Historiographic Essay:

The Black Press: Homefront Clout Hits A Peak in World War II

By Patrick S. Washburn

Since 1986, when I published A Question of Sedition,¹ I have watched with interest what else has appeared about the black press in World War II. There were ample clues in my book, as well as what others before me had done, such as Lee Finkle’s Forum for Protest and John D. Stevens’ Journalism Monographs on black war correspondents,² that much remained to be written. Yet, little has appeared recently except for occasional journal articles or chapters in books on much wider topics. An example of the latter is Henry Lewis Suggs’ P.B. Young, Newspaperman, which devoted twenty-two pages (out of 191 in the text) to Young’s career in World War II.³

Such a paucity is lamentable. The black press during World War II demands more attention from researchers simply because historically it was at the peak of its power, and that power was far from insignificant. Its circulation increased almost 50 percent during the war; several government agencies were extremely concerned about its influence with blacks, who could only get in-depth news about themselves from black newspapers because the white press virtually ignored them. The black press pushed for and obtained in 1944 the accreditation of the first black White House correspondent and a meeting of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association with President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The

l latter was extremely important. This was the first time that a president had met with a group of American black journalists.

Making an even more compelling case for additional research on the black press in the war is the significance of this period to the black history that followed. A strong argument can be made that the push for equality by the black press during World War II set a solid foundation which helped make possible the Civil Rights movement in the 1950s. While this connection is not unknown to historians, my experience has been that it is all but unrecognized by what should be another major audience for researchers—the public. I have spoken to numerous blacks about the black press in World War II, and I always conclude by pointing out why this period was important in terms of what occurred later. They usually have been enthralled and amazed. It is simply a part of their history of which they know virtually nothing. And almost uniformly, they want to know more, particularly because they are extremely interested in the Civil Rights era and anything that is tied to it. Suddenly, the black press in World War II becomes very relevant to them.

So, what are some of the major topics involving the black press during the war which need further examination? Let me make six suggestions.

1. One of the most obvious is the black newspapers' coverage of black workers. I was introduced to the topic as a doctoral student at Indiana University when I took a history course on black workers since the Civil War and did a paper on the Pittsburgh Courier's coverage of black workers in 1942.4 In examining the paper's stories, which ran the gamut from reports on discriminatory treatment of black servicemen to the proud contributions of black women in airplane plants, I slowly realized that this was the black press' biggest story during World War II. It trumpeted the workers struggles and accomplishments week after week.

The employment gains during the war for both black men and black women were astronomical. Robert C. Weaver, who rose to become head of the black labor division of the War Manpower Commission during World War II, noted in 1946 that blacks experienced more occupational improvement between 1940 and 1944 than in the previous seventy-five years.5 As Pittsburgh Courier columnist Joseph D. Bibb noted prophetically in October 1942, "War may be hell for some, but it bids fair to open up the portals of heaven for us."6 That point was not lost on black publishers, who played up black workers' gains week after week not only because this was breaking news but because it was good for circulation.

Such gains were sometimes controversial, Particularly striking was a 1942 incident which involved the familiar separate-but-equal argument. In May, the Courier announced that the Sun Shipbuilding Company in Chester, Pennsylvania, was going to build a separate plant that would hire only blacks.


American Journalism/Volume 12 Number 3/Summer 1995 361 (from 5,000 to 6,000). The paper emphasized that this would end black unemployment in Chester and would provide some jobs for blacks who lived in nearby Philadelphia.7 In a subsequent issue in June, the Courier devoted almost a full page to the project, including nine photographs, and the number of workers, who would have an annual payroll of $21 million, was increased to nine thousand. The paper also noted that 69-year-old Emmett J. Scott, a Courier columnist and one of the country's best-known blacks, would be the yard's personnel director.8

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, black government officials, and the top educators at Tuskegee Institute attacked not only Sun's obvious segregation plan but the Courier for supporting it. The paper noted that those groups called Sun's plan a step backward, despite the large number of blacks who would be hired, because the absence of an integrated plant would make it easier to fire the blacks at the end of the war.9 On the Courier, only influential columnist George S. Schuyler criticized the segregated yard, and he indirectly attacked the Courier when he claimed that "even the most stupid Afro-American can see the disadvantages" of such a plan. "It must never be forgotten that segregation is only a palliative, not a solution," wrote Schuyler. "It invariably worsens race relations and makes the subordination of Negroes to white whims and prejudices more permanent."10 The Courier also printed a letter from a reader who wondered if the paper was playing up the Sun story just to increase circulation.11

The Courier never backed down, however, from its support of the Sun project. In an August 1942 article, the paper argued:

Whenever a Negro or a group of Negroes can go into a project...gain administrative and executive experience, [and] learn the art of shipbuilding and manufacturing on a large mass production scale, it should be welcomed by ALL groups... It means that we are moving a little further up the ladder of practical experience in business training and are making some financial gains, too. Regardless of what is said to the contrary, we will only succeed by letting this white world KNOW that

9. For articles noting the opposition to the Sun project, see the following in the Pittsburgh Courier: "Spooks Sought in Sun Shipyard Plant," 13 June 1942; "NAACP Raps Shipbuilding Plan," 13 June 1942; and Bert Cumby, "Three Pressure Groups Seek to Control the Destinies of the Negro in America," 1 August 1942.
11. J.H. Jenkins, "Was Pegler Right?" Pittsburgh Courier, 25 July 1942. Jenkins may have been right. The circulation of large black newspapers grew rapidly in 1942, and the Sun project articles, certainly of interest to many readers, had the potential to increase the Courier's circulation.
we have the ability, the training and the experience. The Sun project is a magnificent laboratory, if nothing more to get that training, experience and financial compensation. 12

Black papers were replete in World War II with such examples involving workers, and they form a fascinating picture of a press on an important mission. It was a press that was quite willing to take gains wherever they appeared—if it meant playing up the contributions of women, for example, so be it. An in-depth look at this important coverage, and the changes which occurred over time, is long overdue.

2. Another important and absorbing topic is the connection during World War II between black newspapers and communism. Military Intelligence and the FBI noted numerous ties between black journalists and communists before the United States entered the war, and they continued to do so after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Part of the reason for this fixation on Communists at the FBI, of course, was that the agents were conditioned to think along those lines, according to former agent William W. Turner:

Very many agents in the FBI, I learned, were hostile not only to avowed Communists but to the entire left-of-center spectrum.... Once inside the Bureau subculture, the agent was indoctrinated in the belief that only J. Edgar Hoover’s early recognition and exposure of the Communist menace had preserved the American way of life. The enemy was not only Communists and socialists, but ‘those liberals’ and ‘dangerous-thinking one-worlders.’ ...Agents who carried these demon beliefs into the field were plainly predisposed to slant reports, subconsciously if not deliberately. 13

My favorite example of just how far some of the agents would go in finding Communist connections comes from late 1942 when the special agent in charge in Oklahoma City complained about the Oklahoma City Black Dispatch. He noted in a report that the 19 September issue of the paper “is of a rather biased nature and is sprinkled with such well-known Communist phrases as ‘Civil Liberties,’ ‘Timeless Rights,’ and ‘Freedom of Speech and of the Press.’”

While such a report is laughable, numerous other FBI reports—as well as those from Military Intelligence—were much more damning. For instance, Military Intelligence forwarded to Hoover in July 1941 a black special agent’s report claiming that “Japanese and Communist press agents are releasing news in all available negro publications and in some cases, Communists or Communist sympathizers are employed on the editorial staffs of these papers.” The agent labeled five black journalists (including three on the influential Pittsburgh Courier) as either Communists, Communist sympathizers, or radicals. He concluded that “the source of this subversive activity [should] be investigated at the earliest possible moment.” 15 Then, on 21 February 1942, a Military Intelligence report listed seventeen black publications which it claimed were “carrying abnormally inflammatory articles, sponsored by Communists.” The FBI reports were filled with the same type of material. In September 1943, Hoover mounted his major wartime attack on the black press, and blacks in general, in a 714-page “Survey of Racial Conditions in the United States.” Thirty pages of the report were devoted solely to the black press, looking specifically at seven newspapers. While the report did not claim that they had done anything illegal, it suggested that six of the papers were causing massive discontent among blacks and, in numerous instances, had Communist connections or were running pro-Communist propaganda. 17

The problem is that little is known about communist activities and the black press during World War II beyond what has been written from government records. An in-depth examination is needed to establish the accuracy of the government claims, how much and what the black press carried about communism, and the attitude of the black press toward communism.

3. The Negro Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), whose membership included all of the major publishers, also needs to be examined during the war years. It is best remembered for becoming the first group of American black journalists to meet with a U.S. president and for working out the details to have a black correspondent accredited to the White House. But its influence spread far more widely than that, as indicated by its numerous correspondence and meetings with government officials in World War II. In the summer of 1943, for example, eleven members of the NNPA’s executive committee met over two days with Vice President Henry Wallace, Attorney General Francis Biddle, War Manpower Commission Chairman Paul McNutt, and Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy as well as officials from the navy, the War Production Board, the Selective Service, and the Office of War Information. The discussions zeroed in on discrimination and morale problems. Such contacts were important to the black press. Yet, little has been written about the NNPA in the war years and the group’s significance for the black press. This is a major oversight.

4. Little attention has been paid to editorial cartoons in the black press in World War II. Yet, even a cursory examination of black newspapers reveals some powerful, and sometimes unsettling, images.

15. Sherman Miles to J. Edgar Hoover, 11 July 1941, record group 165, MIDD 10110-2452-1174, box 3085, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
In my research on the black press, I was not paying particular attention to cartoons, but I recall two of them vividly. One was published in early 1942 in the *Baltimore Afro-American* following a vicious killing in Sikeston, Missouri. A mob of about six hundred whites stormed the jail and seized Cleo Wright, a black who was charged with attempting to rape a white woman. He was tied to a car, dragged at high speeds, and then hanged before being doused with gasoline and set on fire. The black press was incensed. The *Afro-American* ran an editorial cartoon showing Adolf Hitler and a Japanese soldier grinning from across an ocean as a white mob lynched Wright. The headline read: “Defending America Our Way.”

The other editorial cartoon appeared in early 1943 in the *People’s Voice*, a paper that the FBI’s special agent in New York claimed was willing to follow the communist “line.” It showed a black soldier, who represented 450,000 black servicemen, with heavy chains on his wrists symbolizing the way blacks were hampered from fighting in the war. Hoover asked the Justice Department whether the cartoon violated the Espionage Act, which made it illegal to print anything that would obstruct the war effort, but he was told that it did not. Nevertheless, it resulted in an FBI investigation of the paper.

Such cartoons raise important questions about the black press. What were the most prevalent wartime themes; were the cartoons positive or negative images and was there a change that paralleled the increasingly positive tone in black press reporting as the war progressed; and what black newspapers were the most critical in their editorial cartoons and why were they like that? The answers would provide important information about an area of journalism which has received little attention.

An equally important content analysis needs to be conducted on the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s talented columnists. The paper was noted for the group, which included one woman, Marjorie McKenize. They wrote well, they were extremely outspoken and controversial, and it was not unusual for them to express differing viewpoints.

The only one who has received much attention is Schuyler, who in World War II was one of the black press’ most famous journalists. He was fearless in attacking black inequalities without mincing his words, which was remarkable because it was well known that the FBI was closely monitoring the black press. On 10 January 1942, for example, he wrote that blacks would not be worse off if the Japanese won the war. Then, on 28 March 1942, he followed up by praising the Japanese for “their cleanliness, their courtesy, their ingenuity, and their efficiency.” As a result, the FBI investigated him heavily. But others were just as outspoken. Fellow columnist J.A. Rogers wrote on 20 February

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20. See E.E. Conroy to Director, FBI, 18 March 1943; Memorandum, John Edgar Hoover to Wendell Berge, 12 April 1943; and Memorandum, Wendell Berge to Director, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 30 April 1943. All are in file 100-5120, Federal Bureau of Investigation.
23. Ibid., 769-71.
mainstream press. Thus, instead of the few areas which have been examined so far, it is time that we have a fuller, more well-rounded picture of this press. Such research will make a clear contribution to a better understanding of twentieth-century mass communication history.

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