AFRICAN AMERICAN LIVES

The Struggle For Freedom

© 2005

Clayborne Carson
Emma J. Lapsansky-Werner
Gary B. Nash

0-321-02587-3 Exam Copy ISBN
0-321-02586-5 Bookstore ISBN

Visit www.ablongman.com/replocator to contact your local Allyn & Bacon/Longman representative.

s a m p l e c h a p t e r

The pages of this Sample Chapter may have slight variations in final published form.

Longman
1185 Avenue of the Americas
25th floor
NewYork, NY 10036
www.ablongman.com

CHAPTER 15

Jacob Lawrence, *Christmas*, 1937. Tempera on paper, 25 x 27 1/2"

The New Politics of the Great Depression: The 1930s

The Scottsboro Boys

"The next time you want by, just tell me you want by and I let you by," Haywood Patterson remembered telling the young white hobo who stepped on his hand as both clung to the side of a freight train on 25 March 1931. Nineteen years old at the time, Patterson was himself a hobo. He had joined thousands of other people riding the rails in search of work as the Great Depression tightened its grip on Americans. This day, he was traveling across northern Alabama on his way to Memphis. Patterson had encountered hardship even before the stock market crash of 1929 that sent the economy reeling. His parents, Janie and Claude Patterson, had worked as sharecroppers on a Georgia farm. The couple struggled to pay off the debts that tied them, like many other black farmers, to their white landlord. When his father found work in Chattanooga and moved the family there, Haywood felt compelled to leave school after the third grade to help support his younger siblings. Venturing throughout the South and as far north as Ohio looking for employment, he found only temporary, low-paying jobs. Through hard experience, Patterson learned that he had to stand up for himself. But he could hardly have anticipated how much his life would change as a result of his brief confrontation with a white teenager.

"Nigger, I don't ask you when I want by," the teen shouted. "What you doing on this train anyway?"

"Look, I just tell you, the next time you want by, you just tell me you want by and I let you by."

"Nigger bastard, this is a white man's train. You better get off. All you black bastards better get off!"

CHAPTER OUTLINE

Vignette: The Scottsboro Boys 41

African Americans in Desperate Times 44

Black Militancy 49

A New Deal for African Americans? 54

Black Artists and the Cultural Mainstream 59

Conclusion 65

First Person

Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke Describe "The Bronx Slave Market" 45

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and the Fight for Jobs 53

T. Arnold Hill and the Negro Worker in the 1930s 56

1929 The stock market crashes, signaling the beginning of economic decline known as the "Great Depression."

1932 In *Powell* v. *Alabama,* the Supreme Court rules that Scottsboro defendants must be retried because Alabama officials violated the Fourteenth Amendment by denying them adequate legal counsel.

1933 Democrat Franklin Delano Roosevelt becomes president and immediately launches New Deal programs to address the problems of the Great Depression.

Robert Weaver becomes the Roosevelt administration's first African American appointee when named race relations advisor in Interior Department's Housing Division.

W. E. B. Du Bois and other black leaders gather in Amenia, New York, to discuss the NAACP's future direction.

1930 **1932** **1934**

1931 After eight of nine black youths accused of rape in Alabama are sentenced to death, Communists launch "Free the Scottsboro Boys" campaign.

1934 Du Bois is forced from editorship of the NAACP's *The Crisis* magazine after writing a controversial editorial calling for voluntary segregation to achieve racial advancement.

1935 Mary McLeod Bethune founds the National Council of Negro Women and receives the NAACP's highest honor, the Spingarn Medal.

Du Bois's *Black Reconstruction in America* highlights the African American role in winning the Civil War and bringing about democratic reforms in the South during Reconstruction.

In *Norris* v. *Alabama,* the Supreme Court again overturns the conviction of a Scottsboro defendant, this time on grounds that black jurors were systematically excluded.

"You white sonsofbitches, we got as much right here as you," Patterson yelled back.

As the two shot retorts back and forth, other hobos on the train watched with growing excitement. Soon the argument escalated into a fistfight that pitted black youths against white. Most of the white hobos retreated by jumping off the slow-moving train. Then they complained to local authorities that a gang of blacks wielding knives and guns had assaulted them.

When the train arrived in Paint Rock, the next stop in Alabama, the sheriff was waiting with an armed posse. By this time, some of the black riders had already gotten off the train. But deputies roped Patterson and eight others together and took them to the county jail in Scottsboro. The arrestees would soon be known as "the Scottsboro boys," though the oldest was an adult nineteen years old. Two were thirteen. All nine were poor, illiterate or barely literate, and bewildered by the allegations against them. A deputy initially told Patterson, who knew two of the other arrestees, that the group would be charged with assault and attempted murder. Yet only after the inmates had languished in jail for hours did they learn the true seriousness of their situation.

Patterson recalled that two young white women were brought to the jail. He had paid little attention when he had seen them in Paint Rock standing with the white hobos and wearing men's clothing.

"Do you know these girls?" a deputy asked the prisoners. Patterson and the others said no.

"No? You damn-liar niggers! You raped these girls."

Charged with rape, a capital offense in Alabama, the Scottsboro defendants now faced the possibility of the electric chair—that is, if they managed to avoid being lynched by the mob of whites who gathered as lurid accounts of the alleged crime spread. There had been twenty-one reported lynchings in the United States the previous year, nearly all involving southern black men who were murdered before they could stand trial. Fearing bad publicity for the state, Alabama's governor and the local sheriff agreed to call in the National Guard to ensure that the defendants received a formal trial.

The trials began in Scottsboro on 6 April, just twelve days after the arrest. They unfolded in a climate of mob vengeance that made it clear the defendants had no chance. Angry whites gathered inside and outside the courtroom. Some insisted that the trials were a waste of taxpayers' money, given that the defendants must certainly be guilty. The headline of a *Huntsville Times* editorial read, "DEATH PENALTY PROPERLY DEMANDED IN FIENDISH CRIME OF NINE BURLY NEGROES." The sixty-nine-year-old white defense attorney

1936 In February the National Negro Congress is formed at a Chicago conference, with labor leader A. Philip Randolph as president.

Bethune becomes director of Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration (NYA) and organizes the Federal Council on Negro Affairs, better known as the Black Cabinet.

With the Democratic party attracting unprecedented support from black voters, Roosevelt wins a landslide victory in the presidential election.

1938 In *Missouri ex rel. Gaines* v. *Canada*, a case argued by NAACP lawyers, the U.S. Supreme Court rules that states must provide equal, even if separate, educational facilities for African Americans.

1940 The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund is established under the leadership of Thurgood Marshall.

Richard Wright publishes *Native Son,* the first novel by an African American author to become a bestseller.

President Franklin Roosevelt announces that African Americans will have equal opportunities in the military but rejects calls for desegregation of Armed Forces.

1936

1938

1937 Alabama officials agree to drop charges against four of the Scottsboro defendants, but five others remain imprisoned.

Randolph's Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters is recognized as a union by the Pullman Company.

Joe Louis becomes world heavyweight champion and in 1938 avenges his only defeat by knocking out German fighter Max Schmeling.

1939 Marian Anderson sings to large audience at the Lincoln Memorial after being denied the opportunity to perform at Washington, D.C.'s Constitution Hall.

Jazz singer Billie Holiday popularizes anti-lynching song "Strange Fruit."

who reluctantly agreed to accept the cases had little time to prepare and was hesitant to challenge the stories of the white accusers.

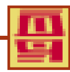
Yet the testimony of Victoria Price and Ruby Bates contained numerous inconsistencies and improbabilities. Like the defendants, the two women were unemployed vagrants. They claimed that armed black men had brutally raped them, but medical examinations revealed no evidence of sexual assault. No weapons were found on the defendants. But such considerations did not deter the prosecutors. Within four days, all-white juries had convicted eight of the nine defendants, who were then sentenced to death. Jurors deadlocked in the case of the youngest defendant, Roy Wright. A mistrial resulted in his case when eleven of the twelve jurors insisted on the death penalty after the prosecutors asked only for life imprisonment.

In previous years, the Scottsboro case might have attracted little attention outside the South, and the defendants would have been promptly executed. But in 1931 economic catastrophe was reshaping American politics. People of all races had begun questioning their country's political and economic institutions and considering radical solutions to their problems. Insisting that the depression demonstrated the failure of capitalism, members of the United States Communist party saw the Alabama case as a chance to unite workers of all races against what they called the Scottsboro Frame-Up. Though few African Americans embraced revolutionary socialism, the Communist-led Scottsboro campaign spurred various forms of black militancy, especially in urban areas. During subsequent years, black non-Communists worked with Communists to stage numerous mass protests—rallies, marches, rent strikes, union organizing, economic boycotts—to try to vanquish discrimination. The Scottsboro campaign also catalyzed heated debates about the future of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization.

Presidential politics also influenced the fate of the Scottsboro defendants and the lives of most African Americans. Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal offered an alternative to radicalism. Although Roosevelt's first priority after winning the presidency in 1932 was to restore confidence in the economic system, his administration provided relief assistance to ease the anguish of joblessness and hunger. New Deal employment and job training programs brought hope to those without jobs. Despite racial bias in the administration of some of these programs and Roosevelt's failure to support civil rights legislation, most African Americans appreciated the New Deal and some benefitted from it. In the 1936 election, many black voters switched allegiances from the Republican party o

Abraham Lincoln to the Democratic party of Roosevelt. Moreover, Roosevelt's so-called Black Cabinet the Federal Council on Negro Affairs, testified to the gradual incorporation of African Americans into the New Deal coalition, which came to include numerous black workers who participated in the expanding industrial union movement.

The cultural explosion of the Harlem Renaissance could not survive the economic downturn. Yet black writers, artists, and entertainers of the 1930s still managed to reach large multiracial audiences and influence the nation's mass culture as never before. By the early 1940s, mobilization for a new war in Europe further transformed American race relations, as wartime labor needs opened new opportunities for black workers. Meanwhile, the bestseller status of Richard Wright's provocative novel *Native Son* (1940) revealed the growing impact of black intellectuals on the nation's cultural mainstream—even as Wright's doomed young protagonist, Bigger Thomas, symbolized persistent racial divisions.



AFRICAN AMERICANS IN DESPERATE TIMES

"I did not know in that spring of 1931 that I was about to join an estimated 200,000 to 300,000 homeless boys—and a smattering of girls—between twelve and twenty, products of the Depression, who rode freights or hitchhiked from town to town in search of work," twenty-year-old Pauli Murray recalled. Unlike the Scottsboro defendants, Murray's time as a hobo was limited to one cross-country trip that ended without misfortune. She was a college student at New York's Hunter College at the time of the 1929 stock market crash, but had been forced to quit school when laid off from her restaurant waitress job. "I became one of those marginal workers who felt the first shocks of the Depression."

Although Americans of all races and backgrounds were profoundly affected by the worsening economic crisis of the 1930s, black Americans such as Pauli Murray experienced special hardships due to the added burden of racial discrimination. African Americans who had fewer employment opportunities than whites even during the best of times were especially hard hit by the crisis. As the overall unemployment rate reached 25 percent of the nation's entire workforce, the black unemployment rate was over twice that high in many cities. In once-thriving Detroit, the center of automobile production, the unemployment figure for black workers exceeded 60 percent in the early 1930s. One of thousands of African American migrants who had flooded into New York during the Harlem Renaissance, Murray and other black people encountered the intensified competition for urban jobs as the economy deteriorated.

While conditions deteriorated throughout the nation, rural black southerners experienced even more dire conditions, exacerbated by boll weevil infestations and floods. At the beginning of the 1930s, one of every two African Americans lived on farms, most of whom were tenants working on land owned by others. The fall in cotton prices—from twenty cents per pound in the early 1920s to five cents by 1933—added to the hardship. Ned Cobb was a tenant farmer in Alabama. Struggling to acquire and hold onto land despite indebtedness and dependency encouraged by the sharecropping system, the illiterate Cobb was finally able to secure a low-interest loan through a federal government program that lessened his dependency on the white landowner. As the depression dramatically reshaped American life, African Americans explored a wide range of political alternatives as they sought answers to the problems confronting them.

Dubois Ponders Political Alternatives

"The Scottsboro, Alabama, cases have brought squarely before the American Negro the question of his attitude toward Communism," W. E. B. Du Bois editorialized in the September 1931 issue of the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*. Indeed, the Scottsboro cases and the Communist-led campaign to free the defendants captured widespread attention as the depression deepened during the early 1930s. Du Bois maintained that the Communist party was cynically using the Scottsboro campaign to persuade African Americans "to join the Communist movement as the only solution to their problem." At the same time, his loyalty to the NAACP, which he had helped found two decades earlier, was being tested by his growing conviction that the organization needed to shift its direction to combat both economic deprivation and racial discrimination.

Du Bois had stirred controversy when he urged black voters to support the Socialist party's presidential candidate in the 1928 election. But just three years later, he found himself on the defensive as Communists argued that they, not the NAACP, now spearheaded civil rights efforts in the United States. In his editorial, Du Bois conceded that Communists had "made a courageous fight against the color line among the workers." But he doubted whether white workers would ever turn toward socialism or ally themselves with black workers. "Throughout the history of the Negro

First Person

Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke Describe "The Bronx Slave Market"

During the 1930s, employment opportunities for African American women were largely restricted to domestic service. The following article, prepared in 1935 by Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke, indicates that many women were forced each day to sell their labor under degrading conditions reminiscent of slavery.

Rain or shine, cold or hot, you will find them there—Negro women, old and young—sometimes bedraggled, sometimes neatly dressed—but with the invariable paper bundle, waiting expectantly for Bronx housewives to buy their strength and energy for an hour, two hours, or even for a day at the munificent rate of fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, or, if luck be with them, thirty cents an hour. If not the wives themselves, maybe their husbands, their sons, or their brothers, under the subterfuge of work, offer worldly-wise girls higher bids for their time.

Who are these women? What brings them here? Why do they stay? In the boom days before the onslaught of the depression in 1929, many of these women who are now forced to bargain for a day's work on street corners, were employed in grand homes. . . . Some are former marginal industrial workers, forced by the slack in industry to seek other means of sustenance. In many instances there had been no necessity for work at all. But whatever their standing prior to the depression, none sought employment where they now seek. They come to the Bronx, not because of what it promises, but largely in desperation.

—The Crisis, *November 1935, reprinted in Herbert Aptheker,* Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States *4, 198–199.*
For a full version of this account, please go to www.ablongman.com/carson.

in America, white labor has been the black man's enemy, his oppressor, his . . . murderer," Du Bois insisted. White workers, after all, had joined the Scottsboro mob "demanding blood sacrifice."

> "Throughout the history of the Negro in America, white labor has been the black man's enemy, his oppressor, his . . . murderer."
> —W. E. B. Du Bois

Du Bois concluded that the NAACP's strategy of achieving *gradual* reform held greater promise for African Americans than the Communists' radical effort to overthrow capitalism. "Negroes know perfectly well that whenever they try to lead revolution in America, the nation will unite as one fist to crush them and them alone," he wrote. Though most African Americans shared Du Bois's skepticism about the Communist party, a small minority found the party a source of hope in a time of desperation. Exerting influence far beyond their numbers, these black Reds provided the spark that ignited an unprecedented period of African American political militancy.

Black Reds

"WOULD YOU RATHER FIGHT OR STARVE?" Seventeen-year-old Angelo Herndon spotted this provocative headline on a leaflet he found on a Birmingham street as he walked home from work in June 1930. At first he guessed the leaflet was a call to military service. But when he read it more closely, he learned it was an invitation to attend a meeting of Birmingham's Unemployment Council. Herndon had a job. Nevertheless, he had struggled to survive since leaving home at age thirteen to work as a coal miner, as his father had done for most of his life. Lying about his age, Herndon had labored in the mines of Kentucky and northern Alabama before landing a job in Birmingham loading coal onto railway cars. He found the working conditions harsh. The racism of white foremen and bosses—who often assigned the most dangerous and lowest-paying jobs to black workers—only worsened matters.

Conditions for workers everywhere had deteriorated even further after the stock market crash of 1929. Detroit's automobile assembly lines had long symbolized America's prosperity, but by 1930, automobile plants were laying off workers and canceling orders for Birmingham's steel. Th

depression hit the nation's farmers hard as well—in their case, by continuing the long-term decline in prices for their products. Farm foreclosures as well as depressed economic conditions in Europe undermined confidence in the nation's banks. "Mines and factories were closing down; businesses failed, banks crashed," Herndon recalled. "Workers who had never been out of jobs before, suddenly found themselves tramping vainly in search of new employment."

> "Workers who had never been out of jobs before, suddenly found themselves tramping vainly in search of new employment."—*Angelo Herndon*

At the meeting sponsored by the Unemployment Council, Herndon listened to Communist organizers, both black and white, calling on workers to unite to fight "the bosses." Ignoring warnings from relatives about associating with "Reds," Herndon attended other such meetings. Within a few months he became a Communist organizer, urging other workers to join unions to fight exploitation. He had once admired "big Negro leaders" such as Du Bois, but now he decided that such "self-appointed leaders" were "lined up on the side of the capitalist class." Though Herndon had dropped out of school to become a miner, he struggled to read Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* "over and over with pained concentration." He knew the risks of affiliating with a revolutionary group; nevertheless, he decided that the Communist party offered a vision of a "radiant future" that gave him "a purpose in living, in doing, in aspiring."

The Communist party's success in recruiting black workers such as Herndon resulted from its decision during the 1920s to combat racial discrimination as well as economic oppression. In the first decade after its founding in 1919, the party had attracted only a handful of black members. Notable among them were the Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay (who soon abandoned radical politics) and a few black nationalists affiliated with the secretive African Blood Brotherhood. The party scored greater successes after 1928, however. Late in the 1920s, it followed the lead of the Communist International—the institution, dominated by the Soviet Union, that provided ideological guidance for the worldwide Communist movement—and declared that African Americans were an oppressed national group with the right of self-determination in the South's "Black Belt," where they formed a majority. The party stepped up recruitment of African Americans and established the League of Struggle for Negro Rights to fight lynching and other forms of racism.

Shortly before the Scottsboro arrests, the Communist party's racial policies were put on display at a well-attended mock trial in Harlem. The trial resulted in the expulsion of a white Communist who failed to defend a black worker being harassed at a dance. Even in the South, Communist organizers stressed that racial divisions undermined the power of workers. Herndon was impressed that the party "fought selflessly and tirelessly to undo the wrongs perpetrated upon my race. Here was no dilly-dallying, no pussyfooting on the question of full equality for the Negro people."

The Scottsboro Campaign

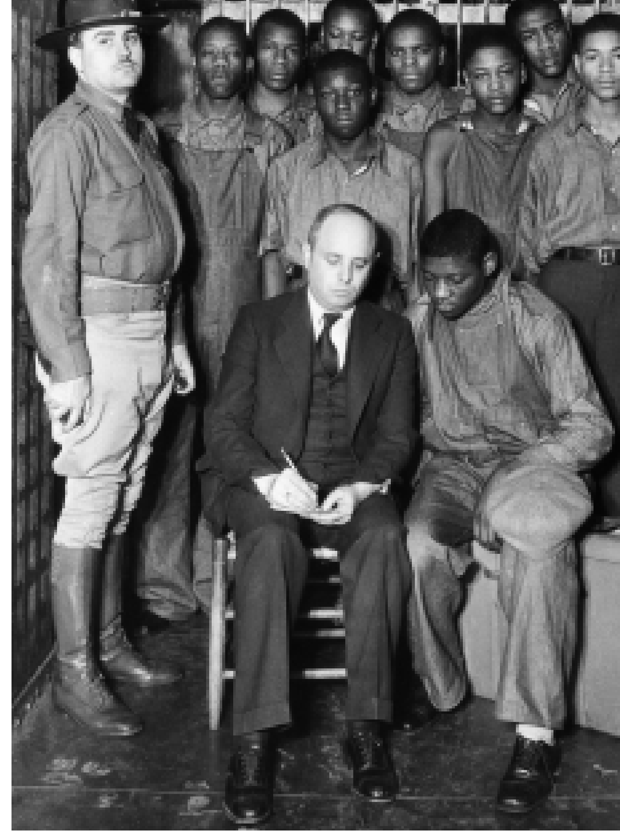
The Scottsboro trials in 1931 gave the Communist party an opportunity to demonstrate its commitment to protecting black workers' rights. Within days of the verdicts, William Patterson, the African American head of the Communist-sponsored International Labor Defense (ILD), and no relations to defendant Haywood Patterson, sent the ILD's lead attorney and other representatives to meet with the defendants and their parents. A graduate of the University of California's law school, Patterson had risked his successful legal practice in Harlem to join the Communists. After receiving instruction in Marxist theory during a stay in the Soviet Union, he quickly became one of the party's most influential black members.

The NAACP also sent lawyers to Alabama, but the ILD team argued convincingly that its strategy of combined legal appeals and mass protests offered the best chance for saving the defendants. Du Bois and NAACP executive secretary Walter White complained that the Communists were manipulating the poorly educated defendants, but the defendants saw things differently. Explaining his decision to place his fate in the hands of Communists, Haywood Patterson noted that the ILD representatives "were the first people to call on us, to show any feelings for our lives, and we were glad."

The Communist party launched a nationwide "Free the Scottsboro Boys" campaign. As the defendants awaited execution, which was scheduled for July 1931, Communists in Harlem held boisterous rallies and led marchers along Lenox Avenue, demanding "Death to Lynch Law" and "Smash the Scottsboro Frame-Up." Several demonstrations featured appearances by Janie Patterson, Haywood's mother, and Ada Wright, mother of two other defendants. Angelo Herndon, who had relocated to New Orleans to escape harassment by Birmingham police and vigilantes, enthusiastically joined the Scottsboro effort. He assembled a mass meeting of workers and helped form a Provisional Committee for the Defense of the Scottsboro Boys. He also participated in the All-Southern Conference for the Scottsboro Defense, held at the end of May in Chattanooga. Speakers

at these gatherings not only called on workers of all races to prevent the "legal lynching" but also praised the Communist party at the expense of the "reformist" NAACP. Denouncing NAACP leaders for believing that the Scottsboro defendants could receive a fair trial in Alabama, the ILD-sponsored newspaper *Liberator* remarked, "Anyone who says otherwise is trying to deceive." ILD lawyers insisted that only mass protests could free the defendants. Yet they also appealed the convictions, thereby staving off the executions and buying time to mobilize support for the Scottsboro campaign.

Much to the dismay of NAACP leaders, the Communist party's enthusiastic support of the Scottsboro defendants proved to be its most effective recruiting tool in black communities. Although some black ministers barred Communist organizers from churches because of their atheist views, the Scottsboro campaign attracted support from many sources. Early in 1932, the black poet Langston Hughes visited Alabama's Kilby Prison, where the defendants waited. The experience inspired Hughes to spread the news about "eight black boys and one white lie." He quickly crafted a one-act play titled *Scottsboro, Limited* that portrayed black workers uniting to smash an electric chair. When the play was later performed in Los Angeles, the aroused audience rose in unison at the end to chant "Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!" Though Hughes did not join the Communist party, the Scottsboro campaign brought him into close contact with party activists, and he agreed to serve as president of the party's League of Struggle for Negro Rights.



In 1931 nine young black men arrested in Scottsboro, Alabama, were charged with raping two white women on a freight train. Following legal appeals and Communist-led demonstrations to free the "Scottsboro Boys," the defendants gained new trials.

Clamping Down on Black Radicalism

Langston Hughes risked his career as a writer by associating himself with the Communist-led Scottsboro campaign, but black Communists working in the South, such as Angelo Herndon, took far more serious risks. Even without the Red label, black political activists in the region often came under violent attack from the Ku Klux Klan. Moreover, southern police and thugs hired by employers to combat unions had long targeted labor organizers. Herndon recalled finding a Klan handbill lying at his front door warning black Birmingham residents against attending "Communist meetings." The document read: "Alabama is a good place for good negroes to live in, but it is a bad place for negroes who believe in SOCIAL EQUALITY." Raymond Parks, a barber in Montgomery, Alabama, discovered that simply holding Scottsboro defense meetings in his home exposed him to the potential for violent retribution. "I didn't go to meetings because it was dangerous," his wife, Rosa, remembered. "Whenever they met, they always had someone posted as a lookout, and someone always had a gun."

Herndon found that the threat of violence loomed th largest in rural Alabama, where the Croppers and Farr Workers Union (later known as the Sharecroppers Unior had established a foothold. Despite massive black migratio from the countryside to cities during World War I and th decade afterward, most African Americans still lived in th rural South at the start of the 1930s. And three out of fou black farmers in the region were tenants working lan owned by others. Tenant farmers had to acquire staples– seed, fertilizer, farm equipment, and other items—on cred from their white landlords or from merchants, with the air of paying off those debts after harvesting the crops. Tenant who sharecropped also had to give landlords part of the harvest—usually a third or a half. This system forced most ter ants to grow commercial crops, such as cotton, rather tha the grains and vegetables they needed for their own use. Fo this reason, members of Cropper's Union demanded th right to sell their own crops rather than hand them over t their creditors for sale. They also wanted their children t be able to attend school for nine months, instead of help ing with planting and harvesting most of the year.

Just two months after the Scottsboro trials, a violent clash outside a union meeting near Camp Hill, Alabama, revealed the vulnerability of black tenants to violent intimidation. When a county sheriff and his deputies tried to break up a gathering of about 150 sharecroppers, they exchange gunfire with Ralph Gray, a union member posted to guard the meeting. Both the sheriff and Gray were wounded. Later, the white posse tracked Gray to his home and killed him. During the next few days, vigilantes discouraged further union activity by attacking black farmers and arresting dozens of union members on charges of conspiracy to murder. The ILD immediately publicized the Camp Hill tragedy and eventually secured the release of most of those arrested by arguing that there was insufficient evidence of wrongdoing. The following year, Ned Cobb's decision to join the union caused him to become involved in another bloody clash between union supporters and sheriff's deputies sent to confiscate a black farmer's property. Cobb would later recount his decision to join the union and his subsequent imprisonment in *All God's Dangers*, a vivid autobiography (dictated under the pseudonym Nate Shaw).

Herndon moved to Atlanta in 1932 to continue his organizing activities and soon became the central figure in another major protest campaign. After he led a thousand black and white workers to Atlanta's courthouse to demand increased funding for economic relief, police arrested him for "attempting to incite insurrection." Facing a possible death sentence, Herndon defiantly turned his 1933 trial into a forum on injustice. He proclaimed to the jury, "If the State of Georgia and the City of Atlanta think that by locking up Angelo Herndon, the question of unemployment will be solved, I say you are deadly wrong. If you really want to do anything about the case, you must go out and indict the social system."

Like the Scottsboro trials, Herndon's plight provided a rallying point for Communists, who began organizing demonstrations on his behalf. Black attorney Benjamin J. Davis Jr., the son of a wealthy Republican realtor and a graduate of Morehouse, Amherst, and Harvard Law School, volunteered to defend Herndon at no charge. Though lacking in trial experience, Davis devoted all his energies to the case. When Herndon was nonetheless convicted and sentenced to twenty years on a Georgia chain gang, the undaunted Davis appealed the conviction and resolved to continue working on behalf of workers. (The Supreme Court overturned Herndon's conviction in 1937.) As Davis later explained, "I entered the trial as [Herndon's] lawyer and ended it as his Communist comrade." Davis later became editor of the *Harlem Liberator* and began a rise to political prominence that culminated in 1943, when he won election to the New York City Council—the first Communist to hold such a position in the United States.

Election of 1932

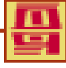
Herndon's imprisonment revealed the considerable obstacles facing Communist organizers in the South. Yet even in northern cities, the party found it difficult to garner mass support in black communities. As the 1932 presidential election approached, the Communist party attempted to strengthen its black support by running a black vice presidential candidate—James W. Ford, a Fisk graduate radicalized by his military experiences in World War I. Still, few African Americans who were able to vote felt comfortable casting their vote for a controversial party that had no chance of winning the election.

Though Republican candidate Herbert Hoover had presided over the economic tailspin of the previous three years, many black voters despaired at the thought of breaking their traditional ties to the party of Abraham Lincoln. Others viewed the Democratic candidate, Franklin D. Roosevelt, with skepticism. Though Roosevelt's record as governor of New York had shown him to be liberal on many issues, he had never supported civil rights reforms. Furthermore, the Democratic party had historically allied itself with labor unions that excluded black workers.

Roosevelt swept the election, capturing more than 57 percent of the votes cast. Although the Republican party still retained the support of most black voters, Democrats made substantial gains in northern black communities. The Communist ticket received slightly more than 100,000 votes, less than 1 percent of the total turnout. This was less than one-eighth the votes cast for the Socialist Party's Norman Thomas, the candidate favored by Du Bois as a nonrevolutionary alternative to the major candidates.

As his first priority on taking office in March 1933, Roosevelt set out to restore confidence in the economic system. He said nothing about addressing racial problems. Still, his administration soon adopted policies that would affect the lives of many African Americans. In addition to regulating the banking system and securities trading, the new president quickly won passage of a series of measures that became known as the New Deal. Through relief programs, the New Deal's architects sought to provide immediate assistance to workers seeking food, shelter, and jobs. In some southern states, local agencies that received funding from the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) discriminated against black recipients. Yet, for many African Americans, such relief programs provided essential sustenance. Similarly, thousands of black workers benefited from federal programs that provided jobs and training, such as the Public Works Administration (PWA), the Civil Works Administration (CWA), and the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). In time, such relief programs prompted blacks to shift their atti-

tude about Roosevelt and the Democratic party. For the first time since the days of the Freedmen's Bureau, established after the Civil War, the federal government undertook new assistance programs that provided tangible benefits and hope to millions of African Americans. The Communists had promised more than the Democrats, but Roosevelt demonstrated that he could deliver.



BLACK MILITANCY

For the NAACP, the upsurge of Communist agitation and the launching of Roosevelt's New Deal posed a dilemma. Under the leadership of executive secretary Walter White, the nation's largest civil rights organization struggled to build a mass following in black communities while also attracting the support of powerful white people. White's decision to withdraw the NAACP from the controversial Scottsboro case drew criticism from African Americans who saw the group as overly cautious. W. E. B. Du Bois, editor of the NAACP's journal *The Crisis*, initially agreed with White's view that the Communists were exploiting the Scottsboro case and rejected their allegations that the NAACP was unwilling to assist the defendants. "Whatever the NAACP has lacked," he wrote, "it is neither dishonest nor cowardly." Nevertheless, Du Bois came to agree with the Communists' view that merely providing legal assistance to the Scottsboro defendants "will never solve the larger Negro problem but that further and more radical steps are needed."

A New Course for the NAACP

As the economy continued spiraling downward in the early 1930s, Du Bois and other NAACP members grew increasingly dissatisfied with White's dedicated but cautious leadership. At the organization's annual convention in 1932, Du Bois insisted that the NAACP would never achieve its goals unless it abandoned the notion of working "*for* the black masses but not *with* them." While rejecting calls for revolution, Du Bois was drawn to Marxist notions of class struggle. He urged delegates to seek economic as well as political change and to view America's racial problems through an international lens. During 1933, he provoked debate within the NAACP by publishing an essay in *The Crisis* titled "Marxism and the Negro Problem."

Du Bois also promoted a gathering of some of the best-educated black leaders—whom he called the "talented tenth"—to define economic as well as civil rights goals for the NAACP. He handpicked the thirty-three people who met in Amenia, New York, at the estate of NAACP board chai man Joel Spingarn in August 1933. Du Bois made certai that invitations went to up and coming professionals an academics, most of them just half his age. The select grou included eleven women. Several of these, such as Ann Arnold Hedgeman, were affiliated with the Young Women Christian Association, one of the few national interraci organizations in which black women held leadership pos tions. A brashly confident contingent from Howard Un versity exerted considerable influence over the discussion sometimes even pushing Du Bois toward a greater empha sis on economic rather than racial concerns. This grou included political scientist Ralph Bunche, economist Abra Harris, and Howard Law School dean Charles Housto Fisk sociologist E. Franklin Frazier, a brilliant young schol who would soon join Howard's faculty, also participated.

Like Du Bois, these scholars had studied at leadin research universities (Bunche and Houston at Harvard, Ha ris at Columbia, and Frazier at University of Chicago). The shared the leftist views of many white intellectuals of th period and hungered to devote their skills to the cause c social justice. Most of them agreed with Du Bois's dismiss of Communist calls for violent revolution. Yet they sa enormous promise in interracial efforts to unionize indu trial workers.

The young intellectuals at the Amenia Conferenc proved unable to shift the NAACP's direction—a failure th disappointed Du Bois. At the same time, he had his ow doubts about the feasibility of working-class unity in th United States, where white laborers had long victimize black workers. Instead, Du Bois urged Pan-African unit and the building of strong institutions within black com munities. A decade earlier, he had denounced Marcus Ga vey as "either a lunatic or a traitor" for promoting simila ideas, but Du Bois placed his faith in locally based institu tions rather than a single national organization such as Ga vey's United Negro Improvement Association. In a Januar 1934 *Crisis* editorial titled "Segregation," Du Bois ques tioned the NAACP's single-minded devotion to integra tionist policies. He feared that these policies implied "distaste or unwillingness of colored people to work wit each other, to cooperate with each other, to live with eac other." Instead, he wrote, "it is the race-conscious black ma cooperating together in his own institutions and movemen who will eventually emancipate the colored race."

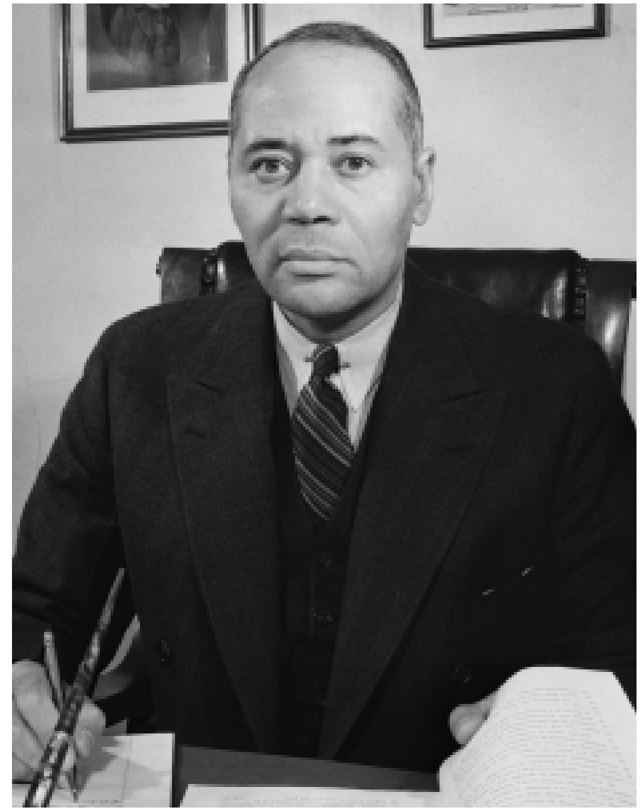
White and other NAACP leaders worried that som readers might mistake the *Crisis* editor's views for the orga nization's official position. Du Bois added fuel to the fire h had lit when he questioned the fair-skinned White's abilit to comprehend racism: "He goes where he will in New Yor City and naturally meets no Color Line, for the simple an

sufficient reason that he isn't 'colored.'" Soon the NAACP board ordered Du Bois to stop using *The Crisis* to criticize the organization's politics. Du Bois defiantly published his resignation letter in the August 1934 issue. "If I criticize within, my words fall on deaf ears," he complained. "If I criticize openly, I seem to be washing dirty linen in public." Du Bois then left New York for Atlanta University, where he had already accepted President John Hope's invitation to teach.

At this point, Du Bois might have retired; he was sixty-six years old. Instead, he began a new, remarkably productive period of study, scholarship, and activism that would last almost three decades. In 1935 he published *Black Reconstruction in America*. This important and controversial historical study challenged the conventional view of the Civil War era by suggesting that a "general strike" by slaves had contributed to Union victory and that the black masses had influenced the democratic reforms of Reconstruction. During the next few years, Du Bois would also write *Black Folk: Then and Now* (1939) and *Dusk of Dawn: An Autobiography of the Concept of Race* (1940). In 1940 he launched *Phylon: A Journal of Race and Culture.*

Within the NAACP, White had prevailed over Du Bois. Nonetheless, Du Bois's criticisms, together with the nation's economic collapse and new developments in the Scottsboro case, finally forced a shift in the NAACP's direction. When Scottsboro defense lawyer Samuel Leibowitz asked for help as preparations got underway for a third set of trials, White agreed to a Scottsboro Defense Committee led by moderates rather than Communists. For Patterson and the other defendants, this development made little difference. They were convicted once more, though this time spared the death penalty. In 1937, however, the committee gained the release of four of the defendants. Haywood Patterson remained imprisoned, however, and by this time had adapted himself to the violent realities of prison life. "I had faith in my knife," he remembered. "It had saved me many times."

Walter White continued the NAACP's efforts to pass federal anti-lynching legislation, and Charles Houston, the Howard Law School dean who became the organization's first full-time attorney and head of its legal department, launched a new campaign against school desegregation. An exceptional law student, Houston had been the first African American editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. As dean he proved a strict taskmaster, unwilling to accept anything less than excellence. One of his students, Thurgood Marshall, remembered Houston as a "very brilliant, very decent person," but a demanding mentor: "He used to tell us, in our first year, to look at the man on your right and look at the man on your left, and bear in mind that two of you won't be here next year. Well, that sort of kept your feet to the fire." Howard students sometimes derided Houston as Iron Shoes or Cement Pants. Yet the exacting dean, along with



Instrumental in training a new generation of civil rights lawyers, Charles Houston was legal counsel to the NAACP. He worked with Thurgood Marshall in a legal assault against segregation in the United States.

his colleague William Hastie (also a distinguished Harvard graduate), transformed Howard's law school into a demanding training ground for attorneys who would spearhead the equal rights movement. Marshall stuck it out and graduated first in his class in 1933; later he replaced his mentor as director of the NAACP's legal campaign.

At the NAACP, Houston and the lawyers he recruited sought to identify cases that would expose obvious racial inequities, especially in the field of public education. They set out to force states to undertake the expensive and often impractical task of living up to the separate-but-equal standard of *Plessy* v. *Ferguson.* When the University of Missouri Law School rejected the application of a black resident, Lloyd Gaines, solely on racial grounds, Houston had his opportunity. He promptly argued that Gaines was denied equal protection rights guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1938, the Supreme Court accepted the argument. In *Missouri ex rel.* v. *Canada*, the court declared that Missouri must make legal training available to qualified residents regardless of race. Previously focused on its unsuc-

cessful anti-lynching campaign, the NAACP had broadened the battlefield to secure civil rights for African Americans.

Black Nationalists

Few within the NAACP challenged the notion that enforcing the separate-but-equal principle was simply a means toward the eventual goal of integration, but many African Americans were convinced that integration was an unrealistic objective. The hunger and joblessness wrought by the depression not only sparked leftist radicalism but also a reinvigorated black nationalism. Despite the exile of Marcus Garvey, some UNIA groups remained active. Malcolm X later recalled that his father, Earl Little, served as an organizer for the United Negro Improvement Association until his death in 1931—at the hands of white racists, Malcolm believed.

But the depression also spurred the emergence of independent black nationalists, often street-corner orators who attracted followings in New York and other cities. In Chicago, groups such as the Ethiopian Peace Movement and the National Movement for a Forty-Ninth State sprang up. A Chicago firebrand named Sufi Abdul Hamid initiated a "Don't Buy Where You Can't Work" campaign that soon spread to other cities. Hamid later gained the nickname "Harlem Hitler" when he moved to New York and launched boycotts targeting Jewish businesses. In Detroit, former Garveyite Elijah Poole joined the Nation of Islam, a small sect established by itinerate peddler Master Fard Muhammad. The Nation's founder claimed that Allah (God) was a black man who would someday return "the so-called Negro" to a position of superiority over "white devils." Poole, who changed his name to Elijah Muhammad, became the group's new leader when his predecessor mysteriously disappeared in 1934. While most unconventional black religious figures experienced only fleeting success during the depression, Muhammad managed to retain a small yet loyal following through the 1940s and 1950s.

Italy's invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 prompted an upsurge of concern among African Americans with a wide range of political views. While Communists saw Ethiopia as a victim of fascism, black nationalists viewed it as a black-ruled African nation that had maintained its independence since biblical times. Indeed, for many African American Christians, Ethiopia, the site of the ancient Abyssinian civilization, had long symbolized the historical connections between Africa and Christianity. The anthem of Garvey's UNIA began with a reference to "Ethiopia, thou land of our fathers." Some black nationalists, including members of the Chicago-based Ethiopian Peace Movement, even sought to emigrate there. Black newspapers gave extensive coverage to the brutal suppression of Ethiopian resistors by the military forces of Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. Black supporters of the Ethiopian cause formed groups such as th
Ethiopian World Federation Council to mobilize protes
and gather food and supplies to send to the besieged natio
Despite all these efforts, however, Ethiopia would not regai
its independence until World War II.

During this volatile decade, educator and historia
Carter G. Woodson became one of the period's most artic
ulate proponents of the black nationalist tradition. Wood
son was not affiliated with any black nationalist grou
However, throughout his professional life, he had draw
attention to African American historical achievements. I
1915 he founded the Association for the Study of Negro an
History, and in 1926 he initiated Negro History Week. I
his influential book *The Mis-Education of the Negro* (1933
Woodson expressed his strong sense of racial pride throug
his critique of higher education. Though Woodson himse
had a PhD in history from Harvard, he (like Booker
Washington) denounced educational institutions tha
estranged black students from the black masses while fai
ing to provide them with the practical knowledge neede
to uplift the race. Higher education, he argued, should serv
"as preparation to think and work out a program to serv
the lowly rather than to live as an aristocrat." Woodson fu
ther insisted that black advancement should be "based o
the scientific study of the Negro from within to develop i
him the power to do for himself what his oppressors wi
never do to elevate him to the level of others." Like Du Boi
Woodson saw the overthrow of capitalism as unlikely in the United States. He remarked in *Mis-Education*, "If the Negro has to wait until that time to try to improve his condition he will be starved out so soon th
he will not be here to tell the story." Nevertheless, he argue
"The Negro needs to become radical, and the race will neve
amount to anything until it does become so, but this rad
calism should come from within."

"The Negro needs to become radical."—*Carter G Woodson*

Social Gospel Ministers

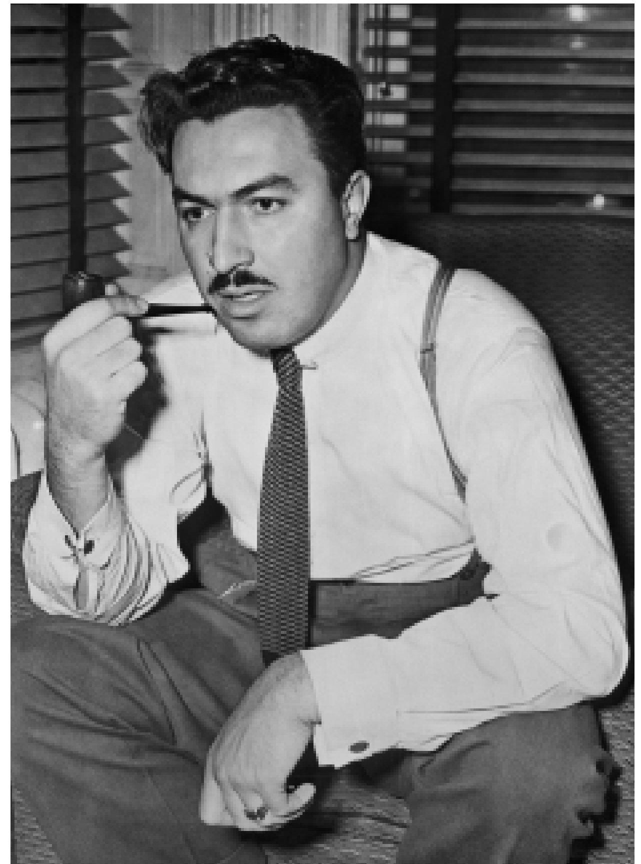
Neither Du Bois nor Woodson saw most African America
religious leaders as positive forces for social change. A
agnostic who rarely attended church, Du Bois once com
plained that "pure-minded, efficient, unselfish" black minis
ters were far outnumbered by "pretentious, ill-trained me
who were often "dishonest and otherwise immoral." Not su
prisingly, Du Bois had omitted ministers from his Amen
invitation list. Woodson similarly saw black clergymen
among those who had been "mis-educated." Most Africa
American ministers, he charged, borrowed their ideas fro

"the oppressors of the race" and were either illiterate or "trained to drift away from the masses." He believed they were unprepared to confront the real, everyday problems burdening black Americans. He also felt that the scant resources of African Americans were divided over their numerous denominations and self-governing churches and thus could have little impact on the problems. Yet Woodson applauded the minority of clergymen "who today are endeavoring to carry out the principles of Jesus long since repudiated by most Christians." He was referring to black clergymen who advocated a "social gospel" version of Christianity to address the economic problems of the Great Depression.

Among these social gospel advocates was Martin Luther King Sr., a Morehouse graduate who succeeded his father-in-law as pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church in 1931. In 1935 King led a voting rights march through downtown Atlanta, and he later orchestrated an effort to raise the salaries of black public school teachers to the levels of their white counterparts. He expressed the basic social gospel message when he advised other ministers: "Quite often we say the church has no place in politics, forgetting the words of the Lord, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the broken-hearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised.'"

Harlem's Adam Clayton Powell Jr. similarly combined religious and political leadership after a privileged childhood as the son of the well-known pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church. While an undergraduate at Colgate, Powell briefly passed for white, drawing a stern rebuke from his father. But after succeeding to his father's pulpit in 1937, he became a crusader for social justice. Powell helped form the Greater New York Coordinating Committee for Employment, which used picketing and boycotts to pressure businesses to hire more black workers.

As the large urban black churches turned increasingly to college-educated ministers such as King and Powell for leadership, others without educational credentials also played important roles in African American religious life. One of the most unconventional of the religious leaders to gain prominence in the 1930s was the largely self-educated, charismatic preacher George Baker, better known as Father Divine. After arriving in New York shortly before World War I, Divine convinced a growing number of white as well as black followers that he was "the true and living God." In 1932, officials of the Long Island community where he had purchased a house prosecuted him for disturbing the peace by holding integrated gatherings of his Peace Mission. When the judge who sentenced him to a year in jail suddenly dropped dead three days afterward, Divine added to his legend by asserting, "I hated to do it."



During the Great Depression, Harlem minister Adam Clayton Powell established himself as a civil rights leader, campaigning to feed the poor and gain better employment opportunities for African Americans in New York City.

Many self-serving cult leaders simply enriched themselves at the expense of gullible, mostly female followers. But Divine's movement, which reached as far as California, proved a complex blend of idealism and hucksterism. While stressing spiritual enrichment rather than political activism, Divine nonetheless encouraged his followers to support the Scottsboro and Herndon defense campaigns and similar causes. Despite being embroiled in frequent financial and sexual scandals, he developed self-help programs, such as Peace Kitchens, that responded to the material as well as spiritual needs of his "angels." Even Du Bois grudgingly acknowledged Divine's achievements: "As a social movement there can be no question but that it has helped many people who need help." When Divine submitted to an interview by Claude McKay during the mid-1930s, he insisted that his programs had a longer reach than even those of the Communist party. McKay reported that Divine was "willing to cooperate in his own way with the Communists or any group that was fighting for international peace and eman-

First Person

Adam Clayton Powell Jr. and the Fight for Jobs

As African Americans endured the general decline in the American economy, they also attacked employment discrimination with a new sense of militancy. In New York, as in many other cities, boycotts provided an effective weapon against retail stores that had black customers but few or no black employees. As pastor of a church with more than ten thousand members, Powell became a major figure in Harlem's campaign to end employment discrimination. Later, he built on this success when he launched a long political career.

The Coordinating Committee for Employment is beginning a serious business in Harlem. It is beginning a fight for jobs. It has asked for work. It has pleaded for work. It has held conferences. It has utilized every means at its disposal to get the employees of New York City to stop starving the Negroes of New York. These means have failed. The Committee is now inaugurating a mass boycott and picketing of every enterprise in Greater New York that refuses to employ Negroes. The Gas and Electric Company has seen the light, the telephone company must also. The big department stores must follow suit. If Negroes can work at Ovington's, Wanamaker's, Macy's and Bloomingdale's, then an appreciable percentage must work at Gimbel's, Klein's, Hear's, Saks and other stores. The milk companies are next. No more subterfuges, no more passing the buck, but black faces must appear on Harlem milk wagons immediately or the milk concerns shall be boycotted. Three hundred and fifty thousand consumers are not anything to be sneezed at and if anyone dares try to sneeze, we are killing him with the worst cold he ever had. The same thing goes for the Metropolitan Life. As long as we have Negro insurance companies there is no reason why Negroes should pay one cent to any other insurance company that refuses to employ Negroes.

—Adam Clayton Powell Jr., "Soap Box" (regular column) New York Amsterdam News, *7 May 1938, p. 11.*
For a full version of this account, please go to www.ablongman.com/carson.

cipation of people throughout the world and against any form of segregation and racial discrimination." McKay added: "He had come to free every nation, every language, every tongue, and every people. He did not need the Communists or any other organization, but they needed him."

Activist Black Intellectuals

Charles Houston's transformation of Howard's law school provided but one example of what made the university an exciting intellectual center during the 1930s. Most college campuses buzzed with political activism during the depression. But black students at black colleges in the South were discouraged from political expression by college presidents—who had to answer to white trustees. Even at Howard, Mordecai Johnson, the university's first black president, suppressed student protests. On the other hand, he worked to attract talented black faculty members. Many of them had scholarly credentials that would have gained them teaching positions at leadin predominantly white universities—if racial barriers ha not existed in academia.

Writer Alain Locke, a distinguished contributor to th Harlem Renaissance, was already on the Howard facult when Johnson took over in 1926. During the next ten year the university raised standards and faculty salaries to attrac major scholars. These included Rayford Logan in histor Sterling Brown in literature, and Charles Drew in medicin as well as Amenia Conference participants Abram Harri Ralph Bunche, and E. Franklin Frazier. Several of these professors tested Johnson's constraints. For example, Bunch joined the Scottsboro Defense Committee. With help fro Howard law professor William Hastie, he also founded th New Negro Alliance to launch boycotts against businesse that discriminated against black workers.

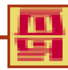
International events, especially the rise of fascism i Europe and the stirrings of anticolonialism in Africa, furthe intensified political militancy among black intellectual

During these years, Bunche—who wrote his doctoral dissertation on French colonialism in Africa—met with many African leaders, including Kenya's Jomo Kenyatta, who would later lead independence movements in his country. In 1936, Bunche's influential *World View of Race* predicted that racial conflict would soon give way to "the gigantic class war which will be waged in the big tent we call the world."

> "The gigantic class war . . . will be waged in the big tent we call the world."—*Ralph Bunche*

The success of Roosevelt's New Deal eventually confirmed the view of Bunche and other activist intellectuals that the United States could solve its economic problems without revolution. By the mid-1930s, some of the outspoken intellectuals who had attended the Amenia Conference had considered or accepted positions in New Deal agencies. Even some Communists gladly took new federal jobs as the Roosevelt administration began providing jobs and other direct aid to the unemployed. Federal employment programs—most notably those under the Works Progress Administration (WPA)—restored hope to millions of Americans and contributed to Roosevelt's growing support in black communities.

Although New Deal programs addressed economic rather than racial problems, they forced African Americans to rethink their political views. Instead of revolutionary activism or mass protest, it was the Roosevelt administration that emerged as the most significant new political force of the 1930s. And it was a Roosevelt appointee who emerged as the most influential African American of the period.



A NEW DEAL FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS?

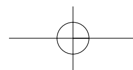
"Don't you realize this is the first such post created for a Negro woman in the U.S.?" pleaded Aubrey Williams, head of the National Youth Administration (NYA). Williams was striving to persuade Mary McLeod Bethune to join his New Deal agency, which provided training and part-time jobs for students to enable them to stay in school. Two weeks earlier, Bethune had caught President Roosevelt's attention when she presented a report concluding that NYA wages of $15 to $20 per month "meant real salvation for thousands of Negro young people" and brought "life and spirit" to people "who for so long have been in darkness." In the report, Bethune had added that she was speaking not for herself but "as the voice of 14,000,000 Americans who seek to achieve full citizenship." After concluding her moving testimony, Bethune recalled "a stillness in the room" and tears flowing from the president's eyes. Impressed by Bethune's accomplishments as an educator and by her forthright manner, Roosevelt decided she had to join his administration.

Mary McLeod Bethune

Initially, Bethune hesitated to leave her position as founding president of Florida's Bethune-Cookman College, but she recognized the historic significance of her decision finally to accept Roosevelt's invitation. "I visualized dozens of Negro women coming after me, filling positions of high trust and strategic importance." When Aubrey Williams took Bethune to the White House to discuss her new role with Roosevelt, she assured the president, "I shall give it the best that I have." Roosevelt observed to Williams, "Mrs. Bethune is a great woman. I believe in her because she has her feet on the ground; not only on the ground, but deep down in the ploughed soil."

Even before she accepted the position that would make her Roosevelt's most influential black appointee, Bethune had demonstrated remarkable perseverance and leadership skills. Born in 1875 in Mayesville, South Carolina, the fifteenth child of former slaves, she had left cotton farming to found a small girls' school in Daytona Beach, Florida. She often remarked that she had opened the school with her savings of $1.50. Yet it was her shrewd appeals to white businessmen vacationing in Florida and to black entrepreneurs—such as hair-care distributor Madame C. J. Walker—that enabled Daytona Normal and Industrial Institute to flourish. In 1923, the school merged with nearby Cookman Institute to become Bethune-Cookman College. The following year, Bethune's prominence expanded when she was elected president of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). Walking the middle ground between racial militancy and accommodation, she emerged as the most revered black educator of the period after Booker T. Washington's death. She also became a major figure in the NAACP and the National Urban League. Republican presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover sought her advice on racial issues.

As Bethune's national influence grew, organizations around the country jockeyed to invite her to speak. Known for her distinctive flair for fashion—long capes, colorful jewelry, and a cane carried for "swank"—and her strong



In 1935, Mary McLeod Bethune founded the National Council of Negro Women in New York. Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed her as Director of the Division of Negro Affairs of the National Youth Administration, a position she occupied from 1936 to 1943. She was particularly well suited to this rol because it allowed her to reach the nation's black youth with her zeal fo education. Roosevelt also considered her one of his foremost advisers in the unofficial "Black Cabinet" in his administration.

sense of racial pride, she often said of herself, "Look at me, I am black, I am beautiful." Her down-to-earth, direct manner enabled her to get along with a wide range of people. These included Langston Hughes, who came to appreciate Bethune when he accepted her invitation to travel through the South in 1931. Hughes recalled that Bethune "was a wonderful sport, riding all day without complaint in our cramped, hot little car, jolly and talkative, never grumbling." During the trip, Bethune's many friends and admirers provided housing and food. Their generosity prompted Hughes to remark that chickens fled upon Bethune's arrival: "They knew some necks would surely be wrung in her honor."

"Look at me, I am black, I am beautiful."—*Mary McLeod Bethune*

Bethune's ability to collaborate with people who held differing views served her well as a New Dealer. For example, she jauntily deflected racial slights as she carried out her duties. When a White House guard called her "Auntie," she quipped, "Which one of my brother's children are you' She realized that Roosevelt himself was no racial liberal, a least at the start of his presidency, but instead was a patr cian accustomed to seeing blacks in subordinate roles. H even used the epithet "nigger" in private conversations. Th president was also reluctant to support civil rights reform that would offend the southern segregationist politician nearly all of them Democrats, who provided crucial suppo for his New Deal programs.

But Roosevelt did select a few white proponents o racial equality—such as Bethune's boss Aubrey Williams— for important posts in his administration. Secretary of th Interior Harold Ickes, a progressive who once headed th Chicago NAACP, had appointed the New Deal's first blac official, Harvard-trained economist Robert Weaver. Bethur and Weaver, both "advisors for Negro affairs," became vis ble symbols of racial progress. Rather than setting New De policies, even on racial issues, they instead persuaded pow erful whites to follow their recommendations. The talente black professionals joining the Roosevelt administration als included William Hastie, who left the Howard law facult to become assistant solicitor of the Interior Department.

First Person T. Arnold Hill and the Negro Worker in the 1930s

As executive secretary of the Chicago Urban League and then as director of the National Urban League's Department of Industrial Relations, T. Arnold Hill was well placed to study the New Deal's impact on African Americans. The following excerpt from a report published in 1937 draws on the many surveys conducted by federal and state governments as well as private organizations.

No group suffered more severe devastation in the depression period than did the workers in agriculture and household employment—the two major classifications in which Negroes predominate. Government reports teem with evidence of unemployment and dire want throughout the agricultural regions of the country. The number of workers in the domestic service classification who found themselves on relief during the whole period of unemployment, was greatly out of proportion to the rest of the workers. . . .

Fully 90 percent of Negro workers in industry fall into the marginal or unskilled class. This accounts for the terrific amount of unemployment among Negroes in cities; which, as is commonly known, is out of proportion to their actual numbers in the population.

—*For a full version of this account, please go to www.ablongman.com/carson.*

Among the dozen or so black appointees of the Roosevelt administration, Bethune quickly became the most visible and most effective black advocate. Although previously a Republican, Bethune soon developed an intense loyalty to President Roosevelt. She not only gained the president's confidence but also forged strong ties with the president's politically active wife, Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she had met in 1924 while attending a luncheon of women leaders at the Roosevelt family home in New York. As this relationship deepened during the 1930s, Bethune encouraged the First Lady's growing commitment to racial equality and often influenced the president through her. By 1935, when the NAACP honored Bethune with its annual Spingarn Medal, she had become the nation's best-connected black leader. Drawing on her rich array of contacts, she brought together all the major black women's organizations to form a new umbrella group, the National Council of Negro Women.

Realizing that African Americans had mixed opinions about the New Deal, Bethune urged the president to tackle racial discrimination even as she defended him against his harshest black critics. Yet despite her pleas, Roosevelt refused to support the NAACP's proposed anti-lynching legislation. He also did little to address complaints of racial discrimination in the distribution of Federal Employment Relief Administration funds in southern communities, where relief payments were seen as encouraging black laborers to turn down low-wage jobs.

Black Critics of the New Deal

Despite her own doubts about New Deal programs, Bethune sometimes served as a restraining influence on more critical black appointees, such as Robert Weaver and William Hastie. Weaver, an Harvard-educated expert on labor policies, was aware of the limitations as well as the benefits of the New Deal with respect to African Americans. In a 1935 article published in the Urban League's journal *Opportunity*, he noted that there had been racial "abuses" in the distribution of relief payments. "We can admit that we have gained from the relief program and still fight to receive greater and more equitable benefits from it," he wrote. Weaver's concerns were shared by other black intellectuals, both inside and outside the Roosevelt administration. In 1935 John P. Davis, a black economist who had collaborated with Weaver to monitor the impact of federal programs on African Americans, persuaded Bunche to call a conference at Howard University billed "The Status of the Negro under the New Deal." Although most participants in this conference supported the New Deal, the discussions at Howard made clear that many black intellectuals were becoming increasingly vocal in their criticism of Roosevelt's policies.

Early the following year, as Roosevelt began preparing his reelection campaign, Davis, Bunche, and other black critics of the New Deal convened a major gathering that drew more than 800 representatives of 585 black organizations to Chicago. This conference inspired the formation of the National Negro Congress (NNC), with black labor

■ TABLE 15.1 African Americans on Unemployment Relief, 1935

From the list of selected cities which follows, the percent of African Americans among employables on relief in 1935 was greatly in excess of the ratio of African Americans to the total population.

City	Percent African Americans in total population: 1930	Percent African Americans among employables on relief:1935
Atlanta, Ga.	33.4	65.7
Birmingham, Ala.	38.2	63.3
Charlotte, N.C.	30.4	75.2
Cincinnati, Oh.	10.6	43.5
Kansas City, Mo.	9.6	37.2
New York, N.Y.	4.7	11.2
Norfolk, Va.	33.9	81.3
St. Louis, Mo.	11.4	41.5
Wilmington, Del.	11.3	43.9

leader A. Philip Randolph as president and Davis as executive director. Although internal disputes between Communists and non-Communists soon weakened the new organization, during its initial years, the group strengthened bonds between established African American organizations, such as the NAACP and Urban League, and black activists (including Bunche, Randolph, and Davis) who saw the New Deal as merely the first step toward more far-reaching social change. As Randolph's keynote speech insisted, "The New Deal is no remedy. It does not seek to change the profit system. It does not place human rights above property rights, but gives business interests the support of the State."

Bethune did not participate in the Chicago conference. But later in 1936, she provided a forum for constructive criticism of the New Deal when she invited Weaver and other black officials of the Roosevelt administration to a meeting at her home. This gathering resulted in the formation of the Federal Council on Negro Affairs, an informal group that journalists soon described as the Black Cabinet. Though no member of the group actually held a cabinet position (thirty years later, Weaver would become the first African American to hold such a position), the so-called Black Cabinet enabled the growing number of black New Dealers to exchange views on the racial impact of New Deal programs. Bethune's leading role in the group also enhanced her visibility as a symbol of black participation in the Roosevelt Administration.

By the 1936 election, Roosevelt had successfully countered black criticism through his savvy appointments of African Americans. More and more blacks concluded that the New Deal, despite its limitations, constituted their best avai able political option. Even members of the Communist part shifted their stance regarding the New Deal from open hosti ity to more measured criticism. With the threat of fascism i Europe and the growing success of industrial union move ments in the United States, American Communists adopted Popular Front strategy—working with liberals and non-Com munist socialists to achieve reforms short of revolution. Th party's decision to cede control of the Scottsboro cases to th Scottsboro Defense Committee was part of this strategy.

During the 1936 presidential election, the Communis party again ran its own candidate, with Ford once more a his black running mate. This time, the party focused i campaign on attacking "ruling class" opponents of the Nev Deal. In a historic shift of black political allegiance, a majo ity of black voters abandoned the Republican party to sup port the Democrat Roosevelt—who won by a landslide. historian later estimated that Roosevelt captured an over whelming 81 percent of Harlem's black vote and exceede his nationwide 60.8 percentage in many other black com munities. For the first time, African Americans became pa of the northern liberal-labor coalition that competed wit southern conservatives for control of the Democratic part

After the election, Bethune asserted herself as forcefull as she thought prudent against racial bias in New Deal pro grams. In her view, gradual progress through New Dea reforms offered far more potential than "the quicksands o revolution or the false promises of communism or fascism Indeed, the early years of Roosevelt's second term marke the high point of New Deal social programs. In addition t providing food and shelter to unemployed men an women, Bethune's NYA, the CCC, and the WPA all offere jobs and training to needy individuals of every race. Fo many black workers, these programs provided the bes wages they had ever received.

Still, some blacks continued to voice their disconten with racial bias in New Deal programs during Roosevelt second term. Rather than seeking to muzzle these criticism in 1937 Bethune called on black leaders throughout th nation to attend a conference at Howard Univerity to offe recommendations for addressing black Americans' prob lems. "Until now, opportunities have not been offered fo Negroes themselves to suggest a comprehensive progran for the full integration of benefits and responsibilities o American democracy," she remarked.

The report that resulted from the National Conferenc on the Problems of the Negro and Negro Youth provided balanced assessment of the New Deal. In the document, th delegates conceded that African Americans had receive unprecedented benefits from the New Deal. But they blunt acknowledged the New Deal's limitations: "It is a matter o common knowledge that the Negro has not shared equitabl

in all of the services the Government offers its citizens." The delegates proposed that the federal government take over control of New Deal programs from state and local officials to prevent further racial discrimination. They also urged that minimum-wage and overtime-wage rules as well as Social Security coverage be extended to the two largest categories of black workers—agricultural laborers and domestic servants. Additional recommendations included the enactment of anti-lynching legislation, reduction of the standard work week to thirty hours in order to create more jobs, and denial of collective-bargaining rights to unions that excluded black workers. The delegates further suggested that the government expand federal employment opportunities for black Americans and purchase farmland and resell it to black tenant farmers or small cooperatives.

In 1938, Bethune went further to address the New Deal's limitations. She persuaded Eleanor Roosevelt to join her at the founding meeting of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama. The new group defined a daunting mission: to attack the South's especially severe economic problems, which affected whites *and* blacks. Bethune and Roosevelt knew that the Jim Crow system hampered the effectiveness of New Deal programs in the South, but they were also hesitant to take steps that would anger southern white Democrats whose support Roosevelt needed. When local sheriff Eugene "Bull" Connor insisted on segregated seating at the meeting, Roosevelt tried to find neutral ground between militancy and caution by sitting in the middle aisle. Press reports of her action impressed many black Americans, but a black Communist organizer who attended the meeting complained that Bethune and Roosevelt should have "broke the backbone of jim crowism" by openly challenging segregation in seating.

Gains and Setbacks

The criticisms of the New Deal expressed at the Birmingham meeting and at the earlier conference called by Bethune foreshadowed subsequent assessments of historians who have studied the New Deal. These scholars have concluded that Roosevelt did little to confront racism and racial discrimination. He sought to appeal to black voters without supporting civil rights reforms that would alienate southern segregationists or northern workers who competed with blacks for jobs and housing. Moreover, some of the New Deal's deficiencies had long-term consequences that widened the economic gulf between white and black Americans even further.

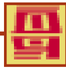
For example, when the Agricultural Adjustment Administration gave subsidies to farm owners who reduced production and purchased machinery (such as the mechanical cotton picker), the move lessened the need for black tenant farmers, both renters and sharecroppers. Together, these groups included more than one-third of all black workers. Moreover, the failure of new labor legislation to require labor unions to admit black workers allowed some unions to maintain racially exclusive practices. Federal housing programs in urban areas often reinforced existing patterns of racial segregation. Furthermore, these programs couldn't keep up with the demand for housing caused by large-scale migration of blacks to the cities. In addition, the exclusion of farm workers and domestic servants from the Social Security program had a damaging effect on the very categories in which black workers predominated.

Yet, despite their limitations, government social programs delivered much needed benefits to many African Americans. In addition to providing direct relief, such as food, New Deal programs gave training and jobs to black workers who had previously been unemployed or restricted to menial jobs and domestic service. African Americans also benefited from the rapid expansion of the union movement following passage of the National Labor Relations Act (often called the Wagner Act, after its Senate sponsor). The act protected workers' rights to join unions and bargain collectively. In 1937, the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters won a major victory when the fiercely anti-union Pullman Company recognized the Brotherhood's right to bargain on behalf of porters and maids who worked on the trains. The Brotherhood's president, A. Philip Randolph, then chose to affiliate his union with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), even though many AFL craft unions excluded black workers. As the AFL's most prominent black labor leader, Randolph became a persistent critic of racial discrimination in the labor movement.

Although the Wagner Act did not prevent unions from excluding blacks or prevent employers from firing nonunionized black workers, nonetheless, it did strengthen the new Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), which organized semiskilled factory workers rather than the skilled craftsmen favored by the AFL. Recognizing that black replacements (often labeled "scabs") could undermine strikes, CIO organizers energetically recruited black workers, targeting especially those working in Detroit's automobile factories. Previously, Henry Ford had fended off the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union by hiring black workers carefully screened by black ministers whose friendship Ford had cultivated through donations to churches and other community groups. By the end of the 1930s, however, black workers had participated in successful UAW campaigns at General Motors and Chrysler, and in 1941 black and white workers at Ford Motor Company achieved sufficient unity to win a bitter, prolonged strike.

Such successes strengthened Bethune's conviction that, on balance, the New Deal improved African Americans' lives. She would later recall of her decade of service in the Roosevelt administration, "More than once I proposed

pretty drastic steps to end the hideous discriminations and second-class citizenship that make the South a blot upon our democracy." When she asked Roosevelt "why this couldn't be done at once or that done immediately," the president explained the political realities causing the Democratic party to shy away from civil rights: "Mrs. Bethune, if we do that now, we'll hurt [another valuable] program over there." Despite Bethune's awareness that Roosevelt would not take political risks on behalf of African Americans, she remained confident that the president ultimately had good intentions. After his death, she wrote that Roosevelt expected Americans to achieve racial equality in time. "That day will come," she quoted the president as saying, "but we must pass through perilous times before we realize it, and that's why it's so difficult today because that new idea is being born and many of us flinch from the thought of it."



BLACK ARTISTS AND THE CULTURAL MAINSTREAM

In New Orleans, sixteen-year-old Margaret Walker heard her parents discussing an upcoming visit by Langston Hughes. The white president of the college where her mother and father taught had told them that Hughes charged a fee of $100 and that he didn't think one hundred people would pay a dollar apiece to come to hear a Negro poet. But one *thousand* people came. That night, Walker later recalled, "was one of the most memorable in my life." At the reception after the reading, she nervously handed Hughes a manuscript of her poems. He read them carefully, one by one, and explained how each might be improved. "He said I had talent," she recalled, "and urged my parents to send me to school in the North, where I would have more freedom to grow."

Margaret Walker and the Works Progress Administration

After Walker graduated from Northwestern University in 1936, job prospects were not plentiful, but she was nonetheless able to find employment with the WPA's Writers' Project, one of many New Deal programs that provided jobs for people who would otherwise have been unemployed. For many black unemployed artists, actors, musicians, and writers, these federal jobs often offered them their first opportunity to earn a living while developing their craft. Like other WPA programs, the Writers' Project also sought to develop useful work experience. Walker, for example, was hired to work on a guide to Illinois—part of a nationwide research effort designed to produce touring and historical guides fo every state. She was able to support both herself and her si ter on her salary of $85 a month.

For Walker, the job meant far more than just a wag Working for the WPA, she believed, helped end "the lon isolation of the Negro artist" and fostered "a great deal c exchange between black and white writers, artists, actor dancers, and other theater people." At a reading by he mentor Langston Hughes, Walker heard that Chicago wri ers were planning a South Side Writers' Group to discus their work. She resolved to join the group. At the first mee ing, "I heard a man expounding on the sad state of Negr writing at that point in the thirties, and he was punctuatin his remarks with pungent epithets," she recalled. "I dre back in Sunday-school horror, totally shocked by his stron speech, but I steeled myself to hear him out."

The speaker, Walker learned, was Richard Wright– already a leading force in Chicago's black literary communit After hearing Wright read some of his works in progres Walker marveled, "Even after I went home I kept thinkin 'My God, how that man can write!'" Wright told Walker tha he planned to transfer from the Theater Project to the Writer Project, because the Theater Project had rejected his contro versial proposal for a play depicting a southern chain gang The next week, Wright began serving as a supervisor i Walker's office. His salary of $125 a month was the highest h had ever received. Over the next year, the two had many long conversations about their mutual literary ambitions. For Walker, the Writers' Project "turned out to be one of the best writers' schools I ever attended." Her relationship with Wright later soured, but she continued to admire his talent, and she would later write a book about him. Another fellow writer asked her a crucial question—"What do you want for your people?"—that inspired her to finish her most celebrate poem, "For My People," in 1937.

"The greatest significance of the WPA," recalled Walke was that it accomplished what nobody believed was possib at that time: "a renaissance of the arts and American cultur with the appearance of spectacular artists or artistic figure phenomenal programs, and immortal creative work." In add tion to employing Walker and Wright, the WPA also gav early, crucial support to future Pulitzer Prize–winnin novelist Ralph Ellison. Zora Neale Hurston, soon to achie

prominence for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, conducted fieldwork for the Writers' Project in Florida, interviewing former slaves as part of an effort to preserve the fading memories of those once held in bondage. Aaron Douglas created murals for the walls of the New York Public Library, while Jacob Lawrence gained early training as a painter in the federally sponsored Harlem Arts Center. Oberlin graduate Shirley Graham worked for the Federal Theater Project directing plays, including *Swing Mikado*, a jazzy adaptation of the Gilbert and Sullivan play with black actors.

Paul Robeson and the Black Role in Hollywood

As federal programs fueled advances in African American culture, the expanding entertainment industry also accelerated the entry of black artists and entertainers into American mass culture. Despite the depression—or perhaps owing to it—large numbers of Americans bought mass-produced novels and records, attended movies, and went to nightclubs and dance halls in the 1930s. Everyone listed to the radio. (By the end of the decade, 90 percent of American homes boasted a radio; many cars had them, too). More than ever before, black entertainers began attracting white fans. Still isolated in mostly separate social worlds, black and white Americans nevertheless now danced to the same commercially popular variant of jazz and blues called swing. Although white executives dominated the entertainment industry and catered mainly to white consumers, African American musicians, singers, and dancers had reason to hope. Like Langston Hughes, they found that their talents could make them a decent living. As entertainer Paul Robeson sardonically observed in 1935, "In a popular form, Negro music, launched by white men—not Negroes—has swept the world."

Robeson's star shown so brightly that he was willing to accept the risks that came with his leftist political ties. During the 1920s he had earned admiration in Harlem, first as a professional football player. (He had been an All-American football star and a Phi Beta Kappa student at Rutgers.) Then he attracted notice as an actor and singer during the heyday of the Harlem Renaissance. His fame spread quickly following critically acclaimed performances in the Broadway production of Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones*. He also played a starring role in black filmmaker Oscar Micheaux's *Body and Soul* and had a brief but memorable part singing "Ol' Man River" in the 1929 Hollywood musical *Show Boat*. Despite the onset of the Great Depression, Robeson's continuing success as an entertainer brought him personal wealth, a home in London, and freedom to expand his political and cultural contacts. He became acquainted with leftist radicals, such as the Jamaican Marxist writer C. L. R. James, and with African nationalists, such as Nnamdi Azikiwe (later president of Nigeria) and Jomo Kenyatta (later president of Kenya). By 1934, Robeson had resolved that "in my music, my plays, my films, I want to carry always this central idea: to be African." He took particular pride in *Song of Freedom*. In that film, he played a London dockworker who gets his lifelong wish to visit his ancestral home in Africa when he achieves sudden success as a concert singer. Although the film depicted Africa in simplistic terms, its portrayals were considerably more accurate than those in Hollywood's Tarzan adventures. A 1935 trip to the Soviet Union fostered a lasting affinity for socialism and left him convinced "that of all the nations in the world, the modern Russians are our best friends."

> "In my music, my plays, my films, I want to carry always this central idea: to be African."—*Paul Robeson*

As an actor, the charismatic Paul Robeson was one of the first black men to play serious roles in the primarily white American theater. He also performed in a number of films, including a remake, shown here, of *The Emperor Jones* (1933).

Infused with racial pride and a growing commitment to leftist politics, Robeson resolved to play only movie roles that portrayed blacks in a positive light. But he made this

decision at a time when Hollywood studios cast black actors in comic bit roles—mainly as servants, porters, or menial laborers—in films whose plots focused on white characters. The popular radio program *Amos 'n' Andy* had shaped the mental image many white Americans had of African Americans, even though the program's lead characters were played by white actors. Stepin Fetchit, who depicted slow-witted, slow-moving racial stereotypes, was the highest-paid black actor in Hollywood. He established a model for subsequent black comics who demeaned themselves to get laughs. In 1935, jazz pioneer Louis "Satchmo" Armstrong clowned and played his trumpet in *Pennies from Heaven*, starring white actor Bing Crosby, and thereafter took similar cameo movie parts. Child actor Shirley Temple's hit films included roles for talented blacks; in *The Little Colonel* (1935), Hattie McDaniel played Mammy and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson danced. Despite the limitations of such roles, the presence of African Americans in Hollywood films attracted black ticket buyers. It also enabled the major studios to quash competition from struggling black film producers such as Oscar Micheaux. Some black performers (and their fans) saw even these stereotypical Hollywood roles as personal and racial breakthroughs. McDaniel, who won an Academy Award for her performance—again as Mammy—in the 1939 epic *Gone With the Wind*, defended her roles emphatically: "I'd rather play a maid than be one."

The Swing Era

Living abroad and performing before largely white concert audiences in Europe, Robeson sustained his career as a singer even as a gulf opened between his own musical preference for traditional music, such as slave spirituals, and the commercially popular music of his day. Trends in the commercial industry disturbed him. He believed that even jazz had lost touch with the African American tradition of "honest and sincere" folk music with spiritual significance. For him, the entry of African Americans into the nation's cultural mainstream represented a loss of cultural integrity. "No Negro will leave a permanent mark on the world till he learns to be true to himself," he warned.

But while Robeson harbored serious reservations about the commercialization of African American music, many African American musicians welcomed the new trends. By the mid-1930s, the swing phenomenon took jazz from the small clubs in the black sections of New Orleans, Chicago, and New York to bigger nightclubs and urban radio stations throughout the nation. While Robeson continued to perform concerts of traditional songs drawn from many cultures, swing musicians, black and white alike, revolutionized popular music in th United States and around the world. As a struggling studen in depression-era Harlem, Pauli Murray saw black entertain ers as welcome antidotes to hard times. She savored th Apollo Theater as one of the "bright spots." There, she said "we could sit in the balcony for twenty-five cents and see th great Negro entertainers in the heyday of their youth—Eth Waters, Jackie (Moms) Mabley, the one-legged dancer Peg Le Bates, tap dancers Peter, Peaches, and Duke, comedian Ga ley de Gaston, and the great bands led by such extraordinar musicians as Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway."

The appeal of these performers transcended racial line Both Ellington, composer of hit tunes such as "Mood Indigo and "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing"), an the flamboyant Cab "Hi Di Ho" Calloway were headliners a New York's Cotton Club. The club had relocated from blac Harlem to midtown Manhattan. Louis Armstrong expande his audience as he moved from the breakthrough exuberan Hot Five recordings of the 1920s to the more refined big-ban sound inspired by white bandleader Guy Lombardo. By th mid-1930s, the bands of Ellington, Calloway, Count Basi Fletcher Henderson, and Chick Webb were facing competitio from highly popular white bandleaders such as Tommy Dorse Glenn Miller, and Benny Goodman. Indeed, Goodman's regu lar appearances on NBC radio earned him the title King o Swing. Singer Billie "Lady Day" Holiday eclipsed the popula ity of her earthier blues predecessors Ma Rainey and Bess Smith. And by the end of the decade, white bandleader Art Shaw broke racial barriers by hiring her to perform with h band. Holiday subsequently redirected her career when sh began performing regularly at New York's Café Society, a hang out for bohemians and leftists of all races. It was there that sh first performed "Strange Fruit," a haunting anti-lynching son with lyrics written by a white Communist schoolteacher.

The popularity of swing music enabled some black pe formers to reach white audiences, but, as Robeson's commen make clear, not all performers went along with the new trend The tradition of southern blues music was kept alive in sma clubs and juke joints. Leadbelly and Josh White were amon the few blues musicians to have successful recording caree as they spurred interest in traditional blues i the urban North, especially among leftists wh appreciated authentic expressions of souther black working-class consciousness. Robeso himself continued to sing traditional Africa American music, although his film actin increasingly overshadowed his singing caree (He would have one final burst of success as singer in 1940 when his rendition of the patr otic "Ballad for Americans" became an instan sensation.) The tradition of black sacred mus also remained vibrant as gospel singin

Composer, bandleader, and pianist Duke Ellington was recognized in his lifetime as one of the greatest jazz composers and performers. The unique "Ellington" sound found expression in works like "Mood Indigo" and "Sophisticated Lady."

evolved in new directions in big-city church choirs featuring the upbeat compositions of Chicagoan Thomas A. Dorsey, often called the Father of Gospel Music. Dorsey's "Precious Lord, Take My Hand" and numerous other songs reached large national audiences when recorded by Clara Ward and Mahalia Jackson.

African Americans would continue to debate whether the growing popularity of black musical styles was a positive or negative trend. Many African Americans resented entertainers who perpetuated racial stereotypes while performing before white audiences. Nevertheless, most black entertainers certainly welcomed opportunities to display their talents before white audiences, and those who achieved wealth and fame were often widely admired in black communities. As was true for the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, black entertainers often faced dilemmas as they sought to meet the expectations of both black and white fans. More than ever before, successful black entertainers also became unofficial racial representatives. When the NAACP awarded its annual Spingarn Medal to opera singer Marian Anderson in 1939, the honor signaled that African Americans took pride in the success of a performer who had used singular talent and determination to break through racial barriers. That year, Anderson was denied permission to give a concert at Washington's Constitutional Hall (owned by the Daughters of the American Revolution). Later, at the urging of Eleanor Roosevelt, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes invited Anderson to give an open-air concert at the Lincoln Memorial. On a chilly Easter Sunday, 75,000 fans came to hear her.

Native Son and the Decline of Leftist Radicalism

"Generally speaking, Negro writing in the past has been confined to humble novels, poems, and plays, prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-beggin to white America," Richard Wright complained in his 1937 "Blueprint for Negro Writing." Wright's essay concerned literature, but his criticisms of previous writers applied as well to black entertainers and artists who compromised their integrity to gain acceptance in "the Court of American Public Opinion." During his own career as a writer, Wright struggled to break free of constraints that prevented him from honestly depicting "Negro life in all of its manifold and intricate relationships." During his formative years in the South, his ambition had been stifled by the Jim Crow system and his own family. He had found a way out through his exposure to literature that "evoked in me vague glimpses of life's possibilities." After migrating to Chicago during the late 1920s, he still struggled to make a living, but he eventually recognized that his writings could be his weapons. Through words, he could make others aware of what black people endured. Then, when he attended meetings of the John Reed Club, a Communist-affiliated group of artists and writers, his feelings of alienation gave way to hopes for a united working class. "Out of the magazines I read came a passion-

ate call for the experiences of the disinherited," he remembered. "It did not say: 'Be like us and we will like you, maybe,' It said: 'If you possess enough courage to speak out what you are, you will find that you are not alone.'"

Wright joined the Communist party, but his political views continued evolving during the 1930s as he gained confidence as a writer. He saw himself as a revolutionary, but his writings rarely discussed Marxism. Instead, in his journalistic pieces about Chicago's black community, he avoided the tendency of some Communist writers to see African Americans only as potential working-class allies. He sought to convey the complexities of American race relations—in particular, the ways in which shared experiences shaped African American political attitudes. His description of the massive street celebration that followed black Joe Louis's knockout victory in 1935 over white former heavyweight champion Max Baer demonstrates his approach. Twenty-five thousand black residents of Chicago's South Side, he wrote, "poured out of the taverns, pool rooms, barber shops, rooming houses and dingy flats and flooded the streets." For Wright, as for many black Americans, the Louis-Baer fight was more than just a sports contest. He saw the enthusiasm displayed on Chicago's streets as a "wild river that's got to be harnessed and directed," for it arose from African American history: "Four centuries of oppression, of frustrated hopes, of black bitterness, felt even in the bones of the bewildered young were rising to the surface. Yes, unconsciously they had imputed to the brawny imag of Joe Louis all the balked dreams of revenge, all the secretl visualized moments of retaliation, AND HE HAD WON!"

By the time he wrote "Blueprint for Negro Writing Wright's political views had evolved to the point that he wa willing to criticize openly Communist notions of political pro paganda. While urging black writers to match the dedicatio displayed "in the Negro workers' struggle to free Herndon an the Scottsboro Boys," he also called on them to pay attentio to the distinctive "nationalist" aspects of African American cu ture. That culture, he believed, derived largely from the reli gious life and folklore of black people rather than just fron their work experiences. Black writers, he added, must unde stand this culture to reach black readers. "Marxism is but th starting point," he continued. "No theory of life can take the place of life." Wright insisted that black writers be more than political propagandists. "Negro writers spring from a family, a clan, and a nation; and the social uni in which they are bound have a story, a record," he concluded In 1937, Wright left Chicago and the WPA to become Harlen correspondent for the Communist *Daily Worker*, edited by for mer Atlanta lawyer Benjamin Davis. Yet he gradually brok away from the party. Like other black intellectuals of the perio

> "No theory of life can take the place of life."
> —*Richard Wright*

Billie Holiday transformed familiar songs with her intensely personal interpretations.

In the face of racial discrimination in Nazi Germany, whose beliefs in racial supremacy and destructive actions led to World War II, Jesse Owens achieved world-record success in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The track star won four gold medals.

he lost patience for the ideological bickering and pressures for ideological conformity associated with Communist activism.

In 1938, Wright sent Margaret Walker an airmail special-delivery letter. In it, he asked her to send him all the news clippings she could about a sensational story then breaking in Chicago. Robert Nixon, a young African American accused of rape and murder, had been captured by the police and forced to confess to five major crimes. Wright saw the accusations against this black youngster not as another Scottsboro-type episode of class and racial oppression but a more complex story. Rather than assuming that the young man was innocent, Wright made his character guilty. Then he sought to imagine the circumstances that might have led his black protagonist—Bigger Thomas—to kill a white woman who sympathized with Communist efforts to help African Americans. *Native Son*, published in 1940, became the first bestselling novel by a black author. In 1940 it was a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and in 1941 Orson Wells directed a stage production of the story.

Many readers of *Native Son* were shocked by Wright's raw language—especially his vivid depiction of the killing of Mary Dalton as seen through the eyes of Thomas. Although Wright did not justify Thomas's crime, he allowed readers to see it as resulting from a series of tragic misunderstandings rooted in racial and class differences. *Native Son* revealed not only the wide gulf that separated Thomas and his employer, Dalton's wealthy father, but also the gulf between Thomas's perspective and that of Communists who saw him solely as a victim of oppression. When Mary Dalton asks Thomas to drive her and her Communist boyfriend, Jan Erlone, to a black restaurant, Thomas becomes increasingly uncomfortable and resentful as Jan's probing questions prod him to reveal that his father was killed in a southern riot.

> "Listen, Bigger," Jan replied,"that's what we want to *stop*. That's what we Communists are fighting. We want to stop people from treating others that way. I'm a member of the Party. Mary sympathizes. Don't you think if we got together we could stop things like that?"
>
> "I don't know," Bigger said; he was feeling the rum rising to his head. "There's a lot of white people in the world."
>
> "You've read about the Scottsboro boys?"
>
> "I heard about 'em."
>
> "Don't you think we did a good job in helping to keep 'em from killing those boys?"
>
> "It was all right."
>
> "You know, Bigger," said Mary, "we'd like to be friends of yours."
>
> He said nothing.

Wright's narrative illuminates the enormous racial barriers that prevented Bigger, Mary, and Jan from seeing one another as individuals rather than as black or white. After returning to the Dalton home, Bigger carries the intoxicated Mary to her bedroom. Sexually aroused by her helpless condition, he also fears that Mary's blind mother will discover him in her daughter's room. He quiets Mary by pressing a pillow over her face, inadvertently suffocating her. Eventually caught after a massive search, he is tried for murder. As in the Scottsboro case, the Communist party provides Thomas with legal assistance. Yet even his well-intentioned lawyer can never fully understand what led Thomas to kill Dalton and then his own girlfriend to avoid getting caught. Condemned to die, Thomas eventually perceives that his crime came not only from racial and class oppression but also from his own choices.

Richard Wright's disenchantment with the Communist party was shared by other black intellectuals who had once been drawn to Communist-led campaigns. Langston Hughes wrote to a friend, "I am laying off of political poetry for a while, since the world situation, methinks, is too complicated. " Ralph Ellison, who became Wright's protégé after arriving in New York from Tuskegee Institute, distanced himself from his mentor's Communist friends. A friend of Margaret Walker's advised her to "get to know" leftist writers but to avoid "getting to be a part of them and all they represent."

Much had changed since the early 1930s, when Communists staged massive protests on behalf of the Scottsboro defendants. A decade later, the case had faded from public

view. In 1938 Alabama officials quietly released one of the four defendants still in prison, but two of the other defendants would wait until 1944 before they were paroled. Haywood Patterson, labeled a troublemaker by prison officials, would languish in prison cells until 1948, when he escaped and enjoyed a few years of freedom in Michigan before being imprisoned once again on a manslaughter charge. Patterson resembled Bigger Thomas in age and impoverished background, but he was largely forgotten by the time Wright's doomed fictional character captured the nation's attention. Looking back on all that he had endured, Patterson concluded shortly before his death that the Scottsboro campaign had advanced the cause of civil rights. "I guess my people gained more off the Scottsboro case than any of us boys did. It led to putting Negroes on juries in the South. It made the whole country, in fact the whole world, talk about how the Negro people have to live in the South."

CONCLUSION

By the time *Native Son* achieved bestseller status, Communist radicalism had been largely supplanted by New Deal liberalism. Still, the party's attention to civil rights issues and its innovative use of mass militancy made a lasting impact on American race relations. In a broad sense, leftist agitation and publications expanded popular awareness of racial discrimination and encouraged appreciation for African American art, music, and literature. Yet, as New Deal programs moderated some of the hardships of the Great Depression and as Communist leaders turned their attention from civil rights issues to the threat of German Nazism, black militancy began to take new forms. The outbreak of war in Europe prompted increasing concern about segregation in the military and discriminatory hiring practices in war-related industries. The NAACP's legal campaign, under the direction of Thurgood Marshall, moved ahead with increasing confidence. Many African Americans had suffered during the Great Depression, but they had also shared experiences with Americans who were not black. Politically, economically, and culturally, black Americans still faced many racial barriers, but i important ways they moved closer to the nation's whit majority during the 1930s.

FURTHER READING

Du Bois, W. E. B., *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay toward an Autobiography a Race Concept* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1940

Goodman, James, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Random Hous 1994).

Greenberg, Cheryl Lynn, *Or Does It Explode? Black Harlem in th Great Depression* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991

Harris, William H., *Keeping the Faith: A. Philip Randolph, Milton Webster and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, 1925–3* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977).

Henry, Charles P., *Ralph Bunche: Model Negro or American Othe* (New York: New York University Press, 1999).

Kelley, Robin D. G., *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

Kirby, John B. *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism an Race* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1980).

McCluskey, Audrey Thomas, and Elaine M. Smith, eds., *Ma McLeod Bethune: Building a Better World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Lewis, David Levering, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and th American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000

Patterson, Haywood, and Earl Conrad, *Scottsboro Boy* (New Yor Doubleday, 1950).

Rowley, Hazel, *Richard Wright: The Life and Times* (New Yor Henry Holt, 2001).

Sitkoff, Harvard, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Righ as a National Issue, The Depression Decade* (New York: Oxfor University Press, 1978).

Trotter, Joe William, Jr., *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industri Proletariat, 1915–45* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1985

Trotter, Joe William, Jr., and Earl Lewis, eds., *African Americans the Industrial Age: A Documentary History, 1915–1945* (Bosto Northeastern University Press, 1996).

White, Walter, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walte White* (New York: Viking Press, 1948).

Wright, Richard, *American Hunger* (New York: Harper and Ro 1944).

Text Credits: Ella Baker and Marvel Cooke. From "The Bronx Slave Market," *The Crisis,* November 1935. Reprinted by permission of th NAACP. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. "Soap Box" (regular column), *New York Amsterdam News,* May 7, 1938, p. 11. Reprinted by pe mission of the publisher.

Photo Credits: page 40 Photograph Courtesy of Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence/Art Resource, NY/© 2004 Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawren Foundation/Artists' Rights Society (ARS), New York; **page 47** Bettmann/Corbis; **page 50** Bettmann/Corbis; **page 52** Bettmann/Co bis; **page 54** Courtesy of the Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library/National Archives (NLR-PHOCO-A-67107[1]); **page 55** Co bis; **page 59** Library of Congress; **page 60** Joanna T. Steichen Collection/Carousel Research/The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonia Institution/Art Resource, NY; **page 61** Duke University, Rare Books, Manuscripts & Special Collections Library (Plate no. 8887-4 **page 62** Bettmann/Corbis; **page 63** Hulton Archive/Getty Images; **page 64** AP/Wide World Photos.