The Role of the Comics and Cartoons of the Black Press During World War II

Written by Matthew Sepko

Edited by Mackenzie Acree
Reviewed by Dr. Louie Dean Valencia

An overview of the role and history of the American Black Press during the Second World War and how its comic strips and editorial cartoons illustrated the complicated discourse over whether or not Black Americans should abstain from the war effort or participate, as well as the ways in which this participation should be done. By using comics and cartoons from the most prominent Black newspapers of the time, this article dives into a conversation that has been around since the American Revolution, one that questions whether Black societal advancement comes with Black participation or if this participation is simply a tool used by the United States with no obligation to return the favor. Examples used within this article range from the Pittsburgh Courier's famous "Double V" campaign, an attempt to frame the war as a simultaneous fight abroad against fascism and a fight at home against segregation, to pro and anti-war comic strips and cartoons, as well as the uncritical, pro-war propaganda of Charles Alston issued by the Office of War Information for distribution in the Black Press.

Introduction

Historically, Black Americans have fought and died for the interests of the United States in the hopes of improving their social and economic positions, to no avail, through both World Wars. Despite their sacrifices, "Black soldiers were never granted equal treatment in exchange for their service"[1] and the broader Black communities saw very little economic advancement while segregation and Jim Crow still reigned in the US. Never being properly rewarded for their service or sacrifice ensured that each time a new conflict erupted, a debate over what role Black Americans should play in the war effort was sure to arise. By the time of the World Wars, the existence of a sizable, independent Black American press, an entire media apparatus separate from the traditionally White dominated American press,

1 Tim Jackson, *Pioneering Cartoonists of Color* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 85. https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat00022a&AN=txi.b6047273&site=eds-live&scope=site.

saw a heightening of this discourse that fostered debate about the potential for Black Americans' upward social mobility through their military service. This unprecedented level of Black media infrastructure was key to maintaining a "separate, parallel culture in America for African Americans [that] had more or less all of the features of the mainstream culture," creating an avenue for the Black communities of the United States to express themselves independently of White America.[2]

World War II, specifically the years 1942-1945, saw the biggest flare up in the discourse surrounding the potential socio-economic benefits for Black servicemen. Inciting debate within the pages of Black media over whether or not Black Americans should participate in the war effort. The comics and cartoons of these newspapers offer insight into this debate and how the Black Press took a decided stance, choosing to advocate for Black enlistment and participation in the war effort while also adjusting their message to appease their more militant, discontented readers.

The Black Press Prior to World War II

The history of Black newspapers in American history is an extensive one that dates back to the first half of the 19th century with the creation of Freedom's Journal in March of 1827. Over the remainder of the century Black newspapers were established in nearly every state, eventually leading to the creation of The Freeman in 1888, "a publication in the vein of Harper's Weekly" that included "political commentary, humorous illustrations, and cartoon art" for the first time in a major Black newspaper.[3] It was from this blueprint that the titans of the Black Press emerged. Newspapers such as the Chicago Defender, the New York Amsterdam News, and the Pittsburgh Courier came to dominate the Black Press by the 1910s and were notable for their inclusion of editorial cartoons and original comic strips that were traditionally reserved for the funny pages of white newspapers.[4]

The onset of World War I saw a newly booming and extensive Black Press come face to face with the Wilson administration, who took this as a sign of potential disloyalty and rebellion. The fears of a potential Black revolt were stoked by the Zimmerman Telegram and reports of German agents "stirring up the Negroes against white people" in the South.[5] This fear, while undoubtedly exaggerated, was not baseless. There was sizable discontent within Black communities,

2 David Hopkins, "'You Can Make Them Liars' – The World War Two Funny Pages of the Pittsburgh Courier, America's Leading African American Weekly Newspaper," *Journal of Graphic Novels & Comics* 3, no. 1 (2012): 2, doi:10.1080/21504857.2011.645246
3 Jackson, *Pioneering*, 12-15.
4 Jackson, *Pioneering*, 18.
5 William G. Jordan, *Black Newspapers and America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 44.

especially in the South where in extreme cases there was even a willingness to cooperate with the Germans; however, the Central Powers of Europe were not seen as allies by the vast majority of Black Americans. Within the community, fear mongering over the Germans' alleged atrocities overseas rang hollow in the face of the very real atrocities occurring at home.[6] There were direct comparisons within Black newspapers between reports of horrific crimes committed by the Germans to the ongoing lynchings and hate crimes of the Jim Crow South, framing the discourse around the conditions of Black Americans under segregation as not too far removed from the horrors of war. The Espionage and Sedition acts suppressed criticism from the more militant elements of Black newspapers, in favor of messaging from accommodationist writers who advocated for a patriotic pro-war participation stance to ease the tensions and threats of violence facing "disloyal" Black communities.[7]

During World War I there was little enthusiasm for being "'sacrificed at every turn' in the coming war," which saw its Black participants return to communities which remained just as disenfranchised and segregated as before their service.[8] Black cartoonist Henry Brown's 1919 illustration (Figure 1) shows both the willingness of Black men to serve their country and of their country's government to immediately forget their service the second it was no longer required.[9] The lack of any genuine effort to improve the lives of Black Americans further reinforced the militancy the government had been quelling, ensuring retaliatory actions from the betrayed populace who were desperate for any improvement in their status and treatment. This debate flared up again following the American entrance into World War II and the conditions of Black America had not progressed much, with Jim Crow and segregation remaining as strong an institution as ever, despite the sacrifices of Black soldiers decades prior. The existence of a robust and truly national Black Press expanded the accessibility of this discourse to the household level for the first time, bringing renewed attention to the debate over whether

Figure 1

6 Jordan, *Black Newspapers*, 44-45
7 Jordan, *Black Newspapers*, 143-145.
8 Jordan, *Black Newspapers*, 65-66.
9 Jackson, *Pioneering*, 21.

or not Black Americans should support the war effort. The Black Press had to decide how it would navigate this debate and ensure that whatever messaging they pushed did not alienate large portions of their readerbase.

A Critical Support for the War

It is out of this milieu that the famous "Double V" campaign of the Pittsburgh Courier was created. During World War II, Double V, or Victory at Home, Victory Abroad, was a campaign to try and ensure Black support for the war effort and prevent any questioning of these papers' loyalties. It did this while hoping to satisfy enough of the very real militancy and anger that Black Americans had towards their own country through tying the tearing down of segregation, Jim Crow, and the general White Supremacy of the United States to the ongoing war against the fascist powers of Europe and Asia.[10] A large number of the cartoons and comic strips that encouraged Black participation in the American war effort did so through the lens of the Double V campaign, often focusing on the Victory Abroad and not so much the one at home. While it spread nationwide, it was within the comic strips of the Courier that the Double V messaging can be seen the clearest thanks to creative minds such as Ol Harrington, Wilbert Holloway, and A. Samuel Milai. These artists were supportive of the war effort and encouraged both Black enlistment and activities such as the purchasing of war bonds, as seen in the Christmas 1942 printings of Milai's "Society Sue" and "Bucky."[11] Both of these comic strips took advantage of the holiday season in an effort to advertise the gift of war bonds through their titular characters, who take on an exaggerated patriotic tone, and speak directly to the reader in the case of Society Sue. The Pittsburgh Courier's Wilbert Holloway promoted Black enlistment with his January 17, 1942, Sunnyboy Sam strip. This strip portrays a hyper-patriotic caricature of Joe Louis, the superstar boxer-turned-soldier and Black American icon, talking with Sunnyboy Sam about his decision to join the army. His bold proclamation,

Figure 2

10 Hopkins, "You Can Make Them Liars," 7.

11 A. Samuel Milai "Society Sue/Bucky." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950*), Dec 26, 1942, City Edition. https://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/historical-newspapers/comic-3-no-title/docview/202103568/se-2.

"All I am–All I have America gave me…S'Long Sunny Boy. It's Great to be an American," is spoken in front of the waving stars and stripes of the American flag, an undeniable and uncritical endorsement of the enlistment of Black men into the military.[12] An Atlanta Daily World cartoon from October, 1944[13] shows a more serious attempt at fostering war support within the Black community with a simple editorial cartoon promoting war bonds. A Black soldier is shown at the forefront surrounded by a somber crowd and patriotic imagery promoting the National War Fund.

One of the most notable and vocal artists that managed to successfully blend the dual messaging of the Double V campaign into his work was Ol Harrington. After the outbreak of the war, Harrington created an entirely new comic strip about a Tuskegee pilot named Jive Gray. A typical Jive Gray comic strip could look like the one published on June 5, 1943, that depicts the action of a combat pilot having to eject and avoid a fiery crash on the battlefield.[14] The creation of a whole new action strip about a pilot seeing action and going on adventures in Europe during the war is clearly supportive of the war effort, as was expected during the height of Double V. The strip was created to portray the heroic and exciting exploits of a Black American serviceman and glorify the war through action and adventure. However, Harrington used the background of World War II and the Nazis to speak strongly about the issues at home as well. This was often done through direct comparisons

Figure 3

between the ideology and reality of the American South and that of the Nazis.

The July 24, 1943 Jive Gray strip [15] has a poor, rural southerner say to a crashed and lost Jive that "He's the black ape we're lookin' fouh. There's gon' be a good ole lynchin,'" which was a real fear of Black soldiers stationed in Southern training camps. The intentional use of poorly

12 Wilbert Holloway, "We Are Americans, Too!" *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Jan 17, 1942, City Edition. https://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/comic-1-no-title/docview/202106532/se-2.

13 See Figure 2.

14 Ol Harrington "Jive Gray." *The Pittsburgh Courier (1911-1950)*, Jun 05, 1943, City Edition. https://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/historical-newspapers/comic-2-no-title/docview/202120936/se-2.

15 See Figure 3.

accented English for the White Southerner is a stark contrast to the proper English that Jive Gray and his fellow Black soldiers use. This is a clever reversal of the traditional "'Negro' accent of radio comedy and drama" that was associated with the Black population of the South.[16] Harrington makes a strong statement here by reversing the traditional roles that Black and White people have played in any American media about the South since the days of blackface minstrelsy. He knows that the South is still a dangerous place that is still so fully within the grip of Jim Crow that Black soldiers will never be accepted as equals. This theme is also touched on by Renny Lee in the March 13, 1943 printing of his "Little Joe" cartoon, which included a panel labeled "Southern Hospitality." This panel showed a white southerner refusing service to a Black soldier in training. He tells him "Sorry so'jun we down heah don't serve yo' kind."[17] These cartoons run contrary to the uncritically patriotic and unity-centric messaging common at the time.

Jive Gray, while still a figure in support of the war effort against the Nazis and a symbol of Black enlistment, manages to maintain its strong messaging supporting the war at home as well, even to the very end. The August 18, 1945 Jive Gray strip[18] directly compares the hate ideology of the Jim Crow South to that of Nazi Germany through a moment of shared hatred towards Black people between a Nazi officer and a politician from Mississippi. There is no subtlety in the comparison of "Dixie" to Nazi Germany, as the first thing the man from Mississippi says after seeing Jive Gray is "Well ah don't like yo' kind of folks, an' tha's why ah'm heah." The accented and poor English are again used to degrade a white southerner instead of a Black one. Harrington is drawing a direct correlation between the fight abroad and the fight at home by essentially showing they are the same fight against a broader fascism that was present not just in Germany and Japan.

Figure 4

16 Hopkins, "You Can Make Them Liars," 11.

17 Renny Lee, "Little Joe." *New York Amsterdam Star-News (1941-1943)*, Mar 13, 1943. https://libproxy.txstate.edu/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/historical-newspapers/comic-5-no-title/docview/226015318/se-2.

18 See Figure 4

The Wartime Propaganda of Charles Alston

The most heavy handed and uncritical way in which the Black Press encouraged Black wartime participation was through the publishing of the cartoons of famed Black artist Charles Alston. The reason why these pieces are so heavy-handed in their messaging is that they were issued directly by the Office of War Information (OWI) to be distributed as propaganda by the Black Press. While it was not quite in line with the more critical and militant pro-war messaging that the Black Press adopted with the Double V campaign, distributing them ensured the appeasement of the American government and prevented the disaster that hit Black newspapers during World War I.[19] One of the least subtle works made by Alston during this time was a 1943 cartoon titled "A Negro Crossed the Delaware with George Washington" that recreates the iconic painting of Washington to emphasize the shared American history between White and Black Americans.[20] The image itself doesn't even highlight the single Black man on the boat, who was a slave which adds a level of irony to the cartoon's tagline of "– And We'll Continue to Fight For Liberty." The throwing out of any of the grievances that Black Americans have towards their own country is intentional as Alston's priorities lay in trying to fold Black Americans into a united American identity on behalf of the OWI.

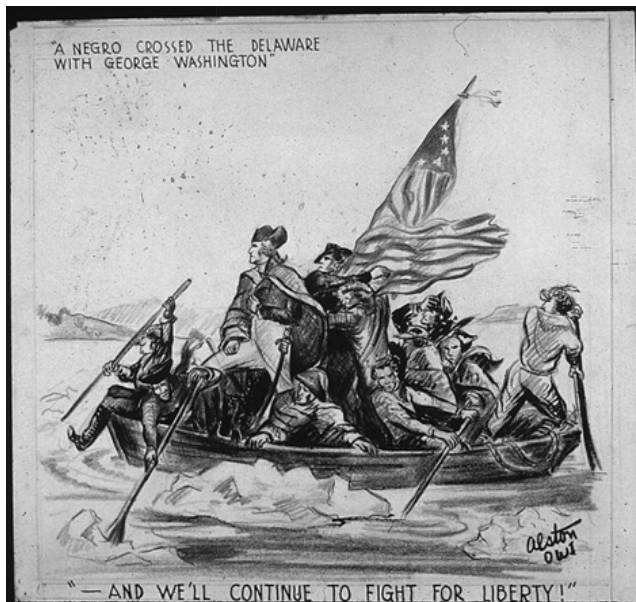

Figure 5

This desire for a single united American identity can be seen in one of Alston's cartoons following the attack on Pearl Harbor with the words "130,000,000 United Americans" written across the sleeve of America.[21] There is no discernable Black voice within this image and in fact Alston makes heavy use of racist caricature in his depiction of a monstrous Japanese soldier stabbing a White woman who presumably represents Columbia, the personified symbol of America. The works of Charles Alston are very far removed from the other cartoons and comics of the Black Press as Alston offers absolutely no

19 Harry Amana, "The Art of Propaganda: Charles Alston's World War II Editorial Cartoons for the Office of War Information and the Black Press," *American Journalism* 21, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 79-80, https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=14009232&site=eds-live&scope=site

20 See Figure 5.

21 See Figure 6.

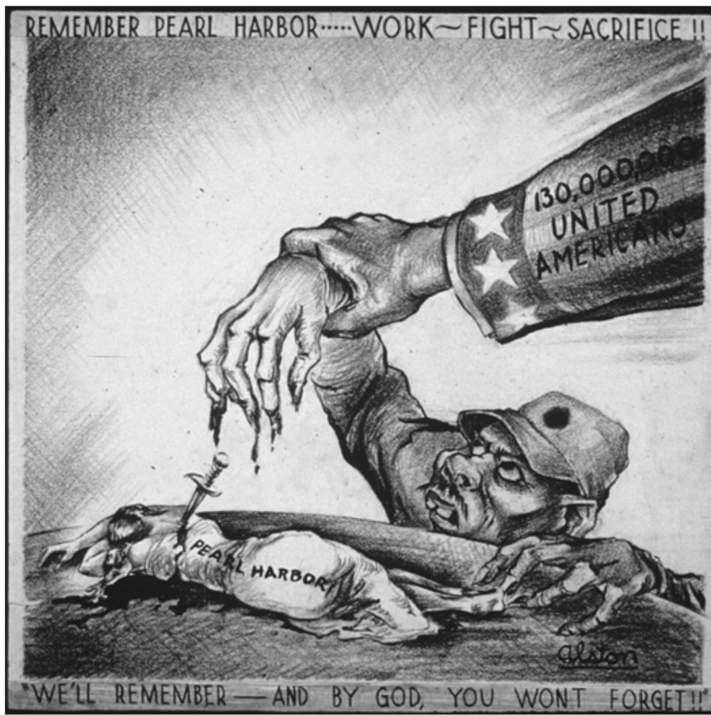

Figure 6

criticism of segregation or the racism ingrained in the United States. In fact, Alston is actually replicating many of the White racial attitudes of the time within his work, even choosing to represent the United States in the form of a white woman. While these are state-sanctioned pieces of propaganda meant to drive up Black participation without inflaming the already tense racial atmosphere of 1940s America, there is precedent for this kind of stance within the Black Press going back to World War I. W.E.B. DuBois wrote an infamous editorial in 1918 that stated, "Let us, while the war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy," a statement that encapsulates the philosophy of Alston's wartime cartoons 25 years later.[22] Alston, and DuBois in 1918, are representative of the members of the Black community who prioritized the American goal of defending liberty and democracy first and foremost, or "The Battle for Freedom" as Alston refers to it within the smoke cloud of a destroyed Japanese ship in another one of his cartoons.[23]His work during this period ignored domestic racial issues in favor of promoting an uncritically patriotic message of wartime unity at the behest of the U.S. Government. Alston is representative of the attitudes of the upper and upper-middle class base of Black Americans that can afford to delay the fight against segregation and unequal treatment until the fight abroad is won and democracy is saved.

Opposition and Criticism of the War Effort

While Alston's propaganda and comic strips such as Harrington's "Jive Gray" or Milai's "Society Sue" promoted Black participation in the war effort from multiple different viewpoints, anti-war and anti-Black participation sentiments were also present. These views were shown in various ways but typically were based on the historical results of attempts at gaining rights and opportunity through participating in American wars. An example that succinctly portrays the

22 Amana, "The Art of Propaganda," 83.
23 Charles Alston "I'm Going to See That You Grow Up in a Better World, Young Fellow!" *Office of War Information (1942-1945)*, 1943. https://catalog.archives.gov/id/535606

sentiments of those who were cynical about the Double V campaign and its effects comes from the New York Amsterdam News' star cartoonist and satirist, Melvin Tapley. Tapley's September 1944 cartoon "Post-War Fashions?"[24] draws a fashion show put on by "Jimcro" where he displays the "fashion" that Black Americans will wear when the war ends and the government no longer needs Black soldiers, workers, or their money. The three "fashions" listed are the loss of war-gained rights, continued racial discrimination, and the firing of minority workers. These ideas are representative of what has historically happened to Black and minority groups within the United States after

Figure 7

the war machine no longer requires use of them. "Post-War Fashion Show" pushes back against the Double V's effort to correlate an American victory against Germany and Japan to a Black victory against segregation, a position that began to look more likely seeing as segregation remained unchanged for over a decade after the war.

The loss of any perceived progress made during wartime was not the only way that Black cartoonists opposed the involvement of Black people during wartime. Figure 8 shows a striking image of a Black soldier in uniform picking cotton under the title "Is THIS the Army, Mr. Jones?" This is a reference to the Irving Berlin song which portrayed the army as a prim and proper institution that in reality has been historically segregated and exclusionary. This image offers a striking juxtaposition between a Black American soldier in uniform and the act of cotton picking, an immediately recognizable symbol of the brutal chattel slavery of the pre-Civil War South and the repressive practices still ongoing within the Jim Crow South. The history of American treatment towards its Black inhabitants is not ignored or glossed over here; instead the viewer is confronted with the reality that many Black soldiers have never received any of the social or economic advancement they had

24 See Figure 7.

New York Amsterdam Star-News (1941-1943); Mar 6, 1943;
ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News
pg. 10

Is THIS the Army, Mr. Jones?

Figure 8

hoped for in return for their service. The only thing distinguishing the depicted soldier from any poor Black field hand working the cotton fields is his uniform, a superficial symbol of the service that left him no better off than if he had never enlisted.

Conclusion

Overall, the Black Press' role during World War II was one of advocating for the support of its Black readers to the ongoing war effort through the use of both propaganda and cartoons made in support of the Pittsburgh Courier's hit Double V campaign. Dissenting ideas were allowed and made their positions against Black participation known, usually due to the previous failed attempts at gaining rights from the War of Independence to the First World War. The Black Press was highly active by the time of World War 2, increasing its circulation by almost 50 percent, and was undoubtedly a powerful force in mobilizing Black communities to enlist, purchase bonds, and get involved in wartime industries with the hope of fighting back the worst of segregation and American White Supremacy.[25] The Black Press' promotion of Double V in fighting segregation can be criticized for falling into the same old trap of promising change through wartime participation. After all, it took almost a decade for the "separate but equal" doctrine to be overturned and two decades for legal segregation to be ended with the first Civil Rights Act, not to mention the still ongoing fight against the de facto segregation and inequality left over from the scars of this time. The Double V campaign's efforts in the fight at home could hardly qualify as a success with this historical hindsight; however, that does not take away from its significance. The need to ensure a loyal and active war-supporting appearance within the Black Press cannot be forgotten in respect to the repression they faced during the First World

25 Patrick S. Washburn "The Black Press: Homefront Clout Hits a Peak in World War II," *American Journalism* 12, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 359. https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.txstate.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=31h&AN=46043308&site=eds-live&scope=site.

War. A more militant approach than Double V could have resulted in a similar crackdown or other repressive actions on behalf of the U.S. government. The Black Press remained critical of the war to varying degrees, typically framing the messaging with at least some acknowledgement of the discrimination faced by Black Americans in their home country. Despite this criticism, the Black Press was still ultimately supportive of the war effort and encouraged greater wartime participation and enlistment for Black Americans.

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