

Our Protesting Negro Press



Its national influence is more potent than most of us are aware

BY TOM MAHONEY

■ "GENERAL MACARTHUR will never be President," said one woman firmly to another recently in a political discussion aboard a New York Fifth Avenue bus.

"And why not?" demanded her companion.

"Simply because the Negro press is against him."

"The Negro press?" exclaimed the other. "I didn't know there was one."

This ignorance is shared by several million white newspaper readers and, until his recall from the

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Far East, even General MacArthur may have been only dimly aware of its existence. On his return, in an interview with one Negro newspaper, he defended his use of segregated units in Korea and blamed Washington authorities for their continuance.

With the exception of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, whose Washington correspondent, Stanley Roberts, obtained the exclusive interview, virtually every Negro newspaper leaped on the General with biting editorials. "It strikes us as more than a little strange," said the *Chicago Defender*, "that a general with the . . . 'I am God' complex . . . would meekly accept the dictates of a President on a racial matter and tell him to go fly a kite on a matter as basic as U.S. foreign policy. . . . It's our guess that back of the General's soul-purging declaration of racial Simon-pureness are some pitifully veiled political ambitions for 1952."

The *Chicago Defender*, one of the big five of the Negro press, has been so potent in recent elections that, as the lady in the bus asserted, its stand may spell the doom of MacArthur politically.

President Truman was re-elected in 1948 by the slender margin of 52,000 votes in the circulation area of the *Chicago Defender*, which, almost alone of all the newspapers of all kinds in that area, supported Truman. After the election it published a boastful full-page advertisement, headlined: "The *Chicago Defender* carried Truman's banner all the way."

What is the Negro press? Primarily it is a protest press demanding the correction of injustice to colored people. "We are organs of protest," explains Thomas W. Young, publisher of the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, "born more than a hundred years ago in righteous indignation over the institution of slavery."

But it does more than protest. It prints news about Negro advancements, social activities and cultural achievements that are largely neglected by the white press. It has

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grown to such important proportions that Gunnar Myrdal, the famous Swedish sociologist, terms it the greatest single power of the Negro race.

Two dailies and some 200 weeklies make up the current 2,000,000 circulation of Negro newspapers in America. A third of this total is accounted for by five great weeklies. These are independent in politics and sensational in format.

Largest is the *Pittsburgh Courier* which prints 15 regional editions and sells some 300,000 copies a week at 15 cents. It includes a magazine section and a full-color comic section. Next comes the Baltimore *Afro-American*, with editions for Philadelphia, Washington, Newark and Richmond.

A third in circulation is the famous *Chicago Defender*, now published by John H. Sengstacke, nephew of Robert S. Abbott, who as a young printer founded it back in 1905. Abbott's slogan, "American race prejudice must be destroyed," is printed at the head of the *Defender's* editorial platform in each issue. The *Defender* has the Billikens, a large youth organization, and sponsors stunts ranging from beauty contests to an annual "honor roll of democracy" which lists men and women, white as well as black, who aid racial understanding.

Next come the *Amsterdam News*, published twice a week in New York's Harlem, and the *Journal and Guide* of Norfolk, Virginia. The conservative *Atlanta Daily World* and all others are smaller and largely local in circulation but together they exert a powerful influence on the country's 15,000,000 Negroes.

Just what do Negro editors publish? Many of their stories are simply more detailed versions of what the general press publishes about Negroes. The week that Jackie Robinson joined the Brooklyn Dodgers, Wendell Smith, sports editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, had five by-line stories about Robinson on page one. Inside there were more, including one by Jackie himself.

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Closely followed are the activities of Negro notables like Joe Louis, Sugar Ray Robinson, Marian Anderson, Lena Horne, Josephine Baker, Juanita Hall, Joe Walcott, Katherine Dunham, Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Ezzard Charles, Sarah Vaughn, Pearl Bailey and Louis Jordan. Special pride is taken in the achievements of Dr. Ralph Bunche, first Negro ever to win a Nobel Prize and famous for his United Nations activities.

Only in Negro newspapers, one of which is named *The Sepia Socialite*, can Negro society news be found. Only in a Negro newspaper can you read a columnist called "Digg Mee," of groups bearing names like "The Swelegants," and gossip items referring to whites as "ofays." Only in the Negro press are to be found pictures of the Black Jews of Harlem observing Rosh Hashana.

Some cartoons and columns are simply colored versions of similar features in general newspapers. A colored Dick Tracy pursues evil doers in one comic strip. Oliver Harrington, a graduate of the Yale Art School, created for the *Pittsburgh Courier* a remarkably original one-panel cartoon, "Dark Laughter," and also a serial strip, "Jive Gray," comparable to the work of Milton Caniff.

Negro achievement in pulchritude, education, industry, science, government and the arts fill columns in all the papers. But the big story is discrimination. This is reported from the cradle to the grave and from all parts of the world. "Baby Diaz has felt the clammy paw of discrimination at the early age of 11 days," began a typical story of this sort in a Harlem paper, when a Long Island diaper service refused to handle the Diaz business. At the other extreme the Negro press won a victory in a War Department ruling that war dead will be buried without race distinction in national cemeteries. The *Pittsburgh Courier*, which separated its news items at this time with a line reading "End Jim Crow in Washington," took special credit

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for this order.

Negro press protests induced the Dell Publishing Company to discontinue a comic magazine called "Li'l Eight Ball" which some sensitive Negroes construed as reflecting on the race. There is a movement to bar the juvenile classic, "Little Black Sambo" from Washington, D.C., schools on the ground that it does not give a well-rounded picture of Negro life. Possibly the oddest anti-discrimination protest was raised when the Post Office ordered a nudist magazine to delete photographs of nude white women. The Negro press demanded elimination also of pictures of nude colored women and action against the *National Geographic*.

The Negro press does not advocate intermarriage of the races, and sometimes even denounces Negro leaders who marry white women, but headlines news of such unions and contends there should be no law against them. Father Divine's white wife is sometimes a picture subject. When Sergeant James Cheeks of Chicago became the first colored Yank to marry a white fraulein in Germany the *Afro-American* published a picture six columns wide of the ceremony.

While the Negro press agitates for a better break for the Negro, it also attempts to make him a more acceptable citizen. Every newspaper publishes at least one feature designed to improve the manners of its readers. The *Pittsburgh Courier* features a weekly admonition titled "Your Public Conduct" of which a recent example was: "Loud talk makes others detest you." The *Chicago Defender* has a cartoon character called "Professor Doodle" who smashes hats and heads of ill-mannered citizens. A weekly column on good grooming is syndicated by NNPA. A feature on "Better English" is published by several of the papers.

Though Communists have sought adherents among the Negroes, even nominating one for Vice-President, they have had little success in the Negro press. The editors print accounts of Moscow

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wooing the dark races and the publishers have accepted advertisements opposing outlawing the Communist Party but no important Negro newspaper favors it editorially. Many, especially the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, actively oppose Communism. The latter ran a series of articles on the unhappy experience of a Negro in Russia. George S. Schuyler, veteran *Courier* columnist, frequently assails Soviet ideas. Paul Robeson, the Negro singer, is often denounced for his Communist beliefs. "If Mr. Robeson chooses to preach treason, he speaks only for himself," said a *Courier* editorial.

"We are not going to fight any battles for the Russians," explains a Negro newspaper man. "We have enough of our own."

What these are is summed up succinctly in a "Negro Press Creed" published each week by the *Courier*. It states: "The Negro Press believes that America can best lead the world away from racial and national antagonisms when it accords to every man, regardless of race, color or creed his human and equal rights. Hating no man, fearing no man, the Negro Press strives to help every man in the firm belief that all are hurt so long as anyone is held back." ■ ■

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