged health problem at the beginning of the war. "Given the continuation of the war every possible avenue for the rendering of service will be opened to all Americans white or black," the paper predicted.

"See, for example, "Well, It Has Happened" Gazette, July 6, 1918, p. 2.

"Ben Baker, "Must All Work Together to Get Somewhere," Chicago Defender, July 6, 1918, p. 16. On the same page, an editorial predicted that the experience of fighting in a common struggle for democracy would mend the rifts between classes and races. "Strange indeed it will be if a new society does not emerge from the democratic spirit that is being evidenced more and more as the war goes on. Worth and not birth will determine one's standing." See "A Common Ground," ibid.

"Red Cross Nurses" and "New Draft Age Limit," Baltimore Afro-American, July 26, 1918, p. 4, and "Good Results Already Evident from Conference of Editors," ibid., Aug. 2, 1918, p. 1. See also, untitled editorial, Cleveland Gazette, July 27,
Hopes accelerated after July 26 when President Wilson issued a long-awaited statement on lynching. Though Wilson's statement has been linked to the lynching of a German-American, and the President did not mention Negroes specifically nor single out the South for special condemnation (in fact, he took care not to blame "any single region"), Wilson followed black editors' practice of comparing lynching to lawlessness in Germany and depicting lynching as a threat to "the honor of the Nation," and a contradiction of the principals America was fighting for in Europe.\(^1\)

We are at this very moment fighting lawless passion. Germany has outlawed herself among the nations because she has disregarded the sacred obligations of law and has made lynchers of her armies. Lynchers emulate her disgraceful example. . . . We proudly claim to be the champions of democracy. If we really are, in deed and in truth, 1918, p. 2.

\(^1\)In an editorial on Wilson's lynching speech, the New York Times called the lynching of German-American Robert Prager in St. Louis in April "the most conspicuous example of the mob mind." On the other hand, a news report on the speech asserted that although Wilson did not mention the lynchings of Southern blacks, "it is known that he included them in his characterization of mob spirit." See "Mr. Wilson on the Mob Spirit," New York Times, July 27, 1918, p. 8; and "President Demands that Lynchings End," ibid., p. 7. Wilson had been urged by William B. Hale shortly after that lynching to form a special commission to safeguard the lives of Americans of Eastern European heritage. Wilson promised to give the matter his serious attention. See William Bayard Hale to Woodrow Wilson, April 6, 1918, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 47, ed. Link, 275-6, 276 n. 4. For an historical account which emphasizes the fact that Wilson's statement contained no reference to race, see Jane Lang Scheiber and Harry N. Scheiber, "The Wilson Administration and the Wartime Mobilization of Black Americans, 1917-18," Labor History, 10 (Summer 1967), 433-58, esp. 457.
let us see to it that we do not discredit our own. I say plainly that every American who takes part in
the action of a mob or gives it any sort of
countenance is no true son of this great Democracy,
but its betrayer. . . . How shall we commend
democracy to the acceptance of other peoples, if we
disgrace our own by proving that it is, after all,
no protection to the weak? Every mob contributes
to German lies about the United States what her
most gifted liars cannot improve upon by the way of
calumny. They can at least say that such things
cannot happen in Germany except in times of
revolutions, when law is swept away.

Had a black editor made this statement, Post Office monitors
might well have classified it as seditious for the way it
likened the United States to Germany. Wilson went on to
"earnestly and solemnly beg" state governors and local law-
enforcement officials and all Americans to work "to make an
end of this disgraceful evil."72

It is not clear how much Wilson's statement was
influenced, directly or indirectly, by the black press. But
in a letter written a week after the lynching speech, Wilson
said he had been impressed by the "fine philosophy of
democracy" expressed by editors at the conference and conceded
that the problems they enumerated were "grave and weighty" and
should have the "frank and calm consideration" of the American
people."73 A week later he told a white correspondent that he
hoped his "colored fellow citizens" were "beginning to

72Woodrow Wilson, "A Statement to the American People,"
[July 26, 1918,] in Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 49, ed.
Link, 97-98.

73Woodrow Wilson to Emmett J. Scott, July 31, 1918, in
Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol 49, ed. Link, 139.
believe" that he was glad to "serve" them. At the end of August, Wilson made another move aimed at winning the loyalty of African Americans. He commuted ten of the Houston soldiers' death sentences to prison terms as "a recognition of the splendid loyalty of the race to which these soldiers belong and an inspiration to the people of that race to further zeal and service to the country." He had accepted the contradictory assertions of the black press, that African Americans were loyal, but that the government had to do something for them to assure their full cooperation in the war effort.

Black editors were convinced that Wilson had been moved to speak out against lynching by them. The Afro reported that the statement had "grown directly out of the recent conference of editors." Columnist William H. Weaver assumed a connection. "If the conference had effected no more than this, it would have" done enough to "justify its assembling," he wrote." In the Cleveland Gazette Harry Smith noted that Wilson had not simply condemned the lynching of opponents of the war, or the lynching of Prager, (as the Associated Press

"Woodrow Wilson to George Foster Peabody, Aug. 7, 1918, in Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 49, ed. Link, 204.

"Woodrow Wilson, statement, Aug. 31, 1918, in Papers of Woodrow Wilson, vol. 49, ed. Link, 400-402, esp. 401.


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predicted he would) but "mob action of all sorts." Thus, Smith asserted, the statement must have pertained to and been inspired by blacks. Smith marveled that "a southern Democratic president, surrounded in the two other coordinated branches of government by men of the same political faith and place of residence" (the South) could make such a statement. It surprised "even the most sanguine members of that great Race Conference that brought it about."

The *New York Age* and the *Chicago Defender* portrayed Wilson as having been persuaded by them to speak out. Just seven weeks earlier, the *Defender* had printed on page one an open letter from a black soldier asking Wilson to speak out against lynching." The Chicago Defender deserves the conscientious thanks of all liberty-loving members of our Race for its continual and unceasing fight to secure an expression from the chief magistrate of the nation against mob violence," wrote reporter A. N. Fields. "Embodied in the President's appeal to the country can be found the principles enunciated by this paper for the past twelve months." The *Defender*, Fields said, had consistently "laid down one fundamental principle" (which Wilson now accepted), that to carry


"Andy Dawson, "We Second the Motion," Chicago Defender, July 6, 1918, p. 1.
democracy to other nations, "we must cease to burn men and women at the stake.""  

The New York Age said it had "taken this position ever since the war began and has sought to open the eyes of those in authority to this view of the case," an editor for that paper wrote. James Weldon Johnson reiterated this point a week later. "For the past year The Age has been pointing out that the torturing and lynching of black Americans by Americans laid the country liable to the charge of hypocrisy in its pronouncements about democracy; and here President Wilson has said the same things." These comments, by Fields, Johnson, and the other Age editorialist, reveal the way they conceived of the role of the black press—not simply to communicate with other blacks, but "to open the eyes of those in authority." In this case, with the help of the conference, it worked.

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Johnson noted that when he had earlier led a delegation to the White House to plead for clemency for some of the convicted Houston soldiers he had taken that occasion to ask Wilson to speak out against lynching. Though Wilson at first "demurred," he finally agreed that "he would 'seek an opportunity' to say something." Johnson believed the July 26 statement was the fulfillment of that pledge. See James Weldon Johnson, "The President on Mob Violence," New York Age, Aug. 10, 1918, p. 4, and James Weldon Johnson, Along This Way: The Autobiography of James Weldon Johnson (1933; New York: Viking, 1968), 324-5.
Wilson's speech led to a moment of high optimism among black editors. After all, the St. Louis Argus editorialized, Americans had "responded nobly" to every other request Wilson had made of them during the war. Surely they would respond to this plea, too.2 Even before Wilson's statement, some Southerners had spoken out against lynching. Tennessee Law and Order League secretary, Bolton Smith, a self-proclaimed liberal from Memphis who had read the Chicago Defender, publicly stated that lynching could prolong the war effort and his fellow Southerners should exhibit "self-control" by allowing accused Negroes to be tried in court.3 Similarly, the Conference on Charities and Corrections, the Atlanta Constitution, the Houston Post, the Little Rock Gazette, the Christian Science Monitor, Outlook magazine, and the University Commission on Southern Race Relations had all recently condemned lynching. The Little Rock newspaper had said that barbaric lynchings in the South did not "fit" with "Our battle cry 'A World Safe for Democracy.'" The Baltimore Afro-American quoted the article at length. "This is just what almost every Negro newspaper in the country has been saying all the time," the Afro commented. "When the editor of


an Arkansas newspaper comes to the same conclusion we look forward in hope that . . . our Southern white friends will be able to see the error of their ways and repent."

After the president's statement, more white newspapers began to come out against lynching. Wilson had "awaken[ed] the conscience" of the Chicago Tribune, according to Fields." And Johnson noted that the Florida Times-Union, which had defended lynching a few weeks earlier, now praised and supported Wilson's statement." By the end of the year, even white Mississippians had formed a group, the Mississippi Welfare League, which opposed lynching." The combination of the president's statement and the fulfillment of a few of the 14 particulars, including the appointment of a black war correspondent, Ralph W. Tyler, in September, along with the perception of a groundswell of mainstream anti-lynching sentiment, understandably fed the hopes of black editors,


reporters, and publishers. "Perhaps after all," the Chicago Defender dared hope, "we are on the eve of true democracy. Who knows?"8

At that moment, late in the summer of 1918, the war seemed to be evolving in a way that black leaders had hoped it would. Though lynchings and other extralegal violence against black individuals had sharply increased, the Federal government was beginning to act in the interests of black Americans, and it seemed that public opinion might finally turn against lynching. Most importantly, African Americans had apparently convinced the man in the bully pulpit to speak out against lynching. They had won all this not through passive accommodation nor through extreme militancy, but with a measured approach combining militant demands with accommodating assurances. In short, they wielded what power they had in the safest way possible. "All things come to him who will but wait," the Afro's publisher, John Murphy concluded after Wilson's statement. But Harry Smith corrected him: "All things do come to him who will but wait but fights for them in a proper way while he waits."89

Wilson's war for democracy had come full circle. Black editors had seized his rationale for war and applied it to the

88 "Our President Has Spoken," Chicago Defender, Aug. 3, 1918, p. 16.

89 "Contend While You Wait!" Cleveland Gazette, Aug. 3, 1918, p. 2.
situation of blacks, particularly in the American South. Now the president himself had been forced to admit that his own principles were unfulfilled here at home. Though Wilson did not single out the South as perpetrator, or African Americans as victims, the statement certainly encompassed within its view the lynching of blacks in the South. Prodded by his top advisers, Wilson had come to see the need to recognize black loyalty and undermine black unrest. The black press did not bring this about single-handedly. Leaders like Scott, Spingarn, and Robert R. Moton also had major influence within the government and, in the case of Scott and Moton, directly on Wilson.90 More importantly, however, the black population acted in ways that concerned those mobilizing for war. Houston was only the most extreme example of black soldiers lashing out against racism. In several cases, black soldiers retaliated against white soldiers and civilians who were trampling on their rights.91 Southern blacks began rebelling against restrictions in the South by standing up to white oppressors, migrating to the North, and joining militant organizations. Some black men resisted conscription.92

90 Moton corresponded with Wilson on lynching a month before the president's statement. See Robert Russa Moton to Woodrow Wilson, June 15, 1918, Papers of Woodrow Wilson, ed. Link, 323-24.

91 Barbeau and Henri, Unknown Soldiers, 71ff.

92 On black resistance to the war, see Theodore Kornweibel, Jr., "Apathy and Dissent: Black America's Negative Responses to World War I," South Atlantic Quarterly 80 (Summer 1981), 322-38. On black militancy during the war, see Stephen A.
The black press did not create this wave of "unrest," as government officials called it, but rather interpreted and placed it in the context of the loyal actions of African Americans. When Creel and Baker sought to understand black unrest, they monitored black newspapers, and then called black editors to Washington. The black press became a channel through which black America reached the highest levels of authority. It portrayed African Americans in a favorable light, made known their demands, and made a convincing case that those demands had to be met. Though many readers resisted the black press's approach, top Federal officials became convinced that lynching was to blame for black unrest. In actuality, lynching had been going on for decades. Its increase during the war may have aggravated black feelings, but other conditions certainly played a greater role in generating unrest. But by convincing Wilson that lynching was the main cause, and also that African Americans were generally loyal, the black press got him to make his statement of condemnation, in which he endorsed the notion that lynching contradicted the nation's war aims.

Ultimately, Wilson's statement on lynching stopped far short of true effectiveness. He never supported Federal anti-lynching legislation, and in the following year, the number of lynchings rose again, as it had during both war years. In


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addition, with the end of the war in November, the government's willingness to address the 14 particulars, most of which had to do with the war anyway, evaporated. Yet, the anti-lynching sentiment which had begun to emerge in the South during the war did not vanish. Public opinion now sustained organized opposition to lynching. The first major organization of the white South to oppose lynching—the Southern Commission on Interracial Cooperation—was formed in 1919 and during the 1920s, the number of annual lynchings declined significantly. But the end of the war by no means meant the end to lynching, interracial conflict, or white interest in the black press. In fact, during the tumultuous year following the war, white interest reached its height.

"Col. Young was reinstated, but only after the Armistice. Particulars 10 and 11, had to do with wartime press coverage. And the federal Government relinquished its control of the railroads before abolishing Jim Crow on them.

CHAPTER 7

THE NEW NEGRO'S MESSAGE TO AMERICA

America must be told. The time is at hand for the people—all the people—to know the truth, and the whole truth, about our condition and our aspirations and our demands. . . . AGAINST A SOLIDLY UNITED, GENERAL, NATIONAL, UNCEASING CAMPAIGN OF PUBLICITY IN ALL FIELDS AND DEPARTMENTS, PREJUDICE AND ITS KINDRED IMPS WILL RUN LIKE A SCARED HOUND. AMERICA MUST BE TOLD.¹

After the end of the war, government surveillance did not end, but was continued and expanded, and matched by increasing interest among white citizens, ranging from a former president to the white residents of Longview, Texas. During 1919, the black press became the subject of a speech on the floor of Congress and of a book by a professor of English in Virginia. Major dailies editorialized on the threat of "radical" black publications, and local, state and national law enforcement officials watched them carefully. The rise in interest in the black press coincided with one of the most turbulent years in American history. It was marked by the signing of the Peace treaty in Europe, growing fear of radicalism all over the world, a devastating influenza epidemic, a dramatic rise in lynchings, and a series of bloody race riots in twenty-five American cities and towns. While the increasing scrutiny of

¹Nahum Daniel Brascher, "Getting America Told," Chicago Defender, June 7, 1919, p. 20.
black newspapers presented some significant dangers, their publishers welcomed the opportunity to continue to lecture white America on the moral implications of racism for the nation and to plead with northern whites to align themselves with justice, democracy, and American ideals, while shunning the evil, racist ways of the South. Most importantly in 1919, however, they had new messages to convey about black loyalty to the country during the world war, about blacks' rising self respect and willingness to stand up for their own rights, and about the dangers white hooligans faced when they initiated violence against this "New Negro." All this and more, they believed, "America must be told."

America's View of the New Negro

Federal officials continued to monitor black publications after the Armistice, believing they were particularly susceptible to the radicalism that seemed to threaten every Western nation after the devastation of world war and a Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917. In America, workers organized 3,630 strikes in 1919, including a general strike in Seattle and a police strike in Boston, and terrorists sent mail bombs to a U. S. Senator and the Attorney General. Government and corporate leaders retaliated by brutally suppressing strikes, deporting Russian aliens, and harassing
radical organizations like the Industrial Workers of the World (I. W. W., or "Wobblies") and the Socialist Party. Repression culminated in the so-called Palmer Raids of January 2, 1920, when Federal marshals and local police raided the headquarters of allegedly radical organizations in 32 cities, arresting 4,000, of whom 550 were eventually deported.

Officials in the government lumped African Americans with Wobblies, socialists, anarchists, and labor agitators as dangerously prone to radicalism. Woodrow Wilson himself believed African Americans would be the "greatest medium in conveying bolshevism to America." A Federal agent felt Negro radicals were "the most radical of all radicals." Officials were especially concerned about New York city's new crop of militant journals, including the Messenger; Marcus Garvey's mass-circulation daily, the Negro World; and two short-lived incendiary monthlies, the Challenge and the Crusader. But white observers often tended to lump socialist journals with generally conservative weeklies like the Age or the Defender, which either opposed or ignored radical ideologies while focusing on racial issues. In a report dated July 2, 1919,

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Robert A. Bowen singled out the Age as he warned that the black press in general "increasingly employed the tone of menace and the threat of violent resistance" and had become aligned "with the most destructive forces of our political life today." Another report blamed the Chicago riot on "vicious and well-financed propaganda."

The most widely circulated government report on the black press, the Attorney General's "Radicalism and Sedition among the Negroes as Reflected in Their Publications," listed several characteristics, common to many black periodicals, which made the black press a "persistent source of a radical opposition to the government, and to the established rule of law." These included advocacy of retaliation against mob violence; demands for social equality; strong opposition to the Wilson administration, the South, and the League of Nations; and an emphasis on "race consciousness." A fifth characteristic, identification with radical organizations and Bolshevism, applied only to a minority of black publications.

Perhaps the most prominent criticism of the black press in the wake of the riots came in late August, when Rep. James

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F. Byrnes of South Carolina interrupted a debate on teacher pensions in the House of Representatives to blame the recent race riots on "incendiary utterances of the would-be leaders of the [black] race now being circulated through negro newspapers and magazines." Though Byrnes quoted mostly William Monroe Trotter and articles from the Crisis and the Messenger, he repeatedly denounced the "negro press" as a whole, and indeed, the sentiments he found so objectionable--like advocacy and praise of armed self defense--characterized the better part of the black press. Byrnes said he read "these quotations from the negro press" in Congress to warn "the white men of America . . . of the efforts that are being made to induce the negro to resort to violence." He attributed immense power to black newspapers, saying they were stirring up an otherwise contented black population, inciting them to violence and rebellion. He also hoped to convince black leaders to "tell their people that in seeking political and social equality they are cherishing false hopes that are doomed to disappointment." In essence, Byrnes thought white people should read more of the black press and black people should read less of it.

He also refuted the black press's claim to pure Americanism. He interpreted criticisms of racism and the South as applying to the government, the flag, the nation as a whole and "alike to the white man of the North and of the South"; he used militant statements of black soldiers as
evidence of black disloyalty and blacks' lack of fitness for
military duty; he warned that the "Bolsheviki of Russia" might
be "using the negro press of America to further their
nefarious purposes." Byrnes sought to dash black people's
hopes for a racially just America lurking somewhere in the
North or in the national government. He asserted that blacks
were doing better in the South than in the North, he quoted
Abraham Lincoln's opposition to social equality of the races,
and he predicted that now that blacks had moved North, all
whites would unite in opposition to equality for blacks. For
these reasons, he said, black people must know that violence
would not further their cause. They must "realize that there
are in this country 90,000,000 white people determined not to
extend political and social equality to the 10,000,000
negroes, and a resort to violence must inevitably bring to the
negro greater suffering."\footnote{22 August 1919, \textit{Congressional Record} 66th Cong., 1st
This, of course, flew in the face of the black press's optimism about armed self-defense and
retaliation.

Byrnes and other critics accused the black press of
driving black readers to interracial violence. Yet, in the
one case where a black newspaper most directly helped provoke
a riot in 1919, the \textit{Chicago Defender} drove \textit{white} readers to
violence. A July 5 \textit{Defender} article claimed that a married
white woman had declared that she loved and wanted to marry

Lemuel Walters, a black man who was lynched on June 17 in Longview, Texas. On July 10, three white Longview men confronted S. L. Jones, the Defender's local agent, accused him of authoring the article, and beat him to the ground with a wrench. Jones escaped, but later that night, a mob marched to his house, intent on lynching him or driving him out of town. In an ensuing riot whites killed one black man and burned several black homes and stores, while the sheriff destroyed copies of the Defender and banned its future circulation. After Jones and some of his allies had fled the state and order was restored, leading white citizens condemned the Defender's "scurrilous article" and pledged they would never again "permit the negroes of this community and country to in any way interfere with our social affairs or to write or circulate articles about the white people of our city or country." To these whites, the black press mattered, not merely for the way it affected black readers, but also for what it said about whites.

Longview denizens were not the only whites to keep their eyes on the Defender and other black publications. White readers from all over the South registered complaints about the Defender and other black newspapers. Five-hundred

citizens of Atlanta unanimously approved a resolution denouncing the *Defender* and the *Atlanta Independent*, another black newspaper, for "abuse of our citizens, civilization and its institutions" and for "engender[ing] bad feelings and an evil spirit in the hearts and minds of the Colored People of this City toward their White neighbors." A again, they felt a need to set the record on white people straight. Whites from Pine Bluff, Monticello, and Helena, Arkansas; Greenville, North Carolina; Macon, Missouri; Marks, Mississippi, and Baldwin, Louisiana, among others, asked the postal service to ban from the mails the *Defender*, and/or the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the *New York Age*, the *Boston Guardian* and the *Indianapolis Freeman*. A Justice Department agent stationed

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9Resolution, City of Atlanta, Georgia, April 1, 1920, in *Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925)*, ed. Kornweibel, reel 13, frame 905. The individual listed as secretary of this meeting also wrote to the Post Office asking that it ban the *Defender* and the *New York Age*, the *Indianapolis Freeman*, the *Boston Guardian*, and the *Crisis* from the mails. See W. H. Rossman to W. H. Lamar, June 28, 1919, in *Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925)*, ed. Kornweibel, reel 13, frame 783.


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in Memphis, Tennessee, reported that he heard a "good deal of criticism" of the Defender in the South during the summer of 1919.¹¹ Letter-writers accused the black press of printing "wild and exaggerated" accounts of the whites' crimes against blacks.¹² Two of the Defender's Southern agents were killed, according to Robert Abbott's biographer, and more than a dozen others were driven from their homes. The state of Mississippi made it a misdemeanor "to print or circulate or publish appeals or presentations or arguments or suggestions favoring equality or marriage between the white and Negro race," and one county in that state banned the Defender's circulation altogether. Some communities reportedly charged prohibitively excessive licensing fees to distributors of black newspapers; in Birmingham, Alabama, the Ku Klux Klan warned the black Baptist Leader to stop criticizing the Klan; in Houston, Texas, the Klan allegedly stole the circulation list of the black Houston Informer; a correspondent for a black newspaper was lynched in Athens, Georgia; and all over the South, according to the New York Age, white authorities scanned black newspapers "with a critical eye."¹³

¹¹Special Agent in Charge to Chief, Bureau of Investigation, July 14, 1919, in Federal Surveillance of Afro-Americans (1917-1925), ed. Kornweibel, reel 9, frame 76.


White Arkansans, including Gov. Charles H. Brough and the Arkansas Gazette, based in Little Rock, thought black newspapers had incited blacks in Phillips County to plot a massacre of local white plantation owners. As it turns out, whites in Phillips County massacred perhaps hundreds of poor blacks that fall. On the first of October, a posse rounded up and killed members of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union of America, recently formed by poor black tenant farmers and sharecroppers to demand fair treatment from landowners. In a letter to Postmaster General Albert Burleson, Gov. Brough claimed the posse had thwarted a plot incited by the Chicago Defender, which had molded "the sentiment out of which this recent conspiracy" emerged. The Defender, the Crisis, "and all other similar publications should be suppressed" in order to preserve racial harmony, he concluded.

In a second letter, this time to the Postal Solicitor, H. L. Donnelly, Brough attempted to further prove the "incendiary and misleading character of" the Defender. He enclosed a copy of the Nov. 1 issue, which published NAACP investigator Walter White's report on the Arkansas riot. After conducting his own investigation in Phillips County, White had formulated a version of events totally at odds with the version advanced by Brough, the Arkansas Gazette, and the Commission on Race Relations, Negro in Chicago, 564. New York Age, April 5, 1919, p. 4. The Athens lynching was reported in the Feb. 19, 1921 Philadelphia American; see Frederick G. Detweiler, The Negro Press in the United States (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1922), 20.
"Committee of Seven" (whites who had investigated the riot). Walter White's report, which also appeared in several Northern dailies, described the exploitative plantation system which kept black farmers in a state of virtual peonage by forcing them to purchase supplies from plantation stores, denying them itemized account statements, and paying them well below fair market prices for their crops. Sixty-five black farmers had contacted a sympathetic local attorney, O. S. Bratton, about challenging elements of this peonage system in the courts, and others were planning to refuse to harvest cotton unless the landowners agreed to pay market prices. White found "no basis" for claims that the farmers had planned a massacre of plantation owners and he claimed that two white men who were shot by blacks, precipitating the riot, had first fired into a black church without provocation.  

According to Brough, Arkansas had no peonage system, black farmers were treated fairly, and the union's demands were unreasonable. Further, the governor claimed to possess "documentary evidence" of a plot to massacre white planters.

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Investigators had found "twenty-one highpowered rifles and several thousand rounds of ammunition" in the office of a black dentist thought to be a leader of the conspiracy, and the two white men had not shot into the church, he claimed. Brough went beyond refuting White's story, however, and attempted to counter the black press's portrayal of African Americans as discontented and increasingly militant. Except for the unionists, black Arkansans were peaceful, law-abiding, and "thrifty." He praised their "splendid patriotic services to our government," and cited a resolution that some black citizens presented to him after the riot, "deploring the attitude of the rioters of their race" and asserting that "the Governor of Arkansas and the white people generally, are giving them a square deal." 15

Given the content of the Defender and the fact that no massacre of whites ever took place, Brough's claim that the newspaper led blacks to plan a bloody attack seems unlikely to say the least. And yet, the Defender and other black publications probably did contribute to a more militant attitude among black readers in Phillips County, thus nurturing labor actions and encouraging armed self defense. At the same time, assertive black newspapers may have spurred whites to launch their massacre, of dozens of African

The combination of the organization of black tenant farmers and the inflammatory rhetoric in black newspapers, of which white Arkansans were apparently aware, might well have contributed to escalating fears of rebellion in a county where blacks outnumbered whites by three to one. One white reader from the county warned the Defender that its rhetoric led whites to kill blacks.

You are agitating a proposition through your paper which is causing some of your good Bur heads to be killed and the end is not in sight yet, but you have not got sense enough to see it... [Y]ou think you have won but the price is being paid still, and will continue so long as you Bur heads keep this... propaganda up. 17

Not all Southerners who commented on the black press opposed it. Between July and November, Robert T. Kerlin, a white professor of English at the Virginia Military Institute, read black newspapers avidly in an effort to understand African Americans. He published a compilation of editorials and articles from 80 different black publications early in 1920 under the title, Voice of the Negro, 1919. Kerlin hoped to understand the Negro version of the year's race riots and "present it to the white public, if that public would accept it." The book includes chapters on "The New Era," the "The Negro's Reactions to the World War," "The Negro's Grievances

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16 On estimates of deaths, see Cortner, A Mob Intent on Death, 30.

and Demands," "Riots," "Lynchings," "The South," and "Labor Unionism and Bolshevism." Unlike Rep. Byrnes of South Carolina and Robert A. Bowen of the Post Office, Kerlin recognized the importance of looking at a wide sampling of representative papers rather than a few of the most radical ones. The Negro, he said, had a "right to be heard in the court of the world" and he believed that helping to bring that about "would be a service to the country." 18

Some Northern whites were also concerned about the impact of the black press on race relations during the year. The Chicago Commission on Race Relations identified the sensationalism of local black newspapers in reporting interracial clashes as one factor precipitating the race riot in that city in July. 19 The New York state legislature launched a high-profile investigation into radical black publications. The Lusk Committee's report, filed in April of

18Robert T. Kerlin, The Voice of the Negro, 1919 (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1920), x-xi. Academic interest in African Americans went beyond the black press. Black historian Carter Woodson published an essay in the July, 1919, Journal of Negro History in which he said that an "'enlightened class' of southern whites was taking an interest in black history: 'seeing that a better understanding of the races is now necessary to maintain that conservatism to prevent this country from being torn asunder by Socialism and Bolshevism, they are now making an effort to effect a closer relation between . . . blacks and whites by making an intensive study of the Negro.'" Quoted in Clarence E. Walker, "The American Negro as Historical Outsider, 1836-1935," Canadian Review of American Studies, 17 (Summer 1986), 137-54, esp. 148.

19Chicago Commission on Race Relations, Negro in Chicago, 556-57, 650-51.
1920, actually did focus on the truly radical black publications, including the Messenger and the Negro World. The committee concluded that, because of the oppression of blacks in America, radical propaganda fell on "fertile soil."²⁰

The New York Tribune blamed the Washington race riot on "dangerous propaganda" printed in black newspapers, and devoted almost a full page to the problem, quoting the Age, the Crisis, the Boston Guardian, the Washington Bee, the Richmond Planet, and others.²¹ White soldiers participating in that same riot apparently agreed. They seized a bundle of 40 copies of the Baltimore Afro-American from a distributor they accused of pedalling "propaganda."²² Former President William H. Taft also assumed the black press had something to do with the riots and asked editors to "cease publishing articles, however true, having inciting effect."²³

²⁰Clayton R. Lusk, Chair, Joint Committee Investigating Seditious Activities, New York State Legislature, "Propaganda Among the Negroes," in Revolutionary Radicalism, April 24, 1920, 1476-1520.

²¹Quoted in New York Age, Aug. 9, 1919, p. 4.


In Cleveland, Police Chief Frank W. Smith called Harry C. Smith to his office to discuss an August 2 Gazette editorial advising blacks to keep "a U. S. Army Riot Gun in your home" as protection against white rioters. "Cleveland may be the next riot-storm center. Who knows?" Smith had written. According to the white daily Cleveland News, Chief Smith accused the Gazette editor of trying to stir up trouble and threatened to charge him with murder if anyone died in a race riot in Cleveland. Another local daily, the News-Leader, however, reported that Chief Smith denied the remarks. Editor Smith described the one-hour meeting which he did have with the police chief as a "pleasant chat." He said the two men discussed the editorial, recent riots, lynching, and mob violence in general. In the next Gazette, Smith reiterated his endorsement of armed self defense, while noting his long term opposition to mob violence. "The Gazette," he asserted, "stands for law and order!"24

To all of these white readers, what appeared in black newspapers mattered. It mattered, first of all, because they believed black newspapers had a major impact on the consciousness and actions of the African Americans, whom they hoped to control. But sometimes their responses to the black press suggest that their concerns went beyond a desire to control the flow of information to black people. The


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Defender's suggestion that a white woman could fall in love 
with a black man, for example, contradicted the lynching and 
rape myths that were central to Southern white consciousness. 
Longview rioters who responded to this were not simply 
defending the honor of one white woman. They were defending 
their particular construction of reality and way of life. 
Other readers, particularly Northerners, and Robert Kerlin, 
showed more of an open-minded curiosity about the black press, 
a willingness to listen and learn from it. On such 
individuals, the editors, publishers, and writers of the black 
press pinned their hopes for a more just society.

The New Negro and White America

African Americans seem to have been aware of the rising 
interest in the black press and equally interested in 
projecting their version of reality, not just for other blacks 
but for a wider American public. Editors commented on 
editorial notices in the major dailies, government monitoring 
of the black press, the remarks of Rep. Byrnes, and the Lusk 
Committee's discussion of blacks. Indeed, their comments 
suggest an eagerness to use the press to affect white public 
opinion--to counter the "insidious and dangerous propaganda" 
constantly issuing from "Negro-hating Southerners" who sought
"to poison public sentiment all over the country." The Gazette, for instance, asked readers to call whites' attention to an article in the paper on a French general's praise of African American performance in battle during the war. The Defender reprinted a racist editorial from a Mississippi newspaper "to show government officials it is in their plain duty to suppress such trouble-breeding sheets as this."

The editor-in-chief of the Associated Negro Press, Nahum Daniel Brascher, expressed black journalists' interest in reaching white readers most directly. He told the Chicago Commission on Race Relations that "most of us are proud to have them [colored newspapers] seen in the hands of our white friends and it is only through them that they can really get our viewpoint. . . . I am very much interested in having the editorial feeling of the newspaper get to the white people." In a June 7 column in the Chicago Defender, Brascher revealed his hopes for the effect of the black press on white America. "America must be told . . . the truth, and the whole truth, about our condition and our aspirations and our demands," he wrote. Blacks must fund "the necessary

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28 Chicago Commission on Race Relations, Negro in Chicago, 565.

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propaganda to get and maintain the rights of freedom." In the face of such a "NATIONAL, UNCEASING CAMPAIGN OF PUBLICITY IN ALL FIELDS AND DEPARTMENTS, PREJUDICE AND ITS KINDRED IMPS WILL RUN LIKE A SCARED HOUND," Brascher proclaimed."

Not coincidentally, as white interest reached its peak in 1919, so did the black press's effort to create a new image of African Americans in the public mind. To be sure, this "New Negro" was grounded in social reality. The migration of 500,000 blacks from the politically and socially repressive rural South to the more prosperous and less restrictive urban North; the enrollment of 370,000 black men in the military (about half of whom served in Europe); the contribution of blacks at home to a war to make the world safe for democracy; and the self assertion of ethnic groups all over Europe made many African Americans aware of new possibilities, eager for greater freedoms, and optimistic about the efficacy of social activism. Membership in protest groups like the NAACP and in Marcus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association soared.30

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But African American newspapers did not simply reflect the social realities of the New Negro. Rather, black newspapers constructed a particular version of the New Negro in such a way as to affect public opinion, black and white. As the first section of this chapter shows, influential white people did look to the black press for an interpretation of the New Negro.

The various elements of the black press's New Negro were designed to persuade America that black people deserved full citizenship and were willing and able to fight for it, and that they would no longer stand for mob violence. News stories called readers' attention to the praise from French generals and other Europeans for the performance of African American soldiers, asserting that it "gives the lie to any

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who may have declared that Negroes were not fighters."

Returning soldiers were "bigger and better men than when you left us," the Defender said, and "The country that commands your service in times of war owes you protection of life and property in times of peace." The "fighting spirit" displayed by these men in France was not likely to accept second class citizenship in America.

We are loath to believe that the spirit which "took no prisoners" will tamely and meekly submit to a program of lynching, burning and social ostracism as has obtained in the past. With your help and experience we shall look forward to a new tomorrow, not of subservience, not of meek and humble obeisance to any class, but with a determination to demand what is our due at all times and in all places."

Other black newspapers put on display returned black soldiers who would stand up for their rights. Letters from militant soldiers who loved their "race better than life itself" became a regular feature. "My appeal is for that which we claim


to have been fighting for, to establish a true and everlasting Democracy," Sgt. James P. Webb wrote in the Afro-American. The Gazette reported that when Sgt. James G. Ellis, a decorated black war hero who had made friends with white soldiers in military hospitals and on the boat ride home from France, arrived in Newport News and boarded a local ferry, a white southerner tried to prevent him from accompanying his friends. The man said that "'niggers' had to go upstairs." Ellis threatened the man with a Colt 45 and was urged to use it by his comrades. Had not a black minister intervened, "there certainly would have been another 'cracker' gone to heaven."36

The militancy of black soldiers translated to militancy among the entire black population. "We take this opportunity to say to America that neither in France nor America will colored men suffer indignities from southern white brutes whether they are in the uniform of the United States or in citizen's garb," William A. Byrd warned in the Gazette.37 The experience of the war, according to James Weldon Johnson, had "worked a great change" in the consciousness of all twelve

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36 Edward Lyon Jones, "A Letter From an Eye-Witness," Cleveland Gazette, Feb. 1, 1919, p. 2. In a similar vein, the Afro reported that a black sergeant did kill two men in Georgia after they tried to Jim Crow him; see "Shabuta," Baltimore Afro-American, Dec. 27, 1918, p. 4.

million African Americans, and they would no longer "tamely submit" to treatment they had "hitherto received." 8 "This is not a time for our Race to be unassuming," a letter writer told the Defender. 9

These writers used black participation in the war as a rationale for whites to give them their rights, first because they had earned and deserved them, and second, because they were now capable of fighting for them. No doubt much of this writing was directed at African Americans, to encourage them to seize the propitious moment soon after their patriotic contribution. But writers may also have thought that they were reminding white people of what blacks deserved and what would happen if they did not get it. In practice, the whites in Phillips County, Arkansas, seem to have taken the Defender's threats at face value, but instead of reacting by making concessions, they launched a preemptive strike, massacring unionizing sharecroppers they feared had read the paper.

It is unclear whether the black press contributed to the outbreak of the two dozen race riots of 1919. That year marked a dramatic shift in the pattern of such disturbances. Previously, what historians refer to as "race riots" bore a

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9 "Editor's Mail," Chicago Defender, May 3, 1919, p. 20. See also, "Justice or Death is Watchword," Baltimore Afro-American, April 4, 1919, p. 4.
greater resemblance to pogroms, in which vengeful whites descended on black neighborhoods, killing, maiming, and burning. From 1919 on, black residents met violence with almost equal force, inflicting comparable losses on whites. From April to October, 1919, an estimated 120 people died in race rioting in 25 cities, North and South. The largest riots occurred in Charleston, South Carolina; Longview, Texas; Washington, D. C.; Chicago; Omaha, Nebraska; and Phillips County. With the exception, perhaps, of Phillips County, the most terrible riot occurred in Chicago, where 500 people were injured and 38 killed. Were it not for police, who killed seven blacks, the death toll would have been nearly even in Chicago: sixteen blacks and fifteen whites.

Black editors and journalists generally condemned the lawlessness, but applauded blacks who fought back with force. Reports on the riots resembled accounts of sporting events, with writers tallying up the casualties on each side of the color line. Blacks in Washington defended themselves "with a grim determination to exact a life for a life," the New York Age reported, and they did it with machine guns, hand grenades, and home-made bombs. And in an early report on the Chicago riot, a correspondent guessed that "casualties among the whites seem to exceed those of the colored." The

"On death tolls, see Tuttle, Race Riot, 10; and Tuttle, "Violence in a 'Heathen' Land," 324. On riots other than Washington and Phillips County, see Waskow, From Race Riot to Sit-In, chapters 2, 3, and 6. See also, "Negroes of Washington Were Forced to Protect Themselves," New York Age,
Gazette claimed white newspapers were "HIDING THE TRUTH," about the high numbers of dead whites in the Washington riot "to keep Afro-Americans afraid to strike back." The Baltimore Afro-American also claimed there were more white than black casualties, leading its story with an itemized list:

COLORED CASUALTIES
3 killed--6 wounded--8 beaten

WHITE CASUALTIES
4 killed--22 wounded--12 beaten

Like a box score, the graphic told the tale at a glance: "The colored population was well armed and able to take care of itself." 41

Though it is impossible to know for sure, it is not unreasonable to assume that black editors intended to encourage black readers to defend themselves. They also hoped to dissuade whites from attacking them in the future. "White boys and men in the South should know the havoc wrought among their race so that they will shrink from committing a similar offense," the Gazette warned. "The truth will end this thing sooner than anything else." Harry Smith's editorial advised readers to arm themselves with U. S. Army riot Guns. The title of this editorial, "A WARNING," suggests it was aimed as

Aug. 2, 1919, p. 1; and "More Than a Score Killed and Hundreds Wounded Since Sunday Afternoon," ibid.

"Soldiers Try to Terrorize Colored Folk," Baltimore Afro-American, July 25, 1919, p. 1. In the end, 10 whites and five blacks were killed in Washington, according to Waskow, From Race Riot to Sit-In, 27.
much at white would-be attackers as at potential black victims. And as we have seen, both the chief of Cleveland police and the local newspapers got the message."

In the midst of the Chicago riot, the Defender began downplaying its previous encouragement of black self-defense, urging black readers "to do your part to restore quiet and order." "THIS," a headline proclaimed "IS NO TIME TO SOLVE THE RACE QUESTION!" Roi Ottley, Abbott's biographer, argues that the publisher wanted to help restore order by urging caution on his black readers. Yet Abbott still wanted to drive the lesson of the rioting home to those white Americans who might read or hear about his paper. In an editorial in the same issue that advised caution, the Defender said that America was "reaping the whirlwind" for having so long lynched and mobbed blacks with impunity. "The black worm has turned," the editorial added, "A Race that has furnished hundreds of thousands of the best soldiers that the world has ever seen is no longer content to turn the left cheek when smitten upon the right." In a similar vein, the New York Age said that blacks' militant self-defense in the riots "proclaimed to the country" that "The Negro will no longer allow himself to be mobbed free of cost. Those who indulge in mobbing him now and

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"Reaping the Whirlwind," Chicago Defender, Aug. 2, 1919, p. 16.

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hereafter have got to pay the cost, and pay it in lives."" These editorialists never took such warnings as far as they might have—as far as Richard Wright would in his famous novel, *Native Son*, suggesting that African Americans had been driven to indiscriminate and horrible retribution by poverty, oppression, and injustice. On the contrary, in all these warnings, black writers were careful to point out that African Americans never initiated the riots, but were provoked and acted in "pure defense." The New Negro was respectable, rational, and aligned with the forces of order and justice and enlightenment against the forces of disorder, injustice and darkness."

Another aspect of the New Negro was his political assertiveness in general and his susceptibility to radical ideologies in particular. Black weeklies embraced and made much of political assertiveness, but were ambivalent about radicalism. Only a few black publications, like the *Negro World*, the *Negro World*, and the *Crusader*, all published in New York City, embraced the radical ideologies of the moment: bolshevism, socialism, anarchism, syndicalism. Marcus Garvey's daily *Negro World* espoused a doctrine of radical black nationalism. With the exception of the *Negro World*, circulation of these journals was small, and all of them were

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relatively short-lived. Most black weekly newspapers, however, used greater care in presenting this aspect of the New Negro to white America. The Defender simply denied and denounced radical doctrines, arguing that it was Southern whites, not Northern blacks who were radical. An editorial said Bolshevism sounded the "death knell of law and order," and endorsed Federal raids on anarchists and other radical "snakes in the grass." Elsewhere, the Defender equated Southern opponents of black rights with Bolshevists, and referred to the Omaha riot as a "fit of semi-bolshevism." The Gazette and the Age tended to oppose Bolshevism, too, the Age equating it with lawlessness and thus "the white lynchers of the South." But they also noted that they could see why disfranchised blacks, in their "depth of desperation" might grab onto a radical doctrine. "If Negroes feel that they are justified in being Bolsheviki there is nobody in America to condemn them for it," William A. Byrd wrote. "The greatest Reds and I. W. W. in this country are the men in power who are exploiting the people for their pockets." James Weldon


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Johnson's editorials, unlike the unsigned editorials in the *Age*, expressed some sympathy for radicalism, though he ultimately rejected it as a viable political strategy. He asserted that most blacks could not be classified as radicals, since they were contending for rights most people took for granted. But he warned that "the treatment they are getting will eventually" force them "into the ranks of the radicals." Thus, Johnson warned of the possibility of black radicalism while attempting to "combat the propaganda that the Negro is a 'dangerous radical' because he is demanding the common fundamental rights of all other citizens of the country."50

The *Baltimore Afro-American* came close to endorsing radical views, stopping just short of supporting the Socialist Party. Carl Murphy, son of the publisher, joined the editorial staff in 1918, and his socialist and pacifist views soon made an imprint on the journal's editorials.51 During 1919, the *Afro* quoted the socialist *Messenger* sympathetically, defended the Rand School, a socialist institution raided by the government in July, and predicted rising black support for the Socialist Party. But ultimately the editors maintained a stand of political independence.52 In August, the *Afro* noted


with satisfaction that the Washington and Chicago riots had "opened the eyes of the country to the fact that the urban Negro will fight back when he has to" and led the New York World to see that continued oppression of African Americans would drive them into the clutches of radical political organizations. Increasing radicalism among African Americans would lead the government to do more to bring about racial justice, a later Afro editorial asserted: "If white people are more willing to listen to reason on the color question today than ten years ago, we have to thank the growing radicalism among colored people." Though radical ideas appealed to Murphy, he seems to have valued them most for how they might force white people to "listen to reason on the color question."

The New Negro and the Redemption of America

Parallel to and inseparable from the black press's projection of a New Negro was its ongoing portrayal of the old, corrupt, uncivilized South. The two were portrayed as locked in battle with each other for the soul of America. In the aftermath of World War I, the nation was at an important


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crossroads, facing the choice of the path represented by the racist, disorderly, uncivilized South, or of the humanitarian soul of the nation exemplified by the Declaration of Independence, Northern Abolitionists, Abraham Lincoln, and the New Negro. An editorial cartoon depicted a cloud of dark black smoke emanating from the scene of a lynching and enshrouding the statue of liberty, with the caption "STIFLING LIBERTY!"\footnote{"Stifling Liberty!" \textit{Chicago Defender}, May 15, 1920, p. 16.} The riots and lynchings of 1919 suggested that the South was in danger of thus contaminating the entire nation with its lack of civilization. But the moment also held extraordinary promise for the redemption of America.

Rather than taking the urban rioting in Northern cities as evidence that racism was a national rather than primarily a Southern problem, black newspapers frequently blamed it, as they had with the East St. Louis Riot, on the influx of Southern "crackers" and the proliferation of "dirty, criminal southern propaganda."\footnote{"The Mob! A Warning," \textit{Cleveland Gazette}, Aug. 2, 1919, p. 2.} "No attention has been paid to the large numbers of 'crackers' who came from the South in the past three years to work" in Northern factories, the \textit{Gazette} editorialized. Their arrival "explains the great increase in prejudice and friction between the races in this city." Smith went on to assert that these Southerners caused the Chicago and Washington riots and "tried to start a riot in Cleveland
last Monday." He called on his "Brethren of the race press" to make this point clear to the "whites of your respective communities."5

In addition to migrating crackers, the anti-black propaganda spread by the "bourbon press" also caused the riots. A Defender editorial listed anti-black propaganda, originating in the South, as the "primary" cause of the Chicago riot. The propaganda alleges that blacks must be kept in their place through lynching and mob violence or whites in the South will be subject to "Negro domination. The result is the inculcation of a disregard of law and order in both races." This view and the resulting disorder could not be confined to the South and was in danger of infecting the whole nation and creating a wave of disorder.5

Despite these dangers, some thought the riots illustrated conditions were not as bad in the North as in the South. They showed that Northern blacks had been less cowed than Southern blacks, who generally did not fight back. If Southern blacks would learn how to "meet violence with violence" like blacks in Washington and Chicago had, the Baltimore Afro-


American reasoned, "there would be a riot after every Southern lynching." The Southern black man has less chance to defend himself when he is attacked by a Southern mob, James Weldon Johnson pointed out, because the whole community attacks him. In the North, he has more chance for a "fair fight. He does not feel that he has the force of the whole community, the whole county, the whole state, and the whole section of the country against him." Some editors also argued that blacks involved in rioting had a chance of getting a fair trial in the North. After indicting 50 blacks on riot-related charges, Johnson noted, a Chicago grand jury had refused to indict more Negroes until they received some evidence against white rioters. "Such an action on the part of a grand jury in a Southern community is inconceivable," he concluded.

Clearly, justice, liberty, and other American ideals were not dead for the authors of these editorials and news stories. At its core, America was good, its ideals sound. The image of a shining city on a hill was not to be ridiculed, but to be realized. The Constitution drew no color line, a speaker,

58 "North and South," Baltimore Afro-American, Aug. 8, 1919, p. 4

59 "James Weldon Johnson, "Justice Toward the Negro, North and South," New York Age, Aug. 16, 1919, p. 4. For an editorial which argues that the Northern riots were preferable to the constant brutal oppression of blacks in the South, see William A. Byrd, "Dr. Wm. A. Byrd on Race Riots," Cleveland Gazette, Aug. 30, 1919, p. 1.

60 "A Weak Spot," Chicago Defender, Sept. 6, 1919, p. 20.
quoted in the Age, could assert, overlooking that document's original endorsement of slavery.61 Editorialists could argue that African Americans needed no new legislation to ensure their rights, just enforcement of the Constitution.62 They could define racial divisions as unpatriotic and un-American.63 And they could continue to advise Southern blacks to migrate to the North.64

But this fundamental goodness was being threatened by the nation's dark side, embodied in the ways of the "southern 'Hun.'" The "one great sin of America" was its "weak and vacillating policy . . . in dealing with southern lawlessness," William Byrd argued.65 Failure to meet the Southern threat endangered the very existence of American values and institutions. "THE SOUTH is a part of the body politic of this country," the Defender warned. "If poison is injected into any part of the human system and the same is not arrested and eradicated, it will eventually infect the whole

62 "Chicago Defender, March 1, 1919, p. 20; Baltimore Afro-American, March 21, 1919, p. 4.
system and may result in death." The South threatened the nation's spiritual health in a number of ways. It spread lawlessness, undermined democratic values, and promoted the values of the enemy--whether they be autocratic Germans or bolshevistic Russians." Byrd saw in the summer's riots a calculated plan by Southerners to make the rest of America like the South--a white man's country--by spreading violence against blacks to all corners of the nation.

The New Negro held the key to the defeat of America's evil impulses. To save itself, America should follow the example of militant blacks in Washington and Chicago who made those cities "decent places to live" by standing up to Southern-influenced ruffians. Since the Federal government was unwilling, African Americans would have to lead the fight against the "southern 'Hun' who sought to destroy the Union and is now seeking to endanger it by his savage traits." By August of 1919, when William Byrd wrote these words, African Americans seemed to have lost a good deal of the hope and optimism they had at the end of the war, when many thought

"Another Angle of the Trouble," Chicago Defender, Sept. 6, 1919, p. 20.

"For an example of an article which categorizes racist Southerners as "the leading exponents of Bolshevism . . . in the United States to-day," see "Sham of American Democracy Exposed," New York Age, Oct. 4, 1919, p. 2.


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that the idealistic crusade in Europe might lead directly to the "dawn of real democracy" in America, when a returning black soldier could write with eager sincerity: "I truly believe that this democracy will not be denied us." After the riots in Washington and Chicago and a dramatic increase in lynching--including the lynching of several returned black soldiers--it had become clear to most that the Federal government would not follow through on Wilson's statement against lynching and that the South would not be made safe for democracy.

Yet even so, black newspapers did not stop prodding America to live up to its ideals and did not completely lose hope that someday it would. Black writers continued to believe that the North, once the home of abolition and the underground railroad, could again become a haven--however flawed--for persecuted blacks fleeing the hellish South. They continued to hold fast to America's founding ideals and institutions, and to the Constitution as a set of principles, which, if adhered to, would guarantee their just treatment. They continued to believe that many white men of good will believed in fairness and justice without regard to race, and that many would support black rights if only they were better informed. They assumed that if the black press kept on "in the same old uncompromising way, asking the white man to live

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up to his constitution and laws . . . the so-called 'Race
Problem,' which flies so ghostly before his eyes, will be no
more."\(^7^0\) Such consistent prodding would do more than benefit
African Americans, it would redeem the republic itself--make
it, as one black soldier wrote, "the greatest on the face of
the earth."\(^7^1\) In the middle of the red summer of 1919, the
Rev. W. Sampson Brooks encouraged and instructed the black
press, during a conference on the race riots:

> The fundamental principles upon which this nation
> was founded must be ever kept aloft by the colored
> press, and when it achieves their universal
> acceptance for all, it will have made the greatest
> contribution to American ideals and government.\(^7^2\)

Though that day was still a distant dream, black newspaper
people kept believing in its inevitability and in the
possibility that they could help bring it about.

\(^7^0\) A. E. Thompson, "Editor's Mail: South Heard From," Chicago Defender, June 7, 1919, p. 20.


\(^7^2\) "Local Ministers Discuss Race Riots," Baltimore Afro-American, Aug. 8, 1919, p. 1.
CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Given the appropriate methods for framing, one may bring about fundamental changes even in another's utterance accurately quoted. Any sly and ill-disposed polemicist knows very well which dialogizing backdrop he should bring to bear on the accurately quoted words of his opponent, in order to distort their sense.

--M. M. Bakhtin

During the period from the beginning of hostilities in Europe in 1914 to the establishment of peace in 1919, African-American writers and editors framed the words of America's leaders in ways that promoted black interests. At a time when minority groups were being charged with having divided loyalties, black writers used words like "loyalty," "preparedness," and "Americanization" to assert the devotion of black people to America and the war effort. At the same time, they used the words that America was using against enemies in Europe in the context of racial problems at home. They used President Wilson's talk of making the world "safe for democracy" in the context of the disfranchisement of blacks in the South and they spoke of the Central Powers'

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atrocities against civilians in the context of the lynching of blacks in America.

To define the black press's acceptance and use of words like loyalty and Americanism as accommodation or its use of Wilson's democratic rhetoric against America as militant protest would be to misunderstand these strategies. Elements of accommodation and protest can be found in the black press's response to World War I. Individual newspapers may have leaned toward one approach or the other. But their orientations to both loyalty and democracy must be understood as growing out of their attempt to engage in dialogue with white Americans of the North, the South, the press, and the Federal government. In this dialogue, African Americans were compelled to take into account the consciousness, and what Bakhtin called the "apperceptive background," of white Americans and to speak in ways that might persuade them.

This dialogue had been underway since the birth of the black press in 1827. Many black editors of the antebellum period began writing their own newspapers only after they could not get a hearing in the white press. They had wanted to argue with whites in existing publications and but instead had to do so in their own journals. Like most of those who followed, these early editors publicized African Americans' worthiness of full citizenship and argued that racial equality was compatible with American ideals. In doing so, they juxtaposed the ideals of democracy and equality against the
brutal realities of slavery and they put on display the proper behavior of middle class free blacks. We know white Americans paid some attention to black newspapers in the 19th century because white abolitionists helped support the black press before the Civil War and because white Southerners often responded to black newspapers violently after the Civil War. Ida Wells traveled North in the 1890s so she could continue her fight against lynching after she had been prevented from doing so by violent white readers in Tennessee. Her journey is symbolic of the shift of the vital center of black journalism back to the North around the turn of the century.

As lynchings multiplied in the South, black editors—especially in the North—increasingly focused on this problem as the central one facing the race and America. Like Wells, they sought to show how lynching and other Southern practices, including segregation and the disfranchisement of black voters, contradicted what they took to be American ideals—justice, humanism, and democracy. They argued against the racist rationalizations for lynching promoted by the Birth of a Nation, and published the gruesome details of the most brutal lynchings in an effort to make conscientious white Americans blush, as James Weldon Johnson put it, and to expose the South as un-American. In a real sense, the black press and the racist South were locked in a battle for the soul of the nation.
With the advent of war in 1917, the black editors and writers faced new opportunities and found a new language for demanding equal rights. They also faced new dangers of persecution and oppression. They tried to avoid the dangers not simply through accommodation, but by appropriating for their own uses the words America's leaders were using to promote loyalty. They could not ignore the national discourse which denounced hyphenism and divided ethnic loyalties and held that "every interest" must be subordinated to the national interest. Rather than denouncing such notions as impractical, foolish, or at least inimical to their own interests--an approach which might have been suicidal--black editors used these notions to show blacks were loyal and worthy of citizenship. But in using them, they also framed them in new contexts, contrasting, for example, the enthusiastic support of the war by African Americans with the obstructionism of white Southerners. They could even use xenophobic phrases like "100 percent Americanism," which, though they sounded hollow and foreign in their mouths (to borrow Bakhtin's phrase), did help to demonstrate their commitment to national unity in a time of crisis. At the same time, the requirements of total loyalty made it more complicated for editors to advocate black interests. All demands for equality now had to be subordinated to national loyalty. This led to some contradictions. Editors who opposed the war backed America's entry and advocated African-
American participation; advocates of militant protest de-emphasized black rebelliousness during the war; and editors who saw the reasons for the Houston mutiny denounced the mutineers or even endorsed their punishment.

Ultimately, however, black journalists could not completely ignore their group interests. Instead, they sought to make them synonymous with the national interest. They argued that loyalty was not a matter of simply supporting the actions of the current government, but of being faithful to national ideals. President Wilson himself strengthened this case by defining the war as a crusade to uphold such ideals. Black writers gleefully seized these words from Wilson's lips and deployed them in the fight for black citizenship rights. Wilson's use of terms like self-determination, democracy, and human rights when talking about Europe had obvious implications when framed against the circumstances of African Americans back home. Surely a nation aroused to fight a war to make the world safe for democracy could be persuaded to do the same for blacks at home. The black press tried to persuade the nation to do so in part by pointing out the similarities between the nation's struggle in Europe and the struggles of African Americans in the South.

Embedded in their use of Wilson's idealistic rhetoric was a fundamental optimism about American ideals, the North, and the potential for racial equality. Despite evidence to the contrary, black writers saw the North as relatively free of
racism and open to black advancement. Even Northern riots provided evidence of Southern rather than Northern racism. They hoped to define the war as a contest in which African Americans and liberal Northerners were united against barbarism and undemocratic institutions simultaneously at home and abroad. They believed it possible to defeat Southern "Prussianism" while defeating the Kaiser.

Influential and other white Americans did pay attention to these arguments. The Federal government received dozens of letters from white Southerners complaining about the black press, Federal agents wrote numerous memoranda to their superiors about black newspapers, the white press and Congress discussed the black press, and high Federal officials, including Secretary of War Newton Baker and President Wilson, corresponded with each other about black newspapers. It is impossible to know for sure what impact African-American newspapers had, and how successful their strategies turned out to be. Censors who read the papers were provoked, their racial assumptions challenged. They characterized black newspapers as loyal, bitter, "vile and nefarious." In reporting their findings, they distorted the sense of black editorials and articles by framing them against the need for national unity and loyalty. In the end, however, they could not make the case that black newspapers deserved to be censored in any kind of systematic way. The subtlety of the
black press's complaints and the strength of its proclamations of loyalty eliminated that option.

But the reports of the censors on the bitter tone of black newspapers reached the highest levels of government, where officials decided that if they could not be censored, something must be done or else African-American "unrest" could threaten the war effort. The government's decision to call black editors to Washington to modify their tone by hearing and responding to their pleas was a tribute to these editors' skill in balancing protest with accommodation—or rather in balancing reassuring with challenging language. And it gave black editors a uniquely direct channel to power. President Wilson thought the proclamation issued by the June, 1918, editor's conference contained a "fine philosophy of democracy," and he admitted that their grievances deserved "frank and calm consideration." Shortly afterward, this Southern-bred president, who had at least implicitly endorsed the message of the Birth of a Nation, condemned lynching as contrary to America's democratic ideals and humanitarian war aims. The Federal government then began to address some of the editor's demands from their bill of fourteen particulars. It is impossible to know how many of the demands would have been met had the war not ended a few months later.

With the end of the war, an important dynamic changed. The government had less need for the cooperation of the black population, and thus less reason to placate its press or to
listen to its demands. Accordingly, in 1919, black newspapers placed more emphasis on self-help and self-defense. Yet it continued to speak to white America. While they called on African Americans to defend themselves, black editors also warned white lynchers and rioters that the assertive New Negro would fight back against anyone who attacked them. Whites would think twice before attacking African Americans if they knew that they might be killed when they did so. At the same time, black newspapers publicized the positive war record and continued loyalty of black soldiers and citizens, portrayed the race as politicized and impatient for equality in the wake of the war, argued that only racism and oppression could drive African Americans to radicalism, and emphasized the purely defensive nature of black violence.

White America continued to listen to the black press, and to respond to its arguments. Though some, like Robert Kerlin, gave a sympathetic hearing, most respondents, like Rep. Byrnes, Gov. Brough, and the 500 Atlantans who signed a petition condemning the Chicago Defender and the Atlanta Independent, interpreted the black press's arguments as subversive trouble-making. White America's receptiveness to black arguments for racial justice, fostered by the nation's need for unity, had receded again. But the dialogue continued as ever, intensifying as the forces of reaction sought to roll back any wartime racial gains and the black press tried to preserve them. Black editors and writers continued to
envision the North as the true seat of American democracy, opposed to the barbaric and undemocratic South. They kept on prodding the nation to live up to its values, expressing optimism that America could and would do so, and representing African Americans as the agent of America's redemption.

World War I did not mark a major step forward in the struggle for back equality. Historians have sometimes faulted leaders and the black press for advocating too much accommodation, for placing cooperation with the war effort ahead of advocacy of black rights. They have contrasted these failures with the successes of World War II, when blacks supposedly gained more by withholding their support of the war effort in exchange for greater action by the Federal government. Recent scholarship, however, suggests that African Americans displayed no greater militancy in World War II than they had in the first World War." Just as the black response to the second World War cannot be reduced to A. Philip Randolph's militant threat of a march on Washington, the response to World War I cannot be reduced to W. E. B. Du Bois's admonition to "close ranks." Neither event sums up the response of all blacks or even of the black press.

If blacks gained less from World War I it may have been because of the length or extent of America's participation in


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the two wars, or with other circumstantial differences. In both wars, black editors had to be wary of the dangers as well as the opportunities presented by their situation. And each war presented different opportunities. In World War I the Wilsonian rhetoric of self-determination and democracy lent itself to black purposes. But World War II, a war against the ultimate racist doctrine, was even more adaptable to the cause of black equality. Thus, black success may have hinged less on the degree of African-American militancy than on the adaptability of each cause--and the language associated with it--to black purposes.

This conclusion does not diminish the importance of African-American agency. On the contrary, I have tried to show that black journalists, editors, and publishers worked strenuously to adapt the current discourse for their own ends and thereby to shape history. Humans do not make history just as they would like. They make it from the circumstances in which they find themselves. Black journalists from 1914 to 1919 did their best to shape history in a situation only partly amenable to their purposes.
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