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Chapter One. Choosing Sides: The African-American Press and Early Cold War International Politics-

I: Historiography-

In the field of American history, it was long believed that internal social issues and external foreign policy issues were two separate spheres of study with few, if any, points of commonality. This divide in scholarship was particularly noticeable in the study of post-World War II American history. One of the primary domestic issues facing the United States after World War II, along with economic production and political anticommunism, was the emergent struggle for African-American equality which would become known as the Civil Rights Movement. Internationally the United States faced off against the Soviet Union, with varying degrees of intensity, for the next five decades in the Cold War. These two events, widely considered the most important events of postwar American history, were for years considered only tangentially and sporadically related. The impact of the Civil Rights Movement on the Cold War, and vice-versa, was thought to be negligible. As two distinct areas of history these events were studied by different historians and developed divergent bodies of literature.

This all began to change in the years following the end of the Cold War. A movement grew among certain historians “to reunite the internal and external sides of the American past,” and explore the connections between American race relations and the attempted spread of American power and ideals which characterized the Cold War. Historians such as Mary Dudziak, Thomas Borstelmann, Jonathan Rosenberg, and Brenda Gayle Plummer have written numerous books and articles attempting to create a
synthesis of Cold War and Civil Rights scholarship, all within the last decade. As a comparatively new field of study, all of the areas of Cold War/Civil Rights research have yet to be adequately discovered by historians. This research thesis endeavors to more closely examine one specific portion of this newly devised field and, hopefully, provide fresh insights which can become a part of the wider collection of Cold War and Civil Rights Movement literature.

Throughout the research being done on the confluence of these two events the African-American press appears in the guise of an official spokesman for the African-American community. The sentiments, beliefs, and viewpoints of the majority of African-Americans could most easily be determined simply by examining the articles and editorial columns of the nation’s black newspapers. After the end of the Second World War, with fascism and militarism adequately defeated abroad, the African-American community was ready to tackle the domestic issues of racial discrimination. The desire to actively participate in finding the solutions to racial problems was one that went to the very foundation of what black newspapers were. Since the very first African-American newspapers were printed in the early 19th century, black journalism had been instilled with a taste for protest and outspoken advocacy. While this was also true of early white papers, the black press retained this characteristic well into the 20th century. Where white journalists had turned to general-interest news, “their Negro counterparts remained loud, clear instruments of protest, by turns educative and provocative.” The African-American press however, did not stop at advocacy. One of the black presses most important characteristics was a combative spirit which engendered a belief that the only way to force necessary social change was to fight for it. In Gunnar Myrdal’s groundbreaking
1944 examination of the African-American life, *An American Dilemma*, the sociologist called the black press “an organ for the Negro protest” and stated that, “Most white people in America are entirely unaware of the bitter and relentless criticism of themselves; of their policies in domestic or international affairs…Week in and week out these are presented to the Negro people in their own press. It is a fighting press.”

The scholarship which specifically surrounds the African-American press has not yet thoroughly examined the early Cold War period. In Charles A. Simmons’ history of the African-American press, the author does note in his preface that the Cold War era of the African-American press was one of the eight major eras into which the history of the African-American press can be broken up. However, as one reads through Simmons’ book it is surprising to see that chapter 6 is titled “World War II, 1939-1945,” and chapter 7 is titled “The Civil Rights Movement, 1960-1965.” Not a word is to be found about the Cold War period.

The political and social realities of American life in the aftermath of World War II presented both a significant challenge and a precious opportunity to the African-American press. On the one hand, the United States, as an emerging economic and military power, was keen to extend its influence across the globe and to limit the power and prestige of its newfound arch nemesis, the Soviet Union. Thanks in large part to widespread Soviet agitation on American racial troubles, the U.S. government could be compelled to take action to remedy these problems in order to avoid losing credibility in the Third World. On the other hand, this often led to superficial or minimal government action. Along with this came the problem of American anticommunism. Any criticism of the United States which was too forceful could leave the African-American press open to
being condemned as sympathizing with communism. Could the African-American press maintain its tradition of being “a fighting press” and still avoid being labeled un-American? Could they strike a proper balance between impassioned political confrontation and necessary acquiescence to the federal government? For many years the African-American press had sole possession of one of the single most important news stories of the 20th century: the Civil Rights Movement. This was their overriding concern. However, they could not withdraw themselves from coverage of international political stories. They attempted to consistently remain true to their roots of advocacy journalism and unapologetic truth telling. This was not always a successful endeavor.

II: San Francisco and the Drawing of Cold War Battle Lines-

As the fighting in the European theater of World War II moved towards its inevitable conclusion in the spring of 1945, the flaws of the League of Nations and other prewar efforts which attempted building international cooperation and peace were apparent for all to see. One of the first major orders of business for the soon to be victorious Allies was to establish an organization which had the ability to effectively mediate international conflicts in a peaceable manner. World leaders met in San Francisco to create what would become the United Nations. As the wartime alliance between the United States and the Soviet Union deteriorated in the wake of victory in Europe, the United Nations Conference on International Organization (UNCIO) became one of the earliest battlegrounds of the nascent Cold War as each nation vied for as much power and influence as could be had. This escalation of tension between the states would
be one of the first minefields faced by the African-American press in this new era of
global politics. Prior to the conference the positive sentiments felt by many African-
Americans to the Soviet Union were on full display in the black press. Sometimes these
sentiments ventured into hyperbole and exaggeration. The perception that the Soviet
Union was committed to ending colonial subjugation led to editorials such as the one
found in the *Baltimore Afro-American* prior to the United Nations Conference on
International Organization (UNCIO) in San Francisco which proclaimed that of all the
nations involved, “Russia seems to be the only one, so far, holding out first class
citizenship to all people under its control.”6 This idealization of the Soviet Union was by
no means limited to African-Americans. In the V-E Day edition of the *Chicago Defender*
Earl Conrad, a white editorial columnist for the *Defender*, would similarly hail the Soviet
Union. Conrad wrote that just as the U.S. had supported the Soviets against the Nazis,
“…so I feel in the coming days, will it be necessary again for the forces of enlightenment
to guard against attacks, economic, political, moral, literary, even military, on the great
Russian fortress of humanity.”7 Defender editorials by Walter White and John Robert
Badger often expressed similar concerns in the months following the war. Despite this
effusive praise heaped upon the Soviet Union by many in the African-American press
community the next several years would see a sharp decline in such laudatory articles due
to growing Cold War tensions.

The UNCIO in San Francisco was of particular interest to members of the
African-American community as it seemed that the formation of such an organization
could finally fulfill the promises made by American and British leaders during the war
that the victory over fascism and militarism would bring about equality, freedom, and
self-determination for all peoples. Even before the UNCIO began a vast majority of African-Americans felt that it would be in the best interest of the community to be a part of the process. The NAACP and other African-American groups began to promote black involvement in international affairs and were uniting in order to demand, “...an end to imperialism, colonialism, and Jim Crow; voting rights; a federal antilynching law; and a renewal of the Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC).”8 African-American interest in the UNCIO would reach an entirely new level with the decision of the U.S. government to send NAACP leaders Walter White, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Mary McLeod Bethune to San Francisco as “consultant-observers” for the American delegation. African-Americans were particularly heartened by claims by White and Du Bois that they would ensure that the issues of race and colonialism would confront the delegates.9 Carol Anderson explains however, that the high hopes any African-American held out for the U.N. were damaged when the proposal of Du Bois, White and Bethune, which urged the American delegation to institute guarantees of racial, religious, and gender equality, was hardly heeded at all. Anderson writes that, “It was...no surprise that when Stettinius returned with his draft, the American delegation’s proposal on human rights was weak. One amendment ‘guaranteeing freedom from discrimination on account of race, language, religion, or sex’ was completely negated.” Du Bois, White, and Bethune protested, but their pleas went unheard.10 Over the next several years African-Americans found the United Nations to be a far less than perfect forum for airing their grievances to the world.

In the African-American press the UNCIO became the most widely followed international news story aside from the war. W.E.B. Du Bois chronicled his experiences
and opinions of the conference in the pages of *The Chicago Defender*. *The Baltimore Afro-American* sent Irene West and Ralph Matthews, one of the paper’s senior journalists and editors, to serve as correspondents from San Francisco. *The Pittsburgh Courier* would send correspondents as well. While not all black papers went so far as the *Defender*, the *Afro-American*, and the *Courier*, most of the premier African-American newspapers of the day eagerly reported on the conference. Even though the San Francisco Conference was hardly the first taste that the African-American press had ever had of the complexities and dangers of entering the world of international politics -- they had done so during both world wars and in various conflicts ranging from Ethiopia to China -- the conference provided for even deeper coverage than many earlier international incidents had. The UNCIO provided hope for future equality and freedom, but posed questions of what to cover and in what manner to cover it. This was to be but the first in a series of delicate balancing acts faced by the black press.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the coverage by the African-American press of the San Francisco conference is the surprising invisibility of outright criticism or denunciation the Soviet Union. Where the Soviets were being trumpeted as a grave threat to American security and economic interests by some Washington policymakers (and many more political commentators outside of the government), the African-American press discussion of the Soviet Union and Soviet-American relations very rarely cast the Soviets in such a confrontational role. Different black newspapers employed different methods of dealing with the Soviet Union and, quite surprisingly, in the months following the war these methods were very rarely anti-Soviet in their tone. The varying ways in which the African-American press presented the Soviet Union and its
interactions with the United States showcase the fact that black editors and journalists did not always act as the monolithic voice of the African-American community.

The first tactic used by members of the black press in regards to the issue of the Soviet Union was to present both the Soviets and the United States in a generally positive light. This was most prominently on display in the coverage of the San Francisco conference in *The Norfolk Journal & Guide*, which Gunnar Myrdal referred to as “one of the best Negro papers.” During the editorship of P. Bernard Young Jr., the *Guide*, more than virtually any other black newspaper, largely abandoned the tradition of advocacy journalism and presented general-interest stories on world events in a more objective fashion. Because of this shift the *Guide’s* stories on Soviet-American interaction at the UNCIIO tended to be more balanced than other portrayals in African-American newspapers. One article in the *Guide* in particular which presented both the United States and the Soviet Union as the only real “good guys” of the whole process claimed, “So far as the little people of the world and the United Nations Conference here are concerned it is to America and Russia of the Big Five that they must look for whatever deliverance is in store from them.” The title of the article could not make the point of American-Soviet agreement any clearer. “U.S., Soviets Back Little People,” the banner headline declared. “Other Big Powers for Colonial Exploitation.” This explicitly targeted the British, French, Belgian, and Italian nations for fierce criticism.

As a part of this strategy for handling the Soviets during their coverage, the African-American press often heaped praise on both American and Soviet officials in San Francisco. Chief among these officials were Secretary of State Edward Stettinius and Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov. Both men received a fair amount of praise
in the African-American press for their insistence that self-determination and racial
equality be crucial elements in the UNCIO debates. While Stettinius’ replacement as
Secretary of State, James Byrnes, would be lambasted by the African-American press just
a few short months later, this had more to do with Byrnes’ Jim Crow racial beliefs than it
did American foreign policy per se. Certain articles almost seem to present Stettinius and
Molotov as some sort of team fighting for the rights of the world’s suffering dark
peoples. Even in black newspapers that were not consistently amenable to the United
States and often took what can be considered a pro-Soviet point of view, such as *The
Chicago Defender*, there are several articles and cartoons that suggest support for the idea
that the United States and the Soviet Union could both fight for the cause of social
justice. In one exceptionally interesting editorial cartoon in the *Defender* the figure of
Uncle Sam, labeled “hope of oppressed whites,” is going eye-to-eye with a burly, bearded
Russian character labeled “hope of oppressed minorities.” The cartoon was entitled “Why
Not Unity Instead?”14 While this is not exactly a glowing endorsement of the ability of
the United States to act on behalf of minorities, it does serve to show that the conception
of the United States and the Soviet Union as allies in the fight against political oppression
was a rather common theme in the African-American newspapers of the period. Although
the cartoon leaves the particular identity of the “oppressed whites” vague, they could very
well represent Eastern European peoples under the occupation of the Soviet Union. This
would drive home the notion of the U.S. and the Soviet Union occupying an equal moral
Another key element of this cartoon is the fact that it is one of the few references made in the African-American press during the early days of the Cold War to the adversarial nature of the relationship between the U.S. and the Soviet Union which did not place the blame for the tensions on the United States. Papers like *The Norfolk Journal & Guide*, which attempted to find common ground between the two nations almost never made much of the discord of U.S.-Soviet relations. In contrast, editorials in papers like the *Defender*, most often those of John Robert Badger, placed the blame on the U.S., even going so far as to claim, “…U.S. imperialism, intoxicated by its cheap and easy victory in a war in which the manpower of other countries did most of the fighting and dying…is dreaming that what Alexander, Caesar, Genghis Khan, Napoleon and Hitler failed to do, it can succeed in doing.”  

Despite such opinions it is still clear to see that
the “fighting press” was not always unwilling to abandon fighting spirit when it came to the Cold War.

The second way in which the relationship between the Soviet Union and the United States was presented in the African-American press does more to confirm the black press’ reputation as “a fighting press.” This second tactic, favored by the most powerful black newspaper in the country, *The Chicago Defender*, was to take an attacking stance towards the U.S. government and a defensive and positive one towards the Soviets. From the end of World War II to 1948, the editorial pages of African-American newspapers were quite often filled with denunciations of American foreign policy. Alternatively, editors and journalists sung the praises of the Soviet Union with passion. This is evident in the way many papers discussed the diplomatic debates between the Americans and the Soviets. While it was not uncommon for a paper such as *The Norfolk Journal & Guide* to portray U.S. and Soviet leaders as morally equivalent, it was even easier to find cases of black newspapers flattering the Soviets. As stated above, papers like the *Guide* liked to stress the potential unity and common ground shared by Stettinius and Molotov. Editors and writers of a decidedly pro-Soviet nature would frequently choose to praise Molotov alone. On the front page of the *Defender*, W.E.B. Du Bois commended the Soviet Foreign Minister for, “…the splendid, frank, straightforward statement [he] made to the world…” Du Bois called Molotov’s remarks, “The greatest thing that has happened at San Francisco.” Other prominent African-American leaders would do the same in the pages of other black papers. In *The New York Age* Dr. Max Yergan, director of the Council on African Affairs, claimed that Molotov’s ideas would serve as the solution to the issues of colonialism that were of interest to African-
Americans. While Yergan also praised the State Department he did so almost as an
afterthought.\textsuperscript{17}

Even \textit{The Norfolk Journal & Guide}, known for its evenhanded approach to U.S.-Soviet relations, was not above taking the U.S. officials to task. African-American newspapers took special delight in reporting a comment made by Molotov to new Secretary of State James Byrnes at the London Conference of Foreign Ministers that suggested that the U.S. should impose democracy in Byrnes’ home state of South Carolina before insisting on free elections in Bulgaria. The \textit{Journal & Guide} had even sent a cablegram to none other than Josef Stalin himself suggesting that the Soviets ought to make such a demand of the United States.\textsuperscript{18} While a similar, and very respectful, cablegram was also sent to President Truman and Secretary Byrnes, this shows that the African-American press would not automatically play nice with the U.S. government to get its cooperation on domestic racial issues.

A particularly popular target of African-American criticism were the colonial regimes which European powers forced upon African and Asian peoples. Every single black paper, which devoted any time at all to international news, was keenly aware of the promises of self-determination, which had been made by the Allies. In fact, it can be said that the overriding concern of the African-American press in covering the UNCIO and its various diplomatic wrangling was to discredit the colonial powers and their practices. The single story which received the most publicity in the African-American press in association with the UNCIO was a statement, written by Du Bois, which officially called for the American delegation to ask for recognition of racial equality in the U.N. charter.\textsuperscript{19} The main thrust of the proposal was that a voice be given to peoples under colonial
subjugation. In reporting this event, and in numerous other articles, African-American newspapers continually and vehemently challenged the notion and practice of European colonialism. While the vast majority of this criticism was leveled directly against Great Britain, France, Italy, and other European colonial powers, the United States was also strongly urged to apply pressure on the Europeans to abandon colonialism.

In some instances the U.S. was attacked for not doing enough in this regard. Once again showing that the African-American press was far from monolithic in its coverage or tone, criticism of American foreign policy on the issue of colonialism ran the gamut from John Robert Badger’s accusations that the U.S. was actively and violently suppressing anti-colonialist movements in Korea, Indonesia, Malaya, and the Philippines\textsuperscript{20} to Max Yergan’s patriotic plea that, “…all liberty loving Americans demand that our country be in the vanguard of the fight for colonial liberation. Our own security and world peace are involved.”\textsuperscript{21} It is downright surprising to see just how vehement some attacks on the United States could get. For a few years following the Second World War the black press did not hold back. One telling example is a 1946 editorial cartoon from \textit{The Chicago Defender} which shows James Byrnes (a popular target of the African-American press due to his Jim Crow racial beliefs) in full Nazi uniform goose-stepping on a prostrate black figure. In the background figures labeled “minorities” and “darker races” are shown being hugged by an almost Santa Claus-like
As we shall see, such criticism would not survive very far into the Cold War. While the anti-colonial passion of the African-American press certainly did not dissipate, the further one gets from the end of World War II, the more tame black newspapers tended to become in their opposition to U.S. policy. As Penny M. Von Eschen has shown in her research on African-American anti-colonialism, criticism of the U.S. and its Cold War European allies was eventually pushed out of African-American newspapers as it became unacceptable to align oneself with the Soviets. Attacks on Western colonial powers came to be seen in such a manner and led to a suppression of leftist African-American journalists and editors in the late 1940’s.

One other strategy employed by some African-American newspapers when it came to the United States and the Soviet Union that deserves brief mention was that used
by *The New York Amsterdam News*. While the *Defender, Journal & Guide, New York Age*, and *Baltimore Afro-American* were all covering the UNCIO and American-Soviet interaction, *The New York Amsterdam News* chose to almost completely ignore such stories. After the end of World War II the paper’s coverage immediately turned to local events. No major articles appeared on the U.N. and the Soviet Union received almost no mention in any capacity, friendly or otherwise. The human rights debate caused by Du Bois’ statement to the American delegation at the UNCIO received a single three-paragraph story, below stories on local petty crime.24 Despite being one of the largest African-American papers in New York City, the *Amsterdam News*’ biggest stories in the aftermath of the war were anti-black violence and the signing of Jackie Robinson by the Brooklyn Dodgers to a minor league contract. While this was certainly not the norm for the African-American press, it shows that the commonly held belief that black newspapers were domestically focused is, to a certain degree, accurate.

Another issue that a thorough study of the African-American press of the day helps to illuminate is the overall opinion of the African-American community about the United Nations. Anderson has characterized the response of the potential of the United Nations to serve the cause of justice and racial equality as one that began in hope and ended in disillusionment. By 1947 it was readily apparent that the hope that many African-Americans had placed in the United Nations was ill founded. The U.N. was thus the first in a series of disappointments wherein the Cold War took precedence over the struggle for civil rights. “…[I]n the span of three short years, the hope of the U.N. as a powerful weapon for systemic change had dissolved into the reality of the United Nations as little more than a pawn in the Cold War.”25
This viewpoint is born out in the pages of African-American newspapers. At the outset of the UNCIO there seemed to be an incredible feeling of optimism that pervaded black journalists’ writings on San Francisco. In an especially effervescent editorial on the subject Ruth Taylor, an editorial columnist for The New York Age, wrote that, “The San Francisco Conference is the direct and immediate concern of every one of us. It is at this Conference that the Charter of the United Nations will be drawn up- the Charter that is the working plan for the brave new world in which there will be peace and fair play for all men…Isn’t it the duty of all of us to support this effort to the full.”

Responses to the question posed by The Norfolk Journal & Guide as to whether or not the UNCIO would achieve its goals were overwhelmingly positive. It is clear that many African-Americans felt that the United Nations would provide them with an institutional framework to correct the racial problems plaguing America and the colonial world. However, despite the positive feeling which abounded in the African-American press when it came to the UNCIO, we can still see that the entire process was surrounded by uncertainty and even ambivalence in some cases. The hope was certainly there, but was not as pure as Anderson suggests in her article. On the very same day that Taylor’s editorial on the UNCIO appeared in The New York Age, an editorial cartoon ran in The Baltimore Afro-American which is downright cynical in its treatment of the Conference. Entitled, “Impressions of San Francisco,” the cartoon was drawn by Ralph Matthews, the Afro-American’s chief correspondent covering the event. It depicted the delegates slicing up a pie labeled, “Freedom For Everybody (White)” and building a house out of the same
old materials of “Colonialism,” Imperialism,” Hate,” and “Greed.”

Not only were members of the African-American press concerned about the ability of the United Nations to fulfill its promises, but many also doubted whether or not the United States even had the ability to act as a world leader at all. In yet another of Jay Jackson’s Chicago Defender editorial cartoons this point was made explicit. The cartoon, titled, “Blind Leading the Blind” depicts a figure with a swastika and bloody hands wearing dark glasses labeled “Race Hate” being led along by a rather disheveled and unkempt American figure that is wearing the same dark glasses.

As was often the case when the African-American press presented material critical of the United States government,
this cartoon does not present the American figure as a specific U.S. policymaker. This could very easily have changed, however, as the cartoon was published in June 1945, one month prior to James Byrnes’ appointment as Secretary of State. Had the Southern diplomat been in place the depiction could have been different. In a more general sense however, the cartoon does express a deep cynicism regarding the ability of the United States to reform Germany in any meaningful way without first addressing domestic racial concerns. The necessary implication of this cynicism is the belief that without significant change in American racial attitudes the entire idea of the United States exerting a positive influence in the world is suspect. Some in the African-American press were just as skeptical of the ability of the United Nations itself to achieve racial justice as they were of the United States. On December 6, 1947 the lead story of the Pittsburgh Courier was a denunciation of the U.N.’s racial attitudes titled, “Hypocrisy at Lake Success: Record of UN on Racial Discrimination Shocking.” In this article James Edmund Boyack went so far as to say that, when it came to racial questions, a conflict existed between the Western powers and the U.S.S.R., which Boyack referred to as “the representatives of the world’s colored peoples.”30 While we can see that a great deal of positive energy was directed towards the San Francisco Conference by black journalists and editors, there was more than a small amount of doubt and apprehension regarding the prospects of postwar internationalism. This move from optimism to disillusionment was even more rapid than Anderson suggests.

However, if we go beyond the timeframe that Anderson uses in her article we see a shift that took place in a sizeable segment of the African-American press concerning the United Nations. As the African-American press toned down or completely ended its
criticisms of the United States and its Cold War allies, a similar turn around occurred with regards to the United Nations. By 1949 the African-American press opinion of the United Nations seems to have gone from disillusionment to renewed trust and optimism. Suddenly, articles on colonialism and European imperialism tended to determine that the U.N. was in fact a partial and adequate arbiter of these matters. This is most prominently displayed by articles in which African-American journalists seem confident that the United Nations would not give in to demands of Italy that it maintain control of its former African colonies.\textsuperscript{31} The feelings of a large segment of the African-American press community were often most forcefully represented through the use of editorial cartoons. This is seen once again in a \textit{New York Age} cartoon taken from the National Labor Service in honor of the fourth anniversary of the United Nations. “Happy Birthday, Champ!” shows the U.N. as a tiny boxer who has successfully knocked out war, religious bigotry, anti-unionism, and genocide.
A somewhat similar cartoon by R.S. Pious appeared one year earlier in The Philadelphia Tribune, entitled, “An Appeal To The World For His Rights.” This cartoon celebrated W.E.B. Du Bois’ letter to the U.N. that asked for an international inquiry into the treatment of African-Americans. It shows a black hand labeled “NAACP Delegation” placing “The United States Negro Case” on the U.N. while the Statue of Liberty covers her face in shame. Implicit in this image is a faith in the United Nations to properly address the grievances of African-Americans. The reputation of the U.N. seems to have made quite a remarkable recovery among the African-American community in but a few short years. This turn around in the tenor of black coverage of the U.N. also illustrates that the African-American press did not come near presenting the thoughts and feelings of the entire spectrum of the African-American community. For many, their public disillusionment with the United Nations was not subsumed or moderated by a need to follow the official American Cold War line. Black nationalists, like the Universal African
National Movement (UANM), incensed when the United Nations did not respond to the issue of Italian colonies as African-Americans had hoped they would, took to protesting with signs proclaiming “The UN is dead,” and “Damn the UN!”

III: Communism and Anticommunism

In spite of the radicalization of some segments of the African-American community it appears that this sudden reappraisal of the United Nations was part of a fundamental shift in African-American press coverage of the Cold War. We have seen that when it came to the United States and the Soviet Union, the African-American press did not shy away from living up to its reputation for impassioned criticism of white America. As the Cold War progressed and the antipathy between the U.S. and the Soviets was further solidified, it became politically and culturally imprudent for the black press to remain such a “fighting press.” Anticommunist pressures began to force ardent leftists like John Robert Badger and W.E.B. Du Bois out of black newspapers in favor of conservative Cold Warriors such as journalist George Schuyler and Negro Labor Committee chairman Frank Crosswaithe. The move towards the right was so pronounced that in 1955 The Chicago Defender, which had been amongst the most outspoken critics of the U.S. government on both domestic racial issues and foreign policy, gave its most prestigious honor, the Abbott Award, to President Eisenhower who, though a rhetorical supporter of civil rights, did not have the proactive urge to force the issue as the Defender would likely have supported just ten years earlier. Even when Eisenhower would commit American soldiers to solving the Little Rock school
integration crisis of 1957 his actions were less concerned with civil rights than they were with preserving the power of federal courts and the image of the U.S. in the world. Significant damage was done to both the influence and confrontational spirit of the African-American press by the escalation of domestic Cold War hysteria. We can see this in the story selection of many black papers. While Brenda Gayle Plummer correctly shows that the majority of the African-American press responded negatively to the Korean War, believing it to be unnecessary and fueled by racism,\textsuperscript{36} this seems to be one of the final proud moments of the “fighting press” during the early Cold War period. The African-American press seems to have almost completely retreated from the world of international power politics. Several landmark events in the diplomatic history of the Cold War went almost entirely unnoticed by black journalists. These include the Soviet development of nuclear and thermonuclear weapons, even though nuclear proliferation was mentioned at various times, specific mention of their importance to Soviet-American relations did not receive any real fanfare, the establishment of NATO in 1949, and the signing of the Warsaw Pact in 1955. The main focus of the international news which did appear in black newspapers tended to deal with colonialism and conditions in Africa. The treatment of these subjects was quite demure compared with the vehemence of the attacks on European colonialism that followed World War II. One important and telling change in the way in which anti-colonialism was presented by the African-American press was that the Soviet Union was no longer held up as the paragon of colonial rights as it had been after the war. European colonialism was still harshly condemned, but Cold War realities, such as the American desire to economically rehabilitate Western Europe and the Truman administration’s growing aversion to criticisms of American foreign policy\textsuperscript{37}
and a newfound understanding, starting in 1947 and 1948, that the Soviet Union was not quite the racial paradise some had thought it to be led to a less sympathetic view of the Soviets in the black press. Mark Gallicchio notes that the Soviet Union’s flaws as a force for anti-colonialism and racial equality came out very soon after the war when it was revealed that at the Yalta Conference Stalin had won concessions in Manchuria that became a part of the Soviet empire.

Perhaps the area where the change in attitude among the African-American press was most prominently displayed was in the treatment of communists, particularly African-American communists. Even when the African-American press was at its most confrontational towards the U.S. government the acceptance of communism as a viable political ideology never gained much traction in the African-American press. At the very onset of the Cold War most black newspapers tended to treat communists in the same manner that *The Norfolk Journal & Guide* treated the Soviet Union: with a very objective and reportorial style. This can be seen in two letters-to-the-editor printed in *The New York Age* in consecutive weeks in June 1945. In the first editorial Frank Crosswaithe, a prominent black conservative labor leader, defended President Truman from criticism and claimed, “…Negroes should learn that Negro Communists as well as white Communists are not acting in the interest of Negroes or of other American workers, but solely in the interest of Russia’s foreign policy.” Such claims would sound at home coming from the mouths of the most ardent anticommunists of the later 1940’s and 50’s. The following week another letter-to-the-editor was printed attacking Crosswaithe. The editorials writer called what Crosswaithe and other conservatives peddled “poison,” defended the patriotism of American Communists, and called American foreign policy “a
‘Weak-minded, two-timing, double-dealing, sloppy, sad sack.’ That The New York Age printed both these letters shows that the African-American press was by no means blindly obedient to either the U.S. or the Soviets in the emerging Cold War. Rather, they often avoided fixing themselves into a position of antagonism or friendliness towards the government.

As was the case with the black press’ treatment of the Soviet Union and the United Nations this did not remain true for very long. In the years following the end of the war, the conservative anticommunist position of Frank Crosswaithe and George Schuyler became the norm in the African-American press. It became common for Communists and white supremacists to be equated. This worked in two ways: while white supremacists were portrayed as playing into the hands of the Soviet Union by giving it ammunition for anti-American propaganda, Communists were depicted as fighting against the best interests of the United States and African-Americans. These interests were also quite often depicted as being one and the same. In this way Communism became linked with anti-black bigotry and violence. This was a similar movement to the “Double V” campaign of the Second World War. Just as victory over fascism and domestic racism were linked during the war, so too were Communism and white supremacy. A 1949 editorial cartoon in The New York Age drove this point home by showing Uncle Sam sweeping away tiny figures holding signs labeled “KKK” and
“Communist Agents.” The caption read, “Sweep clean uncle, they’re all common enemies!”

The African-American press made a concerted effort to distance itself from well-known African-Americans who publicly took pro-Soviet stands. The most prominent example of this is the case of Paul Robeson. Robeson was one of the most famous and respected actors and singers of the 20’s and 30’s. After the Second World War, Robeson’s efforts against lynching, and his belief that, “the new wave of brutality and violence directed especially against returning black soldiers underscored the relationship between antiblack violence in Jim Crow America and the violence of colonialism,” had been commended by the black press. Robeson received such commendation despite the fact that some anticommmunist black leaders like Walter White saw Robeson as extreme. Robeson remained an outspoken critic of American foreign and domestic policy and, unlike the African-American press, never lost his fighting spirit. This eventually led to his being blacklisted. Along with other vocal left-leaning African-Americans such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Civil Rights Congress head William Patterson, and singer Josephine
Baker, Robeson found himself silenced and had his travel abroad curtailed by the State Department.43 While this is not entirely surprising as the U.S. government wanted to keep critics of American race relations away from curious foreign audiences, the African-American press was particularly vehement in distancing itself and the African-American community from Robeson’s activities. After Robeson’s 1949 speech to the World Congress of the Partisans of Peace in which he claimed that African-Americans would refuse to fight for the United States against the Soviet Union, papers like The Chicago Defender and The New York Age had articles describing the harsh condemnations he received from other African-Americans. Walter White, Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and a friend of Robeson’s, Jay Clifford, called the activist-singer’s claims “dishonest, shameful, and irresponsible,”44 and made it clear that, “…he has not voiced the opinion of the overwhelming majority of colored citizens.”45 It is not difficult to imagine that several years earlier the reaction to Robeson’s comments might not have been so one-sided. However, even though press coverage of Robeson’s controversial statements was largely negative, the importance of civil rights progress made sure that he did receive at least some positive exposure. Just months after these remarks earned him scorn, Robeson was nearly lynched at a concert by a white mob in Peekskill, New York. The New York Age serialized Robeson’s story sympathetically. This shows that even while black supporters of the Soviet Union provided a challenge to black newspapers trying to encourage civil rights reform, they were not dismissed wholesale.
Chapter 1 The American Government and Race Relations, 1946-1950

While the African-American press spent the majority of its time and energy covering local stories of interest to the African-American community in the 40’s and 50’s, the primary concern of the American government was maintaining and solidifying its status as a global superpower. The most significant domestic concerns of the United States in the early Cold War period -- economic productivity, technological advancement, and racial strife -- were all subordinate to the broader international issues facing the nation’s leaders. The Cold War came to envelop nearly all of American life. Economic productivity, rather than simply acting as a gauge of the standard of living of U.S. citizens, became an indicator of American capitalism’s superiority over Soviet communism. Technological advancement was as much about giving the U.S. an advantage over the Russians as it was helping mankind. Even the nascent struggle for African-American civil rights became a piece of the Cold War puzzle. American policymakers in the late 40’s and early 50’s began to see American race relations as a crucial part of their decision-making calculations. For the most part segregationism and racial violence were seen as stumbling blocks to the projection of American power abroad. Every lynching gave the Soviet Union more ammunition with which it could damage American credibility and prestige. According to Penny M. Von Eschen, “…[T]he Truman administration saw racial discrimination in America as its Achilles heel in a propaganda battle with the Soviet Union for the allegiance of Africa and Asia.” 46 No less a Cold Warrior than George F. Kennan would express such a concern for America’s reputation in the Third World. The propaganda battle that accompanied the early Cold
War became inseparable from the racial situation in the United States. The African-American press as well found itself in a complex situation due to the concerns of the American government. Black journalists were aware that the desire of American policymakers to appeal to Third World populations left them amenable to civil rights reform. However, they were also aware of the fact that political concerns could also be used as an excuse to ignore the plight of African-Americans. Mary Dudziak explains that as Americans began to look inward after the war they wondered whether the desire for normalcy would mean a return to “racial norms of segregation, disenfranchisement, and subordination.” She concludes that, “Paradoxically, international pressures would soon simultaneously constrain and enhance civil rights reform.” The black press would cope with this paradox by alternating between support for the U.S. government and criticism of many of the racial policies it tolerated.

In order to combat any negative portrayals of the American race relations, the U.S. waged a comprehensive propaganda campaign that was aimed at both foreign and domestic audiences. Early Cold War propaganda went far beyond Radio Free Europe and Voice of America broadcasting pro-democratic messages behind the Iron Curtain. The United States Information Agency (USIA) found international audiences in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean receptive to stories on American racial conditions. However, American propaganda was not simply intended to forge a positive racial standing amongst the citizens of impressionable Third World nations. Crucial to American propaganda efforts was the attempt to convince African-Americans that the United States was making progress on civil rights and that full equality would not remain a dream much longer. The African-American press was keenly aware of the fact that
many non-Americans were interested in the conditions of African-Americans. The attention paid to this audience in the black press would remain constant throughout the early Cold War period. As the Second World War wound down stories of the relationship between black soldiers and the foreign people with whom they came into contact abounded. In 1947 the *Norfolk Journal & Guide* reported on the interest which stories about the conditions of African-Americans generated in India.49 In 1949 Walter White would write about his own international travels and the way curious audiences across the Third World were regarding American race questions.50 This international perspective was presented both positively, as when dark-skinned peoples inquired as to the prospects of racial justice in the U.S., and negatively as in a *Chicago Defender* cartoon from 1955 which depicted Uncle Sam refereeing a boxing match between a black boxer and a white figure labeled “South,” while “world opinion” looked on and said, “There’s Another Low Blow, Ref!,’’ as the Southern character continually
In the years following the Second World War, President Truman’s administration did take several very real steps forward on the issue of African-American civil rights. In 1946 Truman issued an executive order establishing the President’s Committee on Civil Rights. The committee was charged with investigating the condition of civil rights in the United States and recommending the proper course of action the government should take in order to remedy whatever problems they found. The following year the committee issued its groundbreaking report to the president, *To Secure These Rights*. The report declared that one of the major reasons that racial discrimination had to be fought by the federal government was that it hurt the ability of the United States to achieve its foreign relations goals. The committee claimed, “Our foreign policy is designed to make the United States an enormous, positive influence for peace and progress throughout the world…But our domestic civil rights shortcomings are a serious obstacle.” The report
would go on to warn policy makers that the nation’s enemies were glad to point to racial
discrimination as proof that American democracy was a sham.52 The committee’s
message would have an almost immediate impact on the President’s actions on civil
rights. Within a year Truman issued two more executive orders, on the committee’s
recommendation, desegregating both the United States’ Armed Forces and the federal
bureaucracy. While the committee also pointed out the moral and economic benefits of
ending discrimination, we can see that their appeal to international concerns struck a
chord in policy makers like Truman and his third Secretary of State Dean Acheson, who
would acknowledge that the condition of civil rights damaged the ability of the State
Department to sway world opinion in America’s favor. Truman’s actions show that in the
early Cold War period the United States government was engaged in, as Mary Dudziak
has put it, “Fighting the Cold War with civil rights reform.”53

The response of the African-American press to American civil rights reform
underscores the way in which black journalists became less confrontational in their
dealings with the federal government as the Cold War progressed. As would be expected,
the African-American press almost unanimously praised To Secure These Rights as a
major step forward for the cause of freedom and equality in the United States. In fact,
some coverage of the committee’s report very nearly ventures into the realm of
hagiography. In an editorial column in The Pittsburgh Courier, P.L. Prattis, a rather
conservative black journalist, claimed, “Yesterday, Negroes might have had some doubts
as to how honest white people could be in facing the problem…Today and tomorrow, no
such doubt exists. The President’s Committee has dissipated it. Negroes know now that
there are whites…who are willing to go ALL THE WAY.” Prattis even suggested that the
mostly white Committee did a better job than even a group of African-Americans might have done.\textsuperscript{54} While \textit{The Courier} was something of a conservative black paper under Prattis’ editorship, it is important to note that he did have a history of challenging the U.S. government. During World War II Prattis had faced charges of sedition for his criticisms of the Army’s treatment of African-American soldiers.\textsuperscript{55} While he did temper his editorial on \textit{To Secure These Rights} with a call for further action on the part of African-Americans, it seems that by 1947 Prattis had become possessed of a somewhat more supportive disposition towards the government than he had held during the war.

This sentiment was not only expressed by a more conservative black paper like \textit{The Courier}. The traditionally more confrontational and independent minded \textit{Chicago Defender} saw glowing praises flow from its editorial pages as well. Columnist Willard Townsend described the committee’s report as, “a breath of fresh air” and claimed that, “Not since the days of the Constitutional Convention of 1789 and the…Bill of Rights has our government uttered an official word that has more meaning, hope, and democratic essence than this stout and eloquent statement.”\textsuperscript{56} Both papers would go on to devote large amounts of coverage to the report. They provided readers with the details of the report’s recommendations. In his editorial on \textit{To Secure These Rights} Prattis had suggested that the report should be required reading for all African-Americans. He showed how much he meant this by serializing the entire report over the course of November and December of 1947.\textsuperscript{57} The positive nature of the coverage of the committee’s report in African-American press can partially be considered an example of a more general shift away from direct criticism of the American government and towards a more amenable relationship. This can be seen in the way international politics was
covered in the black press. As we saw earlier John Robert Badger was one of the most ardent and outspoken critics of American foreign policy. Badger served as the international correspondent for *The Chicago Defender* until 1947. Badger’s replacement was an ardently liberal former communist Trinidadian activist named George Padmore. At first glance this does not seem to be a sign that *The Defender* was toning down its fighting spirit. Padmore had been a part of the radical Council on African Affairs (CAA) and would later serve as an aide to socialist Ghanaian leader Kwame Nkrumah. However, Padmore was far less vitriolic than Badger had been and had fallen out of favor with the communist element of the CAA by 1947. Padmore’s tone in reporting on international issues was less aggressive than his predecessor’s. This was a significant move as it meant one of the fieriest voices in the African-American press community had been displaced because of rising Cold War tensions. This trend would continue as it did not take long for even less acerbic liberal voices to be pushed out of the picture. According to Von Eschen there was a “collapse of a transnational black press.” Von Eschen writes that one of the outcomes of President Truman’s Cold War policies was that, “The tradition of criticism of American foreign policy [which had been a staple of the black press] was devastated; writers such as John Robert Badger, Kumar Goshal, and George Padmore quickly disappeared from the bylines and were often blacklisted.” It is impossible to assign the blame for this turn of events on entirely on either intimidation or self-censorship. It was a combination of the two acting in tandem. The U.S. government after 1948 was quite unwilling to tolerate any significant criticism of its foreign policy and the black press largely chose not to challenge it.
However, the African-American press was not in lockstep when it came to *To Secure These Rights*. The summary of positions taken by various different black newspapers help to show us that the tactics used to respond to Cold War international stories carried over into domestic racial stories as well. The level of enthusiasm of the praise directed towards the committee’s proposal was not the same in all African-American newspapers. *The New York Amsterdam News* was somewhat more restrained in its analysis of the report, calling it simply, “a step in the right direction.”

The more common approach to the report was to be unreservedly effusive. This belief is best exemplified by the editor of *The Baltimore Afro-American*, which compared *To Secure These Rights* with the Magna Carta and triumphantly proclaimed that it, “Easily stands out as one of the most significant documents of all time.” Even those who praised the document in glowing terms did not always express their feelings without reservations.

While Dr. Benjamin Mays’ editorial on the report was simply titled “Great Document,” he did not hesitate to mention that his hopes for the committee’s proposals to lead to concrete civil rights reform were not entirely realistic. Mays mournfully stated that, “…I do not expect immediate Congressional action on many of these recommendations…I expect Southern Senators and Congressmen to oppose most of these measures and I do not expect East and West to go against the South where the Negro is concerned.”

While this less than cheery appraisal of the report’s prospects was fundamentally directed at white Southern Democrats in Congress rather than Truman’s executive branch, we can see that editorialists such as Mays did not shy away from being brutally honest about racial attitudes in Washington; even in the wake of a major victory for civil rights activists. In fact, the African-American press response to the relationship between the
Dixiecrat wing of the Democratic Party and President Truman varied. In a 1949 editorial in the *Chicago Defender*, George Padmore claimed that Dixiecrat representatives in the Senate had used filibustering tactics to “sabotage President Truman’s civil rights programme.”63 This indicated that Padmore saw Truman and the Dixiecrats as representing two completely different sets of values. However, a *New York Age* political cartoon, which appeared two weeks prior to Padmore’s editorial, depicts President Truman smiling and pointing to a gravestone marked “‘Civil Rights’ Shot by Dixiecratic Filibustering” and saying “He was shot while I wasn’t looking. The cartoon carried the accusatory title of “You promised To Protect Him.”64

This cartoon implies that at least some members of the African-American press considered the sincerity of Truman’s devotion to civil rights to be suspect. Surprisingly, *The New York Age* did not even mention the report at all after its initial release. Still, the array of ways
in which the committee’s report was covered should not distract from the fact that the black press can accurately be said to have greeted it with a sense of victory.

The exuberant response of most of the African-American press to the release of the committee’s report seems predictable. The report was a monumental step forward in the history of African-American civil rights and hardly a case where one would expect to find widespread evidence of the African-American press’ reputation as a “fighting press.” However, we can see a sharp contrast between the handling of the release of *To Secure These Rights* in the African-American press and the handling of the announcement of the creation of the President’s Committee on Civil Rights a year earlier. While the reaction amongst most of the black press community to the committee’s report was nothing short of rapturous, the initial response to the forming of the committee was quite tepid. A useful example is that of the comparatively conservative *Pittsburgh Courier*. When the committee was first formed by President Truman’s executive order *The Courier* was decidedly less emphatic in the prospect of the government achieving racial progress. The paper ran one story on the creation of the committee and did not take any interest in the subject, positively or negatively, in its editorial columns. In fact, editorial opinions that were antagonistic towards the U.S. government were far more common in African-American newspapers in 1945 and 1946. Just one week after President Truman announced the President’s Committee on Civil Rights, an editorial appeared in *The Courier* on December 21, 1946 which equated Soviet press censorship and American press censorship. The editorial claimed that while many Americans criticized the Soviet Union for its state control of the press, “…I think the boys are dealing in double talk, or are, perhaps, just confused, when they complicate matters by assuming that we have
[freedom of the press] here in America.” 65 While the columnist was not directly attacking the U.S. government -- the editorial’s barbs are aimed at the “White American Press” -- this is still indicative that at least a segment of the African-American press retained a sense of confrontation and criticism towards those who sought to silence black dissent and activism.

To Secure These Rights and other civil rights reforms taken by the United States government in the early Cold War period were seen by the African-American press in terms of their domestic importance. Whatever international significance the President’s Committee on Civil Rights claimed the report had, it was primarily a document which made recommendations for improving the racial situation inside the borders of the United States. However, as we have seen, one of the fundamental purposes of the report was to relieve foreign criticism of the U.S. and to prove that the nation could be considered a viable world leader for third world nations. In the African-American press’ handling of To Secure These Rights in its capacity as a document relevant to international politics we can see how a fighting spirit was going into remission as the Cold War progressed. For the most part the African-American press community accepted the U.S. government’s assertion that the committee’s report helped to dispel criticism of the United States. In the wake of the committee’s report, President Truman publicly asked Congress to pass the nation’s first comprehensive piece of civil rights legislation which would put the committee’s recommendations into action. This outraged Southern Democrats who ripped the Democratic Party apart and nearly cost Truman his reelection. The African-American press saw these steps forward in something of an international context. This can be seen in a Jay Jackson editorial cartoon which appeared in The Chicago Defender
in the wake of Truman’s recommendation to Congress. The cartoon simply shows
President Truman’s hand laying a stack of papers labeled “Truman’s Civil Rights Bill for
ALL” on the desk of Congress. The title of the cartoon was “To Place Democracy Above
Suspicion.”

This cartoon, particularly its title, shows that members of the African-American press
conceived of civil rights reforms such as *To Secure These Rights*, as being about more
than just achieving legal equality for African-Americans domestically. Clearly the report
and the reforms that would hopefully follow were seen as a defense of the fundamental
fairness of American democracy. The presentation of the cartoon seems to assert that as a
defense of the United States these civil rights reforms are emphatic and convincing.

Despite the general move of the African-American press away from an
antagonistic relationship with the United States government, there remained one issue in
the international sphere that saw the black press take a critical view of American foreign
policy. While the committee’s report was hailed in the impact it would have on domestic
race relations, it was seen as inadequate as part of a broader struggle against colonial
subjugation which was being fought across Africa, Asia, and Latin America.
Denunciations of European colonial regimes, and American support of such powers, were one of the most common aspects of the international coverage of the African-American press. This sort of sentiment worked its way into coverage of To Secure These Rights as well. Once again a political cartoon provides insight into the feelings of black journalists. An R.S. Pious cartoon that ran in The Philadelphia Tribune showed two globes, one labeled “Majority Free World” and the second, in chains, labeled “Minorities Slave World.” The “Slave World” is covered with a large black “X” labeled “President Truman’s Committee on Civil Rights.”

This could have been meant to imply that the Presidential Committee’s report was an effective tool for helping to eliminate racial discrimination in the “free world” but was not able or intended to do the same in the “slave world.” This strategy came to typify the “fighting spirit” of the black press in the early Cold War period. By focusing their critical energy on conditions in Africa and Asia they maintained at least a part of their traditional
preaching editorial style with the acquiescence necessary to fight for civil rights reform in Cold War circumstances. This cartoon also shows that the African-American press was willing and able to adopt American government propaganda for its own benefit. The free world vs. slave world dichotomy recalled American World War II era propaganda which divided the world into the Allied free world and the Axis dominated slave world. This theme was most clearly be articulated in Prelude to War, the Academy Award winning propaganda film directed by Frank Capra for the U.S. government.

Chapter 2 With Friends Like These: Soviet Propaganda and American Race Relations-

The concerns of the American government in the early Cold War period that domestic racial discrimination might be used as a propaganda tool by the Soviet Union were well founded. The Soviet government almost never missed a chance to use racism in the United States as a bludgeon in their fight against capitalism. Soviet newspapers such as Trud, Pravda, and the satirical magazine Krokodil trumpeted stories of the anti-black violence which they claimed were representative of the fundamental characteristics of American life. By 1949 this tendency had become so pronounced that the American government began to take notice. The U.S. embassy in Moscow reported back to Washington that, “The Soviet press hammers away unceasingly on such things as ‘lynch laws,’ segregation, racial discrimination, deprivation of political rights, etc., seeking to build up a picture of an America in which the Negroes are brutally downtrodden with no hope of improving their status under the existing form of government.”68 American
racism was one of the most commonly referenced aspects of life in the United States. Soviet propaganda tended to call America out for its failures as a democracy but also explicitly connected capitalism to racism, as in a 1930 Soviet cartoon which depicted a lynched African-American figure hanging from the Statue of Liberty while a large white figure identified as “Capitalism” laughs on in the foreground.69

In a global economic and social struggle that would see African and Asian peoples become important political actors, the Soviet Union realized that accusations of racial discrimination implicit in American capitalism would be valuable. This was a
determination that the Soviet Union had made long before the Cold War as such propaganda had been extensive in the 1920’s and 1930’s. Soviet propaganda on American race relations was often colorful, bombastic, and passionate. In particular *Krokodil* was well known for its illustrations and political cartoons that hammered away at the U.S. In one such cartoon called “Honor of Whites Restored,” from 1947, a dialogue between two African-Americans is recorded. “For what did they hang [lynch] your brother?” asks one African-American. “For slander,” responds the other. “He claimed that in our State blacks are discriminated against.”70

The Soviet Union’s focus on race relations in the United States was intended to convince the soon to be decolonized nations in Africa and Asia that the political and economic system of Soviet socialism held better promise of prosperity and equality. The
Soviet Union made their propaganda available to third world nations they hoped to sway. In fact, when it came to coverage of the United States, one of the superseding functions of the Soviet press was to provide Soviet citizens and outsiders with proof of Soviet moral authority over the United States. Jonathan A. Becker writes that, “…[T]he Soviet press was governed by one overriding criterion in its approach to the United States: it had to portray the superiority of socialism and the socialist system over capitalism.” Despite the fact that Africans and Asians were distinct and separate propaganda targets than Soviet citizens, the guiding principle of the Soviet approach to the United States did not change very much. One illustration of how the Soviet Union attempted to appeal to third world nations is a cartoon which appeared in The Morning of the Cosmic Era in 1961 and showed Yuri Gagarin saluting post colonial Africans from his Vostok spacecraft. Walter McDougall contends that this image implies “that each is engaged in the same, mutually supporting struggle against imperialism.”

When discussing Soviet conceptions of the United States in the early Cold War period it is important to keep in mind that anti-American Soviet propaganda was hardly a new phenomenon which emerged in the wake of World War II. The Soviet Union had been pounding away at American racism and discrimination since the 1920’s. Even after the period of U.S.-Soviet détente during the 1970’s, the Soviet Union continued to be very critical of the United States. Becker writes, “From the start of the Gorbachev period, the Soviet press demonized American culture, society and its economic and political systems…The Reagan Administration was portrayed as the most racist since the Second World War. Its attitudes were compared to those of the Ku Klux Klan and it was implied that the administration supported Klan activity.” We will see that many African-
American activists and journalists who had been supportive of socialism or the Soviet Union will become quite anti-communist, despite the massive increase in Soviet propaganda after 1948. We can best explain this somewhat counterintuitive argument by realizing that African-American exposure to such propaganda was not extensive, and even if it had been the increasing antipathy of the U.S. government towards criticism could explain the decline in support for the Soviet Union amongst some African-American writers.

Soviet propaganda was naturally most powerfully directed towards the ordinary Soviet citizens who read newspapers like Pravda every day and were fed a steady diet of criticism of the U.S. government and lifestyle. This raises an important question we must ask of the African-American press in the early Cold War period. Namely, just how aware of Soviet racial propaganda were black journalists and editors at this time? At the very dawn of the Cold War in 1945, we do not see an abundance of references to specific pieces of Soviet propaganda. Soviet political cartoons, films, and news stories would not exactly have been readily available to African-American journalists. However, during the mid-1950s some African-American newspapers do point to particular pieces of Soviet agitprop and, as we have seen earlier, by this time the response to the Soviet Union was overwhelmingly negative.

The only Soviet critiques of American racial policy which were prominently discussed in most African-American newspapers during the 1940’s were the accusations which were publicly launched by the Soviets at the United Nations or in other official diplomatic settings. While there is very little said in the African-American press regarding Soviet propaganda, their international pronouncements on racial matters did
receive quite a bit of attention. Obviously the African-American press were not exactly the primary targets of Russian-language Soviet propaganda, but this holds true for Soviet propaganda produced in English such as the magazine Soviet Life and Radio Moscow broadcasts. This is most dramatically seen in the story of the NAACP’s 1947 petition to the United Nations Division of Human Rights at Lake Success, New York: An Appeal to the World. Presented to the UN by Walter White and W.E.B. Du Bois, the petition requested that the UN take a serious look at American race relations and redress the many grievances of the African-American community. The petition was voted down with only the Soviet Union casting a supportive vote. The U.S. government saw the petition as a humiliation and acknowledged publicly that the document damaged America in its Cold War struggle and played into the hands of the Soviet Union. Attorney General Tom Clark claimed that, “Our failure to live up to our own high phrases is used to mock us in the battle between freedom and tyranny which occupies the world today.”75 The Soviet Union wasted absolutely no time in using the debate over the petition as a propaganda tool. The Soviet delegate to the UN, A.P. Borisov, loudly denounced the British and the Americans as racists and imperialists and proposed an amendment to an international bill of human rights which would officially criminalize racism and, somewhat ironically, religious persecution. The Soviet Union made use of the defeat of the amendment for propaganda purposes. In a Krokodil cartoon entitled “Trade in Colonial Goods,” The U.S. and Great Britain are attacked for their votes and compared to slave traders who treat colonial subjects as property76
In the African-American press Borisov became something of a hero and the Soviet Union’s racial beliefs were praised. When the UN Commission on Human Rights voted down the NAACP petition, *The Baltimore Afro-American* claimed that this was the defeat of, “Another attempt on the part of the Soviet Union to bring about full racial equality in the United States.”77 A week earlier the *Afro-American* had even more closely linked itself to the Soviet Union by running the banner headline “Russia On Our Side at UN.” The article went on to effusively praise Borisov’s denunciations of lynching.78 We can see from here that when it came to this variety of Soviet propaganda there was a receptive audience amongst some African-Americans.

The African-American press was in a difficult situation when it came to Soviet racial propaganda. Naturally, black journalists and editors shared the Russian sentiment that American racism was a problem which needed to be addressed. However, as the Cold War escalated in the late 1940’s it was not a simple proposition to openly declare support for the Soviet Union, especially when it came to Soviet criticisms of the United States. The African-American press responded to these pressures in several different
ways. One way in which this tension was presented in the African-American press was
the presentation of drastically different opinions on communism. In many instances
communism was as viciously attacked in African-American newspapers as it was in any
white one. These attacks on communism, which interestingly generally avoided specific
mention of Cold War events or even the Soviet Union, were quite often based on
religious faith. This is dramatically seen on the editorial page of The Norfolk Journal and
Guide on November 22, 1947. On this day the paper had not one but two editorials
characterizing proponents of both communism and racism as being in opposition to God.
Robert Durr stated that, “Communism’s best friends are those who discriminate against
others because of race, creed, color, or previous condition of servitude. These friends are
first of all enemies of God.” The Rev. William C. Kernan agreed and said that, Both
Fascism and Communism are anti-Christian and un-American. Good Christians and loyal
Americans will have nothing to do with either.” Secular attacks on communism also
conformed to the thinking of many American Cold Warriors. In a letter to the editor in
the Journal and Guide, one woman wrote, “If the Communists were to succeed in their
desire to bring America under Communist control, they would immediately set up a
complete dictatorship. All organized opposition would be suppressed and concentration
camps would be set up.” Such anti-communism tended to stress the moral and political
superiority of the United States over the Soviet Union. In a New York Age political
cartoon a bald eagle dressed as Uncle Sam informs a young boy that “There are 1,749
Daily newspapers published in America. In Russia—28.”

82
However, bringing religious faith into the Cold War debate did not always lead to a rejection of the Soviet Union. In 1945 the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported on a speech given by a YMCA official, Dr. Sherwood Eddy, in which he claimed that God would use the Soviet Union to end racial discrimination.\(^8\)

In contrast to the vociferous denunciations of communism, many in the African-American press community chose to downplay the threat of communism. In *The Pittsburgh Courier*, a J.A. Rogers editorial claimed that the specter of communism paled in comparison to the threat of creeping fascism. Rogers, who was not a Communist but was famous for taking positions in opposition the U.S. government, claimed, “It is very clear that the present administration is using communism as a fat red herring for the 1948 elections. Hitler, it will be recalled also used that and anti-Semitism to hypnotize his
people…”84 Clearly, this exhibits a level of antipathy towards the U.S. government that one might not expect to see during the Cold War. Communism was not just presented as harmless towards the United States domestically but even in divided Europe as well. An editorial in the *Afro-American* asserted that European nations were draining the United States of funds and resources by exploiting our fear that they would become communists. “Why not let them go red or any other color? If the United States would get out of Europe…it would…give the Russians such headaches that Stalin would be glad to retire behind the Danube.”85 Even as the editorial downplayed the threat of communism on the European continent it did regard the U.S. and the Soviet Union as potential military antagonists.

The African-American press could sometimes present similar themes to those favored by the Soviet Union in terms of propagandistic representations of American racial policy. Naturally, the exposure of African-American journalists to Soviet propaganda images was limited so nothing was borrowed directly from Russian material. However, some writers and cartoonists did inadvertently echo Soviet propaganda. In a Tom King political cartoon from *The Norfolk Journal and Guide* the artist shows the giant figure of Uncle Sam barring the United Nations, portrayed as a group of men in Western and exotic dress, from entering past a wall marked “America’s Iron Curtain of
Racial Injustices.” The title of the cartoon was “Speaking of Iron Curtains.”

While no Soviet cartoons specifically used this notion of an American Iron Curtain, this image is similar in a way to the Krokodil cartoon “Trade In Colonial Goods” in the way in which they portray white Westerners (in the Tom King illustration Americans, and in the Krokodil cartoon British imperialists) keeping blacks sealed off from the outside world by walls. Comparisons between the United States and the Soviet Union were not uncommon in the African-American press even as Cold War tensions first began to escalate. One Baltimore Afro-American editorial column stated matter-of-factly, “Uncle Sam and John Bull can ill afford to criticize the Russian attitude in world affairs when they too are guilty of sidestepping or arbitrarily opposing proposals which would force
them to mend their ways. The pot shouldn’t call the kettle black.”87 We can see in these critiques of American racism another way in which the African-American press responded to tension between their desire for fundamental racial change and the political and social realities of American life during the early Cold War. Many writers displayed an ambivalent attitude towards the Cold War. On the one hand they were intensely critical of the United States when it came to race in a way that was parallel to Soviet attitudes. “Speaking of Iron Curtains” and the Krokodil illustration “Trade in Colonial Goods” convey very similar themes of the U.S. trapping blacks in a world of racism and injustice. On the other hand these criticisms very rarely, outside of some African-American communists and Russian sympathizers such as Paul Robeson, W.E.B. Du Bois, and William Patterson, extended to outright praise of the Soviet Union.

This trouble in determining the proper course to take in regards to domestic civil rights and communism was not unique to the African-American press. Brenda Gayle Plummer and Carol Anderson have shown that the NAACP found dealing with African-American communists to be a persistent thorn in their side. Anderson makes note of the Civil Rights Congress’ (CRC) 1951 petition to the UN, We Charge Genocide, which was supported by the Communist Party of the United States and charged government complicity in racial violence. NAACP head Walter White found this to be an embarrassment and “…worked feverishly to have his rebuttal in the hands of the U.S. delegation [to the United Nations] so that he could stop the Genocide petition before it gained momentum.”88

It was not just African-American communists that caused problems for groups such as the NAACP. Soviet propaganda, particularly that propaganda which dealt with
imperialism and decolonization, raised all sorts of complications for these organizations. Plummer places this consternation in a broader historical context when she claims that, “For the NAACP, Soviet support for decolonization represented another instance of unwanted communist interference. The association remembered the conflicts with the Communist Party during the 1930’s, but it understood that colonialism and the race issue transcended the East-West divide.”89 The discomfort manifested in the NAACP’s troubles with communism is indicative of a movement away from communism in which many African-American intellectuals and activists were engaged. This trend began in the 1930’s when many race activists began to meet the attempts of communists to gain African-American support with antagonism.90 One of the most striking cases of this transformation towards anti-communism is that of Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters founder A. Philip Randolph. Randolph was known for his combative stance toward the U.S. government and in 1941 used the threat of a mass demonstration in Washington to pressure President Roosevelt to agree to establish the Fair Employment Practices Commission. In the 1920’s Randolph had seen the Soviet Union as a force for progressive change but over the course of the next two decades he turned into an ardent anticommmunist. Randolph was also a member of the African-American press in his capacity as editor of the Black Worker, the official publication of his union. From the pages of the Black Worker Randolph would claim in 1950 that the Soviet hand held a “dagger aimed at the heart of democratic peoples everywhere.” Jonathan Rosenberg sums up Randolph’s change of heart saying, “The totality of his ideological transformation was striking; the former radical who had once seen the future in the Soviet experiment had become one of Moscow’s most bitter critics.”91 Most in the African-American press did
not pay much attention to Soviet propaganda in the late 40’s and early 50’s and when they did, as in the case of Randolph, the attention they paid to such propaganda was often negative.

When the African-American press did cover specific pieces of Soviet propaganda, such coverage was largely negative. In 1955 *The Chicago Defender* carried an article on its International News page which examined two Soviet propaganda films which Radio Free Europe (RFE) reported were being shown to Polish prison camp inmates. The films, “Slaves in America” (1948) and “The Little Negro,” (1952) were allegedly used to assert Soviet moral superiority on racial matters as well as to warn their Eastern European viewers of the violence and discrimination which were implicit in capitalism. “If the democratic countries are occupied by the capitalistic armies, you can expect the same fate as the Negroes,” proclaimed “Slaves in America.” “The Little Negro” informed its audience that, “The Americans do not hesitate to burn even young Negroes. Only the Red Army can carry deliverance to these oppressed people.” In earlier years it might have been possible for a paper such as the *Defender* to accept the sentiment of these films’ indictment of the American racial system without fully accepting the validity of communism or the Soviet Union. By 1955, however, the Cold War had already pushed any viewpoint sympathetic to the Soviets out of the black press. The title of the article on these propaganda films is quite telling. “Red Movies Fabricate U.S. Torture of Negroes,” the headline blared. Not only did the *Defender* not bother to deal with the films’ claims as if they had even the slightest validity whatsoever (the article does not even mention Southern racism) but it even went so far as to assure its readers that such propaganda was not even working on the prisoners who were forced to watch it. “…[T]he political
prisoners asserted that the films were simply one continuous lie and only propaganda. The Source told RFE that she herself did not believe the films, but they did arouse in her a great interest in the treatment of Negroes in America." Even when the African-American press was busy denouncing Soviet propaganda they did not neglect to remind their readers that the struggle for racial justice was still one which aroused great interest throughout the world. This is a helpful reminder that the Cold War truly internationalized the emergent Civil Rights Movement.

The propaganda battle in the early years of the Cold War was not restricted to either the United States or the Soviet Union. Both governments attempted to appeal, with varying levels of success, to both domestic and international audiences. The importance of propaganda in this period deeply influenced the ways in which the African-American press went about covering stories both international and domestic, racial and political. By no means did the early Cold War period permanently damage the ability of the African-American press to act as a passionate and courageous advocate for social change. It did change the rules by which the African-American press had to play, though. To achieve their domestic goals of racial equality members of the black press were required to go along with the U.S. government when it came to the Cold War. Many journalists, such as George Schuyler, did so out of a genuine conservative anti-communism. Others like A. Philip Randolph did so largely out of necessity. And still other prominent African-Americans like Paul Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois refused to play such a game and did not greatly modify their positions on the Soviet Union and socialism. As the Civil Rights Movement accelerated in the late 1950’s and early 1960’s the Cold War still loomed large. When commenting on American policies towards rapidly decolonizing Africa or
writing in support of sit-ins and boycotts, the African-American press would not lose
sight of the importance of internationalism. The lessons learned by black journalists
during the early Cold War would help them as the story that had been their exclusive
became worldwide news.

Notes on Chapter 1:
1 Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena*
2 Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the
10 Carol Anderson, *From Hope to Distillation: African-Americans, the United Nations, and the Struggle for
p. 1.


Von Eschen, *Race Against Empire*, pp. 119-121.


Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, pp. 61-62.


Notes on Chapter 2:


Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights* pp. 79-81.
54 P.L. Prattis, “President’s Committee Did Better Job Than Negroes Might Have Done,” The Pittsburgh Courier, November 15, 1947.
59 Von Eschen Race Against Empire, p. 118.
61 The Baltimore Afro-American, November 8, 1947.

Notes on Chapter 3:
68 Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights, p. 38, citing Moscow to Secretary of State, July 27, 1949, RG 59, 811.4016/6-2749, National Archives.
69 “In God’s Country, That is, The United States of America,” Moscow, 1930.
70 Vrodat, “Honor of Whites Restored”, Krokojil, June 20, 1947.
71 Dudziak, Cold War Civil Rights, p. 34, Dudziak presents a particular example of this in a Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union (Tass) article which was distributed in one of the most important non-aligned nations in the world, India. The Tass article savaged the United States as a naturally imperialistic power whose very existence was predicated on racism and extermination.
74 Becker, Soviet and Russian Press Coverage of the United States, pp. 112-114.
78 “Russia On Our Side at UN,” The Baltimore Afro-American, December 6, 1947.
83 “God Will Use Russia To End Racial Bias—Dr. Eddy,” The Baltimore Afro-American, June 9, 1945.
84 If any ‘ism’ takes over in United States it Will Be Fascism, Not Communism,” The Pittsburgh Courier, December 13, 1947.
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