A Common Purpose: The Negro Newspaper Publishers Association’s Fight for Equality During World War II

by Earnest L. Perry Jr.

When the United States entered World War II, the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association had to decide whether to suspend the fight for equality and pledge full support for the war effort or continue its all-out assault against second-class citizenship using white America’s conflicting values as a weapon. The publishers decided to do both. This study explores how the NNPA implemented and carried out a unified effort to support the country during the war, while continuing to fight for racial equality.

The Negro Press would be absolutely useless were it to adopt a policy of appeasement. In fact, such a policy would destroy morale and wreck all that is decent and honorable in Negro life.

— The Brown American, 1942.

On Thursday, 29 February 1940, twenty-seven African American newspaper representatives from throughout the country assembled at the Wabash YMCA on the south side of Chicago. The purpose of the meeting was to get “better acquainted” and to agree on “a common purpose for the benefit of Negro journalism.” During the three-day meeting, the journalists discussed editorial policies, advertising problems, and relations with businesses both inside and outside the African American community.

The first topic discussed at this initial meeting of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association was a resolution by Thomas W. Young, business

Earnest L. Perry Jr. is an assistant professor in the Department of Journalism at Texas Christian University. E-mail: e.perry@tcu.edu.

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manager of Norfolk Journal and Guide that the group agree to "arrive at a
common front on national issues affecting the race." They agreed to deal
only with broad issues, such as whether to support anti-lynching legisla-
tion. It was the shortest discussion of the conference, but a little more than
two years later, the organization got its first chance to present a common
front.

When the United States entered World War II, the NNPA, along with
other African American organizations, had to decide whether to suspend
the fight for equality and pledge full support until the war was over, or
continue its all-out assault against second-class citizenship using white
America's conflicting values as a weapon. The publishers decided to do both.
This unified approach was in stark contrast to the one taken by the African
American press during World War I. During that global conflict many edi-
tors and publishers followed W.E.B. DuBois's call to close ranks with the
dominant culture. The first published editions of African American news-
papers after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor gave a clear and almost
unanimous indication of the position the African American press would
take during the war. In newspaper after newspaper, the editors and publish-
ers stated that they would support the war effort but had no plans to stop
advocating equal rights for African Americans.5

This study looks at how the Negro Newspaper Publishers Associa-
tion implemented and carried out a unified effort to support the country
during World War II while continuing to fight for racial equality. While
there have been numerous studies on the African American press, mostly
dealing with specific newspapers or individuals, this article addresses the
efforts of an African American press association in presenting a united front
in support of the war effort but against discrimination and segregation.
Historian Patrick S. Washburn pointed out in his essay, "The Black Press:
Homefront Clout Hits A Peak in World War II," that little research has
been done on the role of the NNPA during the war despite the fact that its
leaders wielded significant power among African Americans and govern-
ment officials.6

The dual victory campaigns of the Pittsburgh Courier, the Chicago De-
fender, and the Baltimore Afro-American represent examples of the efforts
major African American newspapers played in carrying out the association's
objectives. These three newspapers were chosen for study because, along
with the Norfolk Journal and Guide and the New York Amsterdam News, also
members of the NNPA, they had a nationwide circulation that reached about
46 percent of the 1.6 million African American newspaper readers during
the war.7

This study also examines efforts on the part of the NNPA to show a
unified front, including its promotion of the Negro Newspaper Week pro-
grams in March 1942 and again a year later in NNPA meetings with gov-
ernment officials concerning access to information. NNPA members also wrote articles and spoke to various groups about their position on the war and why they chose to take a dual approach.

Walking a Fine Line

The lead editorial on the front page of the 13 January 1942, Pittsburgh Courier reflected the sentiment of many NNPA member newspapers in pledging an “all-out effort to keep the banners of liberty, justice and equality flying over our ramparts.” However, the editorial also asked “the President and Congress to declare war on Japan and against racial prejudice in our country.”

A week later, the Chicago Defender, one of the leading NNPA newspapers, ran a front-page editorial specifically addressing the role the African American press would take during the war. In the article, the Defender stated that the African American press would not participate “in subversive advocacy to the impairment of the national will.” However, the editorial stated that the African American press would continue to fight against racial injustice and discrimination.

The African American press’s initiative to wage a two-front campaign was an outgrowth of what Claude Barnett, head of the Associated Negro Press, called the “dual life” African Americans were forced to lead. According to Barnett, African Americans were forced to read two newspapers, the white newspaper, to get a general sense of current events, and the African American newspaper, to determine what those events meant for the race. Barnett’s reference to a “dual life” comes from W.E.B. DuBois’s concept of double consciousness that he described as the African-American struggle, both physically and psychologically, with the contradiction of American democracy. The duality of African American life meant the African American press had a responsibility to present a dual message, thus the dual victory campaign.

In early February 1942, the Pittsburgh Courier launched its Double V campaign. In its front-page editorial on 14 February 1942, a week after it started printing the dual victory slogans without acknowledging it, the paper stated that the Double V represented “the true battle cry of colored America.” The Courier saw its campaign as a way to promote African American involvement in the war abroad and maintain the fight for equal rights at home.

The Chicago Defender began its dual victory campaign called “Remember Pearl Harbor and Sikeston Too: Fight to Save Democracy,” on 14 March 1942. The Defender linked the American side of double-consciousness with the African side’s struggle for equality by placing the attack on Pearl Harbor.
in the same context with the violent attacks on African Americans in Sikeston, Missouri, and at the Sojourner Truth Homes in Detroit. The “Fight to Save Democracy” campaign was designed to “make democracy safe and the Negro free.”

After running the symbol of a closed fist in a conspicuous place on its front page for months, the Baltimore Afro-American explained to its readers the meaning behind this action. The paper stated in an 18 July 1942 front-page editorial that the closed fist symbol represented African American unity in the war effort. The article stated the Afro-American’s position that African Americans were willing to unite in the fight against the Axis powers abroad, but it would not end its fight against segregationists at home.

The editors and publishers of the Courier, Defender, and Afro-American were leaders in the NNPA and spoke extensively in their respective cities and throughout the country about the role of the African American press during the war. Each paper, in stating its reasons for launching a dual victory campaign, maintained that closing ranks with white America would hurt the race’s chances of reaching its goal of equality.

The idea of placing the fight for equality in the context of a war to preserve American democracy, and creating substantive campaigns to promote it, was indicative of the creativity of African American leaders. The NNPA united behind a plan that helped African Americans cope with support for the war abroad, while being forced to live as second-class citizens at home.

The first months of 1942 saw a continuing barrage of stories in African American newspapers about discrimination and violence, especially in the military, which led to criticism from both whites and some African Americans. Critics, notably white columnists Virginius Dabney of the Richmond Times-Dispatch and Westbrook Pegler of the New York World-Telegram, and African American journalists Warren Brown and Claude Barnett claimed that the African American press’s focus on the country’s domestic ills hurt America’s image abroad and African American support at home. Critics called the African American press’s relentless attack against the segregation of blood by the Red Cross and the military’s refusal to allow African American men to enlist, disloyal and seditious. Pegler and other whites, including First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, claimed that further agitation could lead to more violence among the races.

The African American press fought back, stating that African Americans were loyal to American democratic principles, but those ideals did not include segregation and discrimination. Otto McClarin, president of Delta Phi Delta, an African American journalists society, stated in an open letter to Pegler, published in many NNPA-affiliated newspapers, that the African American press “is the Negro’s principal weapon against the type of hypocrisy that many white men have practiced against colored races throughout

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the history of this country." The letter also stated that the African American press represented the "most powerful medium of reminding the white man that he should practice at home what he preaches abroad about liberty and democracy."20

During the NNPA's 1942 convention, Marshall Field III, publisher of the Chicago Sun and New York PM, two newly created mainstream publications, presented a four-point program that called for the African American press to end its agitation for civil rights during the war. He said that the press should fight for the principles of equality, but that "this could best be done by championing the American government and the existing administration rather than by hacking away at the weaknesses and inconsistencies of the American system." Field said the nation needed the support of every citizen, and it was the job of the African American press to educate its readers "about the problems common to all Americans, as well as about those peculiar to the Negro." Field's comments did not change the NNPA's position because its members believed that they were following his advice, but on their own terms.22

Facing the Opposition

The government was also concerned about the actions of the African American press. President Franklin Roosevelt complained to Attorney General Francis Biddle about articles and editorials in the African American newspapers that highlighted the evil side of America. In May 1942, Roosevelt pressured Biddle to act against what he called subversive activities of the African American press.23 Biddle sent government officials to persuade African American editors to tone down their coverage.24 He also held a meeting with Defender publisher and NNPA President John H.H. Sengstacke in June 1942 to discuss the issue. Biddle agreed not to file sedition charges against the African American press, and Sengstacke said the government would probably receive more favorable articles in the African American press if African American journalists had access to top government officials.25

Other African American press historians, notably Lee Finkle and Washburn, contend that government pressure, especially from J. Edgar Hoover's FBI, may have forced the African American press to tone down its criticism.26 There may be some truth to this, but the African American press was walking the fine line between militancy and apathy among its readers and threats of censorship from the government.

Much of the criticism against the press from within the African American community came from fellow journalists. The bulk of the complaints centered on the lack of patriotic stories in African American newspapers. Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press told NNPA members at its
June 1942 conference that the African American press should be cognizant of the news it prints. He said it was "easy to form the habit of permitting thoughts of racial hate to creep into our columns. Sometimes it seems that has become almost a matter of general policy to encourage the hatred of white faces." Throughout the war, Barnett and others in the African American press complained that African American journalists placed too much emphasis on the injustices and very little on the accomplishments of African Americans involved in the war effort.

As the criticism from inside and outside the African American community continued, the NNPA held strong in its decision to wage a two-front war. Its first nationwide attack against its critics occurred during Negro National Newspaper Week, 1–7 March 1942. It was the first year the NNPA played a role in the event commemorating the significant role African American newspapers played in African American society. Instead of attacking its critics head-on, the African American press took its message straight to the people, both African Americans and whites. The editors and publishers stated in articles, editorials, and speeches, some presented in a special CBS radio broadcast, that African Americans and their press were loyal to the war effort, but could not in good conscience cease to work for equality using all the means at their disposal.

However, the criticism continued with the most blatant attack occurring in December 1942 when an article written by Warren H. Brown, director of Negro Relations for the Council for Democracy, appeared in the Saturday Review and was later published in the mass-circulation Reader's Digest. In the article, Brown stated that African Americans were satisfied with the gains they had made and that the African American press' continuing coverage of violence and discrimination only fueled hatred between the races. He accused the press of being "Negro" first and "American" second. He also accused African American leaders of irresponsibility in guiding the race to a more homogeneous relationship, i.e., equality with whites.

Brown's attack struck at the heart of the African American press not because of what he said, but because of who he was. Brown, a Ph.D., former editor at the Amsterdam News and a former reporter at the Chicago Defender, lent credibility to his criticisms despite the fact that his relationship with the African American press was rocky at best. He had been fired by the Defender and had difficulty selling freelance articles to African American newspapers in New York City.

As far as the African American press was concerned, Brown was a sellout. NNPA editors and publishers fanned out across the country denouncing, in print and in person, the charges leveled against them. In a speech before the St. James Literary Forum in January 1943, NNPA President W.O. Walker of the Cleveland Call and Post tied Brown's statements to those made by white columnists Dabney and Pegler. In directly attacking Brown,
Walker said he and other African Americans were being “used as stooges for the white-trash block of America.” Walker said the comments by Brown and others were an attack against “Negro progress” in America.35

Walker was not the only African American journalist to attack Brown. Columnists in the Courier, the Defender, the Afro-American, and other papers denounced him to the point that he was forced to retract his statements. Brown’s criticism and the subsequent counterattack by the African American press ended his career in civil rights.36 Meanwhile, it gave the press the mantle it needed to show African Americans its militant side. The editors and publishers stood united against the government, white journalists, and African Americans critical of their dual victory strategy. The dual victory campaigns survived 1942—the first year of the war—still united and with a reassurance that a two-front battle was the right approach to take.

Gordon B. Hancock, a professor of economics and sociology at Virginia Union University and a frequent contributor to the Norfolk Journal and Guide and the Associated Negro Press, wrote that militants saw agitation as the best way to gain equality. However, conservatives, like Warren Brown, believed that closing ranks would have been best for African Americans. Hancock stated that it was the job of the African American press to bridge this gap.37 The African American press did this by informing the masses how they could get involved in the war effort. Showing how African Americans were serving the country and providing information on how to get involved was a large part of the press’ dual victory campaigns.38

Presenting a United Message

In 1943, the NNPA gained control of the Negro Newspaper Week activities. Under the theme “Functions of a Minority Press in a Nation at War,” NNPA member papers stressed in articles, editorials, speeches by editors, and other promotions that the press stood firmly behind the war while at the same time fighting for “the Negro’s chance to work and fight” for equality.39 “The full integration of the Negro into American life” was a major part of the newspaper week agenda.40 NNPA officials pushed the same agenda behind the scenes.

The NNPA and other organizations pressured the government to integrate all aspects of the American war machine, an underlying principle of the dual victory concept. African American leaders realized that the race would not support the country as second-class citizens, but integration was not a condition for African American support.41 Office of War Information officer Milton Star stated in a letter to Phileo Nash, Special Assistant to the Director of OWI, that African American leaders would admit in private
that they were inclined to “close ranks” but were afraid that in doing so they would lose their influence, and in the case of the African American press, their hefty circulations. This attitude was indicative of government officials during the first year of the war. They believed that intimidation and the threat of censorship would force African American leaders to abandon their dual victory agenda. It did not work.

Sengstacke and the other editors believed that access to African American troops at home and abroad would be an added plus to their war coverage. However, during the first year and a half of the war, the African American press had to contend with Southern whites and military officials confiscating or banning newspapers from areas where African American soldiers could obtain them. Military officials believed that stories about racial violence and discrimination hurt the soldiers’ morale and turned them against the war. NNPA members said confiscating the newspapers violated soldiers’ rights and kept them from obtaining news from their home towns.

Finally, some progress

In 1943, when Sengstacke became NNPA president for the second time, he vowed to build a relationship with the government. His hope was that cooperation would change the makeup of stories on the front pages of NNPA newspapers. African American editors and publishers would be able to promote the war abroad by showing African American soldiers in action, but the press would continue to highlight segregation and discrimination at home. In turn, the government, which was concerned about African American morale, hoped that it would be able to influence the African American press to tone down its militant rhetoric.

The government realized that the African American press had a huge influence on its readers when, during nationwide racial unrest in the Spring and Summer of 1943, editors and publishers wrote articles and editorials asking their readers to be calm and resist the temptation to commit violent acts against whites who had attacked them. The Defender refused to print photographs showing the violence that took place during a riot in Harlem in August 1943. President Roosevelt and other government leaders asked all Americans to make an effort to ease racial tensions, and the Defender obliged. In its editorial stating why the pictures would not be printed, the Defender asked for “patience, tolerance and common sense.”

The promotion of three African American metal workers at the Packard Motor Car Company in Detroit in June 1943 led to a weeklong strike by white workers at the plant. The tension, caused by the promotions and the strike, erupted into the worst race riot of the war. Of the thirty-four people who died, seventeen were African Americans killed by police. Reports is-

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sued by the NAACP blamed city officials for ignoring the housing and job crisis in Detroit that led to the violence. City officials countered, stating that agitators in the African American community, including *Michigan Chronicle* editor Louis Martin, were irresponsible.

The African American press, while asking its readers to refrain from committing violence, blamed the government for not dealing with "fascists" in this country. In an editorial during the midst of the racial violence, the *Courier* listed a number of government-condoned acts of discrimination against African Americans ranging from the Red Cross segregation of blood, to the lack of enforcement of Executive Order 8802 that outlawed discrimination in the defense industry and federal jobs. At the end of the long, bloody summer that not only saw the Detroit riot, but civil unrest in Harlem, Los Angeles, Mobile, Alabama, and Beaumont, Texas, the *Afro-American* reported that instead of dealing with the problems of segregation and discrimination, Attorney General Francis Biddle had advised Roosevelt to curb the migration of African Americans into industrial areas of the country, effectively denying them jobs in defense plants. Roosevelt did not follow through on this suggestion.

The actions of the African American press during the summer of 1943 enhanced its credibility with the majority of African Americans and enabled it to convince African Americans that the war at home did not have to be sacrificed in support of the war abroad. It had also forced the government to concede that in order to reach a tenth of its population it had to work with the African American press, not against it.

Representatives from the Army and Navy attended the July 1943 NNPA meeting. Shortly after the convention, on 16 and 17 July, the NNPA executive committee met with Vice President Henry Wallace, Biddle, Paul McNutt of the War Manpower Commission, and officials from the War Production Board, Selective Service, and the Office of War Information to discuss how the African American press could help promote the war effort to its readers. The OWI immediately began using some of its manpower and material to provide information on how African Americans were helping in the war effort. It also created an advisory council, which consisted of the NNPA Executive Council. Sengstake, Carter Wesley of the *Houston Defender*, C.A. Scott of the *Atlanta Daily World*, W.O. Walker of the *Cleveland Call and Post*, and Howard Murphy of the *Afro-American* served as the working group that would advise OWI officials on issues concerning African Americans.

The meeting also led to the creation of a public information bureau, staffed by African Americans, in Europe to follow African American troops stationed there. The military allowed African American reporters to cover events in Europe and the Pacific. Military officials worked with the NNPA on a campaign urging African American troops to work hard in defense of their country. There were still problems with post and base intelligence of-
icers banning African American newspapers, but instead of ignoring NNPA complaints, Army officials worked to correct the problem.\textsuperscript{56} And there were other, much larger problems in the military.

The military’s position began to change after the NNPA’s meeting with OWI officials. Steps were taken to show the country how African American soldiers were helping win the war. A film titled “The Negro Soldier” was released and received favorable reviews in the African American press. The Army produced a pamphlet outlining the War Department’s position that African American soldiers should be judged as individuals and used according to their abilities. However, these orders were not implemented in the lower levels of the military, which led to low African American troop morale and their underutilization in combat.\textsuperscript{57} The paradox between American principles and practice continued.

In late October 1943, NNPA officers and White House officials began a series of meeting that would end four months later in an historic gathering between the NNPA and President Roosevelt. Sengstacke, Howard Murphy of the \textit{Afro-American}, and Carter Wesley of the \textit{Houston Informer} met with presidential press secretary Stephen Early to work out the arrangements for the first African American White House correspondent.\textsuperscript{58} Several NNPA member newspapers and Claude Barnett’s Associated Negro Press had been lobbying the White House for permission to cover the President, but the administration refused, citing a rule that only reporters from daily newspapers could be members of the White House press corps.\textsuperscript{59} It took three months to work out the details that led to Harry McAlpin becoming the first credentialed African American journalist to cover the White House. He covered the President for both the \textit{Atlanta Daily World}, the only daily African American newspaper, and the NNPA.\textsuperscript{60} A year later the position was solidified when McAlpin, at the urging of Early, was chosen as one of thirteen pool reporters at President Roosevelt’s funeral.\textsuperscript{61}

On 5 February 1944, thirteen members from ten NNPA newspapers met with President Roosevelt for thirty-five minutes.\textsuperscript{62} It was the first time a sitting president held a meeting with African American editors and publishers.\textsuperscript{63} The NNPA members presented Roosevelt with a twenty-one-point statement of African American hopes and aspirations during and after the war. Percival Pratts of the \textit{Courier} chaired the NNPA committee charged with developing the statement that began with an unequivocal pledge of allegiance to the country’s war effort.\textsuperscript{64} On behalf of African Americans, the publishers asked the President to abolish discrimination in employment, education, housing, and the military; enforce African Americans’ constitutional right to vote; and apply the Atlantic Charter to all colonial territories and colored people throughout the world.\textsuperscript{65}

The year 1943, the African American press had gone from being the government’s scapegoat on low African American morale to a partner in

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the effort to change African American attitudes. The press did this without losing sight of the insecurities and resistance felt by the African American masses. NNPA members realized that the fight for justice at home had to continue in order to satisfy that part of the African American community that believed attaining equality was more important than supporting the war.

The government's assistance in providing information was not contingent on the press ending its coverage of discrimination and injustice against African Americans. In fact, the press continued to report on racial injustice, such as the Port Chicago incident in which fifty African American sailors were tried and convicted of mutiny after they refused to load ammunition barges following the accidental deaths of more than two hundred African American men working in unsafe conditions on a barge at the port in July 1944. 66

The African American press had also flourished during the war years. From 1940 to 1945, African American newspapers' weekly circulation rose from 1.27 million to 1.8 million. 67 African American journalists went from covering events closer to home to major stories in Europe and the Pacific. The African American press' credibility had been challenged, but under pressure the editors and publishers of the NNPA held true to their commitment to the African American masses to continue the fight for equality on their terms. Despite the wishes of many African Americans to let the white man fight World War II alone, the NNPA saw the wisdom in promoting a program that sought to ease African American misgivings about supporting the war and channel the race's growing militancy in a direction that would lead to gains during and after the war.

Endnotes

3. NNPA minutes.
8. "We Are Americans, Too!" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 31 January 1941, 1.
15. "Sengstacke, N.N.P.A. President," PEP: Negro Publisher, Editor and Printer, July 1943, 4. This article gives the officers of the NNPA, and officials from all three papers held a top position.
18. Finkle, Forum for Protest, 73.
20. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. Ibid., 81.
25. Ibid., 88-91.
26. Ibid., 202. See also, Finkle, Forum for Protest, 128.
27. Speech by Claude Barnett, ANP Editor at the NNPA Convention, 6 June 1942, Box 143, Folder 6, Claude Barnett Papers, Chicago Historical Society.
28. Claude Barnett to Walter White, 16 April 1943, Box 143, Folder 7, Claude Barnett Papers, Chicago Historical Society. See also Finkle, Forum for Protest, 81.
29. Moss Kendrix, co-founder Phi Delta Delta Journalism Society for African American journalism students, started Negro National Newspaper Week in 1939 and continued to work on the event with the NNPA.
31. Ibid.
32. Speech by W.O. Walker to St. James Literary Forum, 10 January 1943, W.O. Walker Papers, Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.
33. Finkle, Forum for Protest, 75.
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35. Ibid., 9.
40. Ibid.
42. Milton Star to Phileo Nash, Report on Negro Morale, March 1943; OWI Files: OF 18; Nash papers, Truman Library.
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49. Ibid.
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59. Stephen Early, Secretary to the President to Harry S. McAlpin, 4 February 1943. Colored Representatives folder, Box 36, Roosevelt Library. Stephen Early, Secretary to the President to John H. Sengstacke, 14 April 1943, Colored representatives folder, Box 36, Roosevelt Library.
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