

# Multifarious Hero: Joe Louis, American Society and Race Relations During World Crisis, 1935-1945

*Dominic J. Capeci, Jr. and Martha Wilkerson\**

In an effort to interpret race relations during the 1930s and 1940s, historians have tussled with the interaction of the individual and society. Some have focused on leaders, others on organizations and events; all have demonstrated stirrings of change in the depression decade and, especially, the war years.<sup>1</sup> Yet few have studied heroes, those who cast light on how citizens perceive “the essence of themselves” and on the social milieu in which they live.<sup>2</sup> More than any other hero, heavyweight boxer Joe Louis loomed large from 1934 to 1945, a time when Afro-Americans encountered severe hardship challenged racial mores and laid foundations for future advances. Amidst both the hostile racism and reform spirit of the Great Depression, he exemplified black perseverance: God, wrote novelist Ernest Gaines, sent Joe to lift “the colored people’s heart.”<sup>3</sup> More surprising, he emerged an American hero in the Second World War because of the dramatic impact of Nazism on racial attitudes. In each period, he and his admirers inspired, nurtured and reinforced one another, resulting in his playing several, sometimes contradictory—indeed, multifarious—roles. As a black man in a racist environment, his remarkable transition from race champion to national idol signaled the interplay of the individual, society, and changing times; as much as any leader, organization

\* Mr Capeci is Professor of History and Ms. Wilkerson is a Professor of Sociology at Southwestern Missouri State University, Springfield, Missouri 65804.

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1. Harvard Sitkoff, “No More Moanin’”: Black Rights History in the 1970s, *Prologue: the Journal of the National Archives*, XI (Summer 1979): 84-8 for the historiography of race relations. See also Richard Polenber, *War and Society: The United States, 1941-1945* (Philadelphia, 1972), 99-130 and John Morton Blum, *V Was for Victory: Politics and American Culture during World War II* (New York, 1976), 182-220 for this interpretation.

2. A.O. Edmonds, *Joe Louis* (Grand Rapids, 1973), Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York, 1977), 420-40 and Jeffrey T. Sammons, “Boxing as a Reflection of Society: The Southern Reaction to Joe Louis,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 16 (Spring 1983): 23-33, respectively, for notable exceptions which provide a broad overview, the meaning of Louis for blacks during the depression and for white southerners from 1934 to 1941; Al-Tony Gilmore, “The Black Southerner’s Response to the Southern System of Race relations: 1900 to Post-World War II in Robert Haws, ed., *The Age of Segregation: Race Relations in the South, 1890-1945* (Jackson, Miss., 1978), 73 for the quotation.

3. Quoted in Gilmore, *ibid.*, 74.

or event, his experience provides insights into this watershed period of race relations.

Born May 13, 1914, the son of sharecroppers Lily Reese and Munrow Barrow, Louis grew up near Lafayette, Alabama with his seven brothers and sisters.<sup>4</sup> He was happy despite his father's early separation from the family and the confines of segregation. After his family migrated to Detroit in 1926, he engaged in high jinks and street fights but never ran afoul of the law. Introduced to boxing by a friend in 1932, he fell in love with the sport, the environment and, most of all, the thoughts of money and respect that came to those in the ghetto who hit hard and moved quick. He turned professional by his twentieth birthday.

Louis was enormously influenced by a handful of people. Earthy and religious, his mother taught him to "trust in God, work hard and hope for the best"; she said "a good name" was "better than money" and encouraged him to be somebody.<sup>5</sup> The aspiring, courageous and decent lives that she and her second husband, Pat Brooks, lived impressed young Louis. Managers John Roxborough and Julien Black echoed this message of black dignity. Aware of the resentment triggered by Jack Johnson, the first black heavyweight champion (who challenged racial mores and fled conviction for violating the Mann Act), they instructed Louis in clean living and sportsmanlike conduct; Jack Blackburn, Louis's trainer and father-like confidant, constantly berated "that fool nigger with his white woman, acting like he owned the world."<sup>6</sup> Marva Trotter, whom Louis married in 1935, also reinforced his drive for excellence. Black and supportive, all assisted Louis through his early life, a time of "increased vulnerability and heightened potential."<sup>7</sup>

Between his initiation as a professional boxer in 1934 and his rematch with Max Schmeling in 1938, Louis captured the imagination of blacks everywhere. In the throes of economic crises, when white citizens displayed racial intolerance, when white leaders approached civil rights with "political calculus" and when white liberals, North and South, ignored society's deep-seated, institutionalized anti-black attitude, Louis appeared messianic; as black leadership became more aggressive and black masses more aware, he dramatized their struggle between good and evil.<sup>8</sup> After he defeated Primo

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4. Joe Louis (with Edna and Art Rust, Jr.), *Joe Louis: My Life* (New York, 1978), 3-33 and 93 for information in this paragraph (hereafter cited as Louis, *My Life*). See also Joe Louis, *My Life Story* (New York, 1947), for his initial, very guarded and somewhat misleading autobiography (hereafter cited as Louis, *Story*). A comparison of these autobiographies reveals much about the champion's self-image and development at different stages of life.

5. Quoted in Margery Miller, *Joe Louis: American* (New York, 1945), 12; Louis, *My Life*, 5 and 19.

6. Al-Tony Gilmore, *Bad Nigger!: The National Impact of Jack Johnson* (Port Washington, N.Y., 1975), for the Johnson story; Louis, *My Life*, 38-39 for Roxborough's and Black's instructions, and 36 for Blackburn's quotation. Caswell Adams, "Introducing the New Joe Louis," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 10, 1941, 107; John C. Dancy to Ross Pascoe, Jan. 16, 1946, Reel II, Detroit Urban League Papers, microfilm edition (hereafter cited as DULP); Louis, *My Life*, 176 and 185 for the significance of his handlers.

7. Christopher F. Monte, *Beneath the Mask: An Introduction to Theories of Personality* (2nd ed.; New York, 1980), 224-62 for a summary of Erik H. Erickson's psychoanalytic ego psychology; Erik H. Erickson, "Reflections on Dr. Borg's Life Cycle," in his *Adulthood* (New York, 1978), 5 for the quotation which is applicable to Louis.

8. Nancy J. Weiss, *The National Urban League* (New York, 1974), 266 for "political calculus"; Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909-1950* (Philadelphia, 1980), 98-165 for an exam-

Camera in 1935, for example, Harlem residents poured through the streets “shooting, clapping, laughing, and even crying.”<sup>9</sup> Given black opposition to Mussolini’s invasion of Ethiopia, they celebrated more than a boxing match. Louis seemed invincible in the ring, recording thirty-five wins, twenty-nine knockouts and one loss to Schmeling in 1936 before becoming champion the following year.<sup>10</sup> Graceful, quick and powerful at 6’ 1½”, 200 pounds, he annihilated all comers, permitting admirers vicarious victories, “even dreams of vengeance,” over white society.<sup>11</sup> As significantly, he seemed both Superman and Little Man, greater than his supporters yet acceptable to them; he challenged stereotypes, instilled hope and provided models for racial advancement.<sup>12</sup> Galahad-like, fighting clean and complimenting opponents, he enhanced black respectability; inarticulate and untutored, having stammered as a youth and never advancing beyond sixth grade, he appealed to those—waifs and highbrows alike—who understood action as eloquence and poise as bearing. Whether fighting in the ring or starring in “The Spirit of Youth,” a thinly veiled biographic film about himself, he portrayed “black ambition without blundering into fantasy.”<sup>13</sup> To Maya Angelou growing up in rural Arkansas, he proved that “we were the strongest people in the world.”<sup>14</sup>

Despite sketchy evidence that segments of upper class black society played down his achievements during the mid 1930s, the overwhelming majority of blacks identified with Louis.<sup>15</sup> Below the Mason-Dixon line sharecroppers gathered at general stores or in the yards of white neighbors to hear the broadcast of Louis’s fights.<sup>16</sup> They honored him with letters and song, as did Florida stevedores who celebrated his defeat of James Braddock:

Joe Louis hit him so hard he turn roun and roun  
He thought he was Alabama bound. Ah. Ah<sup>17</sup>

Slum-locked welfare recipients helped fill Comiskey Park for that championship tight, while most residents of Chicago’s South Side, Detroit’s Paradise

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ple of it; John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era: Liberalism and Race* (Knoxville, 1980), 218-35 and Morton Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South: Southern Liberals and the Race Issue* (New York, 1977), 60-63 for white liberals; Jeremiah Wilson Moses, *Black Messiahs and Uncle Toms* (University Park, Pa., 1982), for Louis as messiah; Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York, 1978), 261-62 for black leaders; August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979), 35-107 for black awareness; Martha Wilkerson and Richard A. Dodder, “Toward a Model of Collective Conscience and Sport in Modern Societies,” *International Journal of Sport Psychology*, 13 (1982), 272 for the quotation.

9. Roi Ottley, *‘New World A-Coming’: Inside Black America* (New York, 1943), 188.

10. Louis, *My Life*, 270-77 for these and all other statistics regarding Louis’s boxing record.

11. Orrin E. Kapp, “Heroes, Villains, and Fools as Agents of Social Control,” *American Sociological Review*, XIX (Feb. 1954); 61 for the interpretation which is applicable to Louis; Lena Horne and Richard Schickel, *Lena* (Garden City, N.Y., 1965), 75 for the quotation.

12. Dixon Wecter, *The Hero in America: A Chronicle of Hero-Worship* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1941), 7 and 11 for the interpretation which is applicable to Louis; Ottley, *‘New World A-Coming,’* 189.

13. Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: the Negro in American Film, 1900-1942* (New York, 1977), 339.

14. Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* (New York, 1969), 129.

15. Alexander J. Young, Jr., “Joe Louis, Symbol: 1933-1949” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1968), 83 for evidence of black elite reservation about Louis.

16. Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, 129; Mark D. Coburn, “America’s Great Black Hope,” *American Heritage* 29 (Oct. 1978): 91.

17. Young, “Joe Louis, Symbol,” 82-83 for the letters; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 437 for the lyrics.

Valley and New York's Harlem huddled in small groups about their radios before reveling in the streets victoriously.<sup>18</sup> Elites, too, cheered Louis. Lena Home noted that Louis "carried so many of our hopes," while Charles C. Diggs, Michigan State Senator from Detroit, convinced legislative colleagues to officially congratulate the new champion for serving as "an example and inspiration to American youth."<sup>19</sup>

Louis genuinely related to all segments of Black America. He always remembered his rural, southern roots. He ate blackeyed peas superstitiously on fight day and he gave money to Alabama 'relatives' who appeared on his mother's doorstep in Detroit.<sup>20</sup> Northern blacks knew that Louis roamed the streets of Detroit's eastside and worked at Ford Motor Company, just as they had done there or in similar settings. Perhaps most endearing, Louis organized jobless pals into the Brown Bomber Softball Team and donated to the community chest. Humble origins aside, Louis hobnobbed with celebrities. He became the darling of entertainers like Bill "Bo Jangles" Robinson, who introduced him to Hollywood. Louis meshed well with all blacks because they worshipped him for his feats and, as pointedly, for his divine mettle. In the poetry of Langston Hughes:

Joe has sense enough to know  
He is a god  
So many gods don't know.<sup>21</sup>

Yet Louis enamored few whites before the mid 1930s, as racism continued relatively unabated throughout the depression. In hometown Detroit, for instance, whites barred blacks from jobs and housing and, through the Klan-like Black Legionaires, terrorized them.<sup>22</sup> Occasionally, writers for publications ranging from the *New York Times* to the *Literary Digest* questioned Louis's intelligence, ridiculed his speech or stereotyped him as "kinky-haired, thick-lipped," "shuffling."<sup>23</sup> If many whites "stored up" criticism "for Joe," as an NAACP official suspected, white elites embraced him.<sup>24</sup> Small in number, news-hungry celebrities were drawn by his fame and vote-seeking politicians by his popularity among blacks.<sup>25</sup> Intellectuals and liberals, who challenged white supremacy on the basis of overwhelming scientific research and fought for reform primarily along economic lines (thereby aiding blacks without confronting larger society's racist beliefs), found in Louis a powerful yet

18. Louis, *My Life*, 114 and 119; Miller, *Louis*, 109; Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 436.

19. Horne and Schickel, *Lena*, 75; Senate Resolution No. 39, *Journal of the Senate of the State of Michigan: 1937 Regular Session*, 1641, Michigan State Library, Lansing, Michigan.

20. Young, "Joe Louis, Symbol," 103 for the diet; Louis, *My Life*, 121 for the 'relatives' and 52, 67, 74, and 80 for information in this paragraph.

21. Langston Hughes, "Joe Louis" in Ruth Miller, ed., *Black American Literature* (New York, 1971), 550.

22. Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979), 11.

23. Coburn, "America's Great Black Hope," 88 for the *New York Times* reference and the *Literary Digest* quotations.

24. Walter White to Earl Brown, June 19, 1940, Box 365, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers (General Office Files, 1940-1955), Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited as NAACP).

25. Young, "Joe Louis, Symbol," 104, 116 and 113.

unthreatening symbol of black excellence and interracial unity: “Isn’t Joe Louis wonderful?” marveled author Carl Van Vechten.<sup>26</sup> Certainly a handful of the champion’s personal friends thought so, including Joe DiMaggio and Ed Sullivan.

Inside the ring, racial attitudes began to shift. Louis’s handlers knew that prejudice permeated boxing as white fighters and investors, ever mindful of Jack Johnson, denied black contenders a chance for the heavyweight title. Indeed, the color line that Jack Dempsey and promoter Tex Richard had drawn from 1919 to 1926 carried into the next decade.<sup>27</sup> By that time, however, boxing had fallen into disrepute, marred by scandal, ignoble champions and undesirable gunmen. Roxborough and Black recognized Louis’s talent and the opportunity for personal gain and social change in this atmosphere, providing they could avoid scandal and bury the memory of Johnson. They established rules of public behavior for Louis and, in 1935, contracted with white promoter Mike Jacobs. Shrewdly, he scheduled the Camera bout in Yankee Stadium, which exposed Louis to a known opponent in all important New York City and challenged the Madison Square Garden impresarios who ignored black fighters. The ring announcer—himself aware of the fight’s social significance—reminded spectators of democratic tenets and sportsman-like conduct.<sup>28</sup> For his exemplary behavior and victories over Camera and thirteen other heavyweights that year, Louis became Ring Magazine’s “Boxer of the Year” and the Associated Press’s “Athlete of the Year:” even rank-and-file white boxing fans and southern white journalists considered this ‘well-behaved’ ‘good nigger’ as “the savior of a dying sport.”<sup>29</sup>

Publicly Louis embodied the Galahad image promoted by his handlers. He brought dignity to the race, but he did not comprehend fully the plight of black people. Before the Camera fight, when blacks envisioned him a savior capable of humiliating the symbol of Mussolini’s Ethiopian invasion, Louis heard the name of Back-to-Africa advocate Marcus Garvey for the first time.<sup>30</sup> Rather than serve as a race symbol, however, he desired to make money and party “with pretty girls.” He devastated Camera and four other opponents; he became cocky and out of shape, losing the first Schmeling fight by a knockout. Crestfallen and disturbed that blacks took his defeat to Hitler’s henchman personally, Louis returned home to nurse his pride and his wounds.

Only twenty-four when winning the title, he understandably failed to grasp his relationship with black society. Publicly the paragon, privately he played

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26. Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 190-215 for intellectuals; Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era*, 218-35 and Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 63 for the liberals; Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 257 for the quotation.

27. Randy Roberts, “Jack Dempsey: An American Hero in the 1920s,” *Journal of Popular Culture*, 8 (Fall, 1974): 420 and n. 79; Roberts, *Jack Dempsey: The Manassa Mauler* (Baton Rouge, La., 1979) for Dempsey’s life.

28. Young, “Joe Louis, Symbol,” 120; George Hutchinson, “The Black Athletes’ Contribution Towards Social Change in the United States” (unpublished Ph.D. diss., United States International University, 1977), 86 for a similar announcement at the Max Baer fight.

29. Miller, *Louis*, 35; Young, “Joe Louis, Symbol,” 42; Edmonds, *Joe Louis*; 40; Sammons, “Boxing as a Reflection of Society,” 26.

30. Louis, *My Life*, 58, 63, 90-91 and 118-19 for information in this paragraph.

with the Brown Bombers against the approval of his managers who feared possible injury; he engaged in numerous sexual encounters and love affairs, sometimes with white women.<sup>31</sup> He received double messages from Roxborough and Black, who directed him never to be photographed with white ladies, but said nothing about dating them. Perhaps he emulated Roxborough, who acted legitimate publicly while operating numbers privately; success drew approval despite black awareness of shady activities.<sup>32</sup> Outwardly, Louis became the person his mother desired and the image his handlers forged.<sup>33</sup>

Louis's personal growth accompanied the national shift from depression to war. Between 1937 and 1941, particularly as a result of the Schmeling rematch, he and AfroAmericans gained confidence. They both smarted over the first bout, which cast doubt on his title and their manhood. In addition, the rise of Hitler abroad placed discrimination at home in bold relief and stimulated black protest for civil rights.<sup>34</sup> Nazism also revealed racism as "an unmitigated evil," forcing white society to question its own moral integrity.<sup>35</sup> In this milieu, black and white citizens alike placed the second Louis-Schmeling fight in an international, racial context: American democracy v. Aryan supremacy: even President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent for Louis, felt his biceps and reminded: "Joe, we're depending on those muscles for America."<sup>36</sup> On June 22, 1938, seventy-thousand partisan fans filled Yankee Stadium to see the fight, while many, many more listened to it on the radio. When Louis smashed Schmeling to the canvas four times amidst forty-one blows, delivering the K.O. at 2:04 of round one, celebration occurred everywhere.<sup>37</sup>

The victory greatly affected Louis, who became more sure of himself and at ease with others. He fully understood, possibly for the first time, his meaning for and commitment to black society. No longer isolated, he saw beyond family, friends and personal pride a broader version of people and things black; "If I ever do anything to disgrace my race," he remarked later, "I hope to die,"<sup>38</sup> Louis's triumph also appealed to white society's patriotism and need,

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31. Ibid., 65, 66-67, 81-83, 182-83 and 39, for information in this paragraph.

32. Roxborough appeared Robin Hood-like to unemployed blacks: Louis, *My Life*, 29-30. That Black, Blackburn and he had police records partly explains their attraction to the masses and entrepreneurs, who recognized shady dealings as an avenue for upward mobility in a society of limited opportunities: David M. Katzman, *Before the Ghetto: Black Detroit in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago, 1973), 171-74 and Allan Spear, *Black Chicago The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920* (Chicago, 1967), 71 and 76-78. Their criminal activities aside, some professionals admired the all-black composition of "Joe Louis and Co.": *Detroit Tribune*, June 22, 1940, 12.

33. Earl Brown, "Joe Louis the Champion, Idol of His Race, Sets a Good Example of Conduct," *Life*, June 17, 1940, 52; Marshall W. Fishwick, *American Heroes: Myth and Reality* (Westport, Ct., 1954), 228-29 for the contention that "skillful and faithful manipulators" lay behind all heroes, creating "a mythical image and a second life for them." Parts of Louis's image and life—his humanitarianism, for example—were genuine, however.

34. Richard M. Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution." *The Journal of American History* LV (June 1968): 90-106.

35. Peter J. Kellogg, "Civil Rights Consciousness in the 1940s." *The Historian*, XLII (Nov. 1979): 31

36. Jack Orr, "The Black Boxer Exclusion and Ascendance" in John T. Talamini and Charles H. Page, *Sport and Society* (Boston, 1973), 241; quoted in Louis, *My Life*, 137 and 141 for the following statistic.

37. Young, "Joe Louis, Symbol," 130

38. Erik H. Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (2nd ed.: New York, 1963), 263-66 for the concepts of isolation and intimacy; Edwin R. Embree, *Thirteen Against the Odds* (New York, 1944), 237 for the quotation.

outside of the South, to appear racially moral in the face of its Nazi-like values.<sup>39</sup> As an integrative force, he seemed capable of bringing the races together along commonly held ideals and against common enemies without challenging basic conditions of black life. In fact, sixty-four percent of all radio owners in the nation listened to the rematch—a figure only exceeded in this internationally tense period by two presidential broadcasts.<sup>40</sup>

Louis's mass appeal spread in 1939 and 1940, bringing him greater recognition. He drew honors from *Ring Magazine*—“Boxer of the Year” for the third time in six years—and the Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History for improving race relations.<sup>41</sup> Aware of his phenomenal popularity, particularly among blacks and white liberals, political brokers sought his support. In the hotly contested presidential campaign of 1940. Roosevelt's advisers shared NAACP spokesman Walter F. White's belief that northern black voters could decide the election.<sup>42</sup> Hence, they invited Louis to “thank the President for increasing Negro participation in defense” and “to offer his own services.”<sup>43</sup> Such might parry criticism of Roosevelt seeking a third term, appeals by challenger Wendell Willkie for black ballots and pressure by black leaders for desegregation in the armed services and defense industries.

Nevertheless presidential aides sensed potential “dangers” and cancelled the Roosevelt-Louis meeting.<sup>44</sup> Doubtless the dangers consisted of John Roxborough and his brother, Charles, a prominent Michigan figure in the Republican Party, who persuaded (more likely instructed) Louis to be “in Willkie's corner.”<sup>45</sup> During the crucial, closing days of the campaign, Republicans used him as Democrats had hoped to. He stumped in Chicago, St. Louis and New York, noting Roosevelt's failure to support an anti-lynch bill or get blacks off the WPA rolls; he predicted Willkie would “win by a knockout” and “help my people.”<sup>46</sup> One concerned Democrat suggested a broadcast by vocalist Marian Anderson “to offset Joe Louis' influence.”<sup>47</sup> Michigan State Senator Diggs, however, assured Roosevelt that “the overwhelming majority” of black voters realized his record and Louis's political ignorance.<sup>48</sup> Diggs proved accurate, for blacks disregarded their hero's preference because it challenged their dreams for equal opportunity, which Roosevelt, however paternalistically continued to act upon. Indeed, worried by Willkie's bid for black support, which included the strongest civil rights plank in political party

39. Kellogg, “Civil Rights Consciousness in the 1940s,” 33; Sammons, “Boxing as a Reflection of Society,” 30.

40. *Time*, Sept. 29, 1949, 60.

41. *Amsterdam News* (New York), Jan. 6, 1940, p 15; *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 1940, 13.

42. Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York, 1948), 187-88.

43. Memo to Roberta Barrows (from H. K. ), Sept 23, 1940 and Edwin M. Watson to Julian Rainey, Sept 25, 1940, Box 13, OF 300. Franklin D. Roosevelt Papers, Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York (hereafter cited as FDRP).

44. Oscar R. Ewing to Edwin M. Watson, Sept. 28, 1940, *ibid*.

45. Quoted in *New York Times*, Oct. 27, 1940, 37; Louis, *My Life*, 158-59 for his version of the endorsement.

46. *New York Times*, Oct. 31, 1940, 18, Oct. 27, 1940, 37 for the quotations and Nov. 5, 1940, 21.

47. Anonymous telegram to Roosevelt. Nov. 2, 1940, OF 4884, FDRP.

48. Diggs telegram to Roosevelt, Nov 1, 1940, OF 93, FDRP.

history, Roosevelt followed the counsel of civil rights advocates and, among other concessions, promoted Colonel Benjamin O. Davis the first black brigadier general and appointed William H. Hastie civilian aide to the Secretary of War.<sup>49</sup> Such was enough for blacks to place Louis in context and consider Roosevelt—in Willkie’s phrase—“the Champ” of things political. Having to choose between heroes and a Republican Party which had not been responsive, they voted according to New Deal and wartime realities.

Louis retained his heroic stature, nonetheless. His endorsement of Willkie appeared orchestrated by someone selfishly willing to sell “this otherwise good boy down the river.”<sup>50</sup> As significantly he remained humble in defeat: “I never alibi after a fight.”<sup>51</sup> And he quickly returned to the ring, easily defending his title for the twelfth time against Al McCoy in December. Sportswriter James P. Dawson hailed him as “the greatest ‘fighting’ champion” ever in the heavyweight class.<sup>52</sup> His elevation to truly national status was in the offing.

Such began to occur during 1941, a crucial year for Louis and society. As world war intensified abroad, so did black militancy and white soul-searching at home. Black leaders, faced with the dilemma of opposing the Axis while protesting homegrown racism, unveiled the Double V campaign for the purpose of channeling black frustrations into positive, patriotic actions.<sup>53</sup> By simultaneously seeking victory on two fronts—over foreign and domestic foes—they hoped to bolster black morale and promote racial equality; by linking the struggles and stimulating black defense of the country, they avoided charges of treason and claimed first-class citizenship. White leaders, meanwhile, understood the meaning of Nazism for white supremacy in the United States and the resistance by larger society to any suggestion of changes in the status quo.<sup>54</sup> Rather than chance alienating whites and hindering preparedness, they played up democratic rhetoric and, when forced by black pressure, compromised on symbolically important issues involving the armed forces and defense industries without fundamentally altering basic conditions.<sup>55</sup> In this context, Louis’s forthcoming boxing feats served both personal and societal purposes. He mirrored the aggressiveness of the black masses and the patriotism of their leaders, bringing respect to the race; he embodied the fighting

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49. Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 303-09; Herbert Parmet, *Never Again: A President Runs for a Third Term* (New York, 1968) for the election results.

50. Diggs telegram to Roosevelt, Nov. 1, 1940, OF 93, FDRP.

51. Quoted in Miller, *Louis*, 133.

52. *New York Times*, Jan. 31, 1941, 22.

53. Lee Finkle, “The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric: Black Protest During World War II,” *The Journal of American History*, LX (Dec. 1973): 702-04 and *Forum for Protest: The Black Press during World War II* (Rutherford, N.J., 1975), 88-128.

54. Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War* (New York, 1976), 99 and 108-09.

55. William H. Harris, *The Harder We Run: Black Workers Since the Civil War* (New York, 1982), 117 and James A. Nuechterlein, “The Politics of Civil Rights: the FEPC, 1941-1946,” *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives*, X (Fall 1978): 171-91 regarding Randolph, Roosevelt and the Fair Employment Practices Committee.

spirit and the interracial symbolism needed by white citizens and leaders during world crisis.<sup>56</sup>

Between January and June, he defended the championship monthly, keeping himself before the press and public. He fought Red Burman, Gus Dorazio, Abe Simon, Tony Musto and Buddy Baer, in what some called the bum-a-month campaign, before meeting Billy Conn in an historic bout. No fight since the Schmeling rematch generated such excitement: Louis experienced difficulty defeating some of the “bums” and Conn, the 175 pound light heavyweight champion, entered as the underdog. Indeed controversy swirled over whether Louis was slipping.<sup>57</sup>

On June 18, 54,487 people, including noted businessmen, politicians, “stars of stage and screen,” and 700 sportswriters filled the Polo Grounds.<sup>58</sup> Most of them rooted for Conn, the cocky Irishman from Pittsburgh who spotted the Dark Destroyer twenty-five pounds and fought “a brand of battle” few expected. They supported Conn, local reporters opined, because of his dashing underdog appeal rather than his race: Louis believed otherwise, later referring to Conn as a ‘white hope.’<sup>59</sup> No doubt both factors influenced the crowd, but after twelve spirited rounds by Conn, which left Louis “bewildered, dazed and on his way to a decisive defeat,” the champion rallied.<sup>60</sup> In the thirteenth round Conn, whose speed thus far carried the fight, ceased to box and threw a long left hook; Louis seized the opening, stunning his opponent with a devastating right cross followed by a fusillade of “crushing fire” with both hands “savagely, thudding home.” Conn crumbled, ending one of the greatest heavyweight battles ever.

Louis re-emerged even more heroic and popular among both races. Blacks in Harlem celebrated his victory according to formula: “shouting, dancing, pelting each other with torn paper.”<sup>61</sup> Whites who saw, heard or read about the match understood the epic dimension of Louis. His loss of speed, which probably reflected the smaller challenger’s quickness more than the champion’s aging, and come-from-behind win signaled human imperfection: but his courage throughout the bout and his awesome power and skill in the final round revealed god-like invincibility.<sup>62</sup> His stepping back when Conn slipped in the tenth round (instead of attacking at a time when he was losing the championship), his praise for Conn as “an excellent ring general” and his admission of having declined as a fighter bespoke near-spiritual grace. To the faithful, like Alabama-born actress Tallulah Bankhead, Louis loomed as one of the three greatest men in the nation.<sup>63</sup>

56. Clarence Williams to the NAACP, Jan 3, 1942, Box 549, NAACP; Walter H. Jacobs to Roosevelt Nov. 14, 1941, Box 100, PPF 9-J, FDRP

57. Bill White to the Editor, *New York Times*, May 31, 1941, 18; John Kieran, “Sports of the Times,” *New York Times*, June 18, 1941, 26.

58. *New York Times*, June 18, 1941, 27 and June 19, 1941, 1 for the following quotation, and 27.

59. *New York Times*, June 20, 1941, 25; Louis, *My Life*, 167.

60. *New York Times*, June 20, 1941, 25 for these quotations, and June 19, 1941, 1 for the following quotations and description of the fight.

61. *New York Times*, June 19, 1941, 27.

62. *Ibid.*, June 19, 1941, 27 and June 20, 1941, 25 for information in this and the next sentence.

63. *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb 28, 1942, 1, Roosevelt and Willkie being the other greatest men.

Even great men face difficulties, as Louis and his admirers discovered. In July, Marva filed for divorce. She charged "extreme and repeated cruelty" and estimated Louis's annual income from boxing at \$250,000.<sup>64</sup> Over the next six weeks, reporters publicized their private relations and extravagant life style. In mid August they reconciled and, despite Marva's allegations that Joe acted ungodly by striking her, the champion remained as popular as ever. Maybe black fans believed the rumor that Marva had been "cutting some capers" with a prominent doctor while white supporters probably identified with the soft-spoken, magnanimous Louis they knew publicly.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, everyone could deduce from the reconciliation that charges of brutality were exaggerated. And all expected heroes who fight their way to the top to be wealthy.

Having weathered six title defenses, Conn's near win and marital problems, Louis now fought Lou Nova and re-established his own indisputable supremacy. In predictable ritual, 56,549 persons jammed into the Polo Grounds on September 29 to see the champion drop Nova "like a deflated balloon" in the sixth round.<sup>66</sup> Celebrities abounded, including one-time paramour Sonjia Henie and former challenger Billy Conn; even Roosevelt rearranged his travel schedule to hear the fight broadcast. In the aftermath, the *New York Times* editorialized anew about Louis's infallibility, and Detroit promoters planned a "White Hope" tournament to find the next challenger.<sup>67</sup>

Increased renown continued to bring Louis into contact with black leaders and organizations, but his managers always stood between them. Detroit Urban Leaguer John C. Dancy, whose agency benefitted from Louis's generosity and who knew the champion well enough to pass along the request of others, observed that Roxborough handled all business matters.<sup>68</sup> The National NAACP also received donations via Black and Roxborough, who molded Louis's image while reducing his taxable income.<sup>69</sup> On Occasion Walter F. White thanked Louis for helping the association financially, requested his autographed photo or reprimanded journalists depicting him as "exceedingly stupid."<sup>70</sup> Black and Roxborough, nevertheless, protected Louis from controversial racial issues.

They permitted him more exposure in race relations as times changed, but continued to shield him from militant protest. Aware of the strident Double V effort by White and others, Black and Roxborough aligned Louis with the more conservative, gradualistic National Urban League and Federal Council

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64 *New York Times*, July 3, 1941, 21, July 10, 1941, 21 for Marva's quotation. Aug. 19, 1941, 23 and Aug. 20, 1941, 21 for information in this paragraph.

65 John C. Dancy to Presley S. Winfield, Aug. 12, 1941, Box 1, John C. Dancy Papers, Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Historical Library, Ann Arbor. Michigan (hereafter cited as JCDP).

66 *New York Times*, Sept. 30, 1941, 1 for the statistic and the quotation and 29 for information in the following sentence: Louis, *My Life*, 81 for reference to the Louis-Henie affair.

67 *New York Times*, Oct. 1, 1941, 20; *Detroit Tribune*, Oct. 4, 1941, 7.

68 John C. Dancy. *Sand Against the Wind. The Memoirs of John C. Dancy* (Detroit, 1966), 186-88; Dancy to Julia Black. Oct. 3, 1941, Box 1, JCDP.

69 White to Louis, Roxborough and Black. Dec. 12, 1941, Box 365, NAACP.

70 White to Louis, Feb. 16, 1940 and Feb. 24, 1940, Box 365, NAACP, White to Editor, *Life*, June 18, 1940, for the quotation, and White to Earl Brown, June 19, 1940, Box 365, NAACP regarding the latter's "Joe Louis the Champion, Idol of His Race, Sets a Good Example of Conduct," *Life*, June 17, 1940, 50.

of the Churches of Christ. Hence he participated in the League's radio program on vocational education and, more significantly, solicited funds for the Council's Department of Race Relations.<sup>71</sup> "The hardest fight I ever had was against prejudice and discrimination," he informed Roosevelt in a request for money. Ironically, executive aides-doubtlessly smarting from the President recently having been forced by A. Philip Randolph and White to create the Fair Employment Practices Committee-suspected "the Italian hand" of White behind Louis's solicitation and advised against a contribution.<sup>72</sup> They misunderstood completely, because "in times like these" White believed in a "more dynamic and direct approach" to racial problems than efforts at Christian education.<sup>73</sup> Obviously displeased, he recognized the champion's right to place his assistance where he believed it would do "the most good."

As the national emergency bound Louis and society more closely together, White thought Louis could best serve Afro-America in the armed forces. In the fall of 1941, he knew of the champion's I-A classification and of increased violence between black servicemen and white citizens, police and soldiers.<sup>74</sup> Behind the scenes he contacted Black and Roxborough, Eleanor Roosevelt and military authorities, negotiating the possibility of commissioning Louis in the Army's Morale Division.<sup>75</sup> Apparently all endorsed his proposal, particularly Army commanders who had no other plans for controlling interracial conflict and imagined Louis capable of boosting black emotions.<sup>76</sup> White, of course, envisioned the champion as both a morale builder for blacks and an integrator for whites. One of the few blacks known and respected by both races, Louis could serve the Double V strategy by encouraging black participation and exemplifying black patriotism at a time when blacks appeared indifferent to the war and whites seemed vulnerable to civil rights propaganda. He fit the needs of black leaders, white liberals and War Department officials.

For this reason, White became alarmed over Louis's image. His influential assistant, Roy Wilkins, warned that public reaction would be "very unfavorable" if Louis somehow avoided the draft.<sup>77</sup> People might resent his enormous income, widely publicized at \$2,000,000 in seven years of professional fighting, and compare him with Jack Dempsey, who evoked near lasting criticism for refusing to serve during the last war. Instead they would be "greatly impressed" if Louis entered the service as "a private just like Joe Doakes earning \$18 a week"; by not accepting "some soft berth" made possible "though pull with Army higher-ups," he could follow the examples of Hank

71. Guichard Parris and Lester Brooks, *Blacks in the City: A History of the National Urban League* (Boston, 1971), 312; Louis to Roosevelt, Sept. 27, 1941, OF 93, FDRP.

72. Memorandum for Watson (from S.T.E.), Oct. 2, 1941, Box 5, OF 93, FDRP Black militancy aside. Roosevelt must have recalled Louis's opposition to his re-election before informing the champion that he donated to relief organizations of broader scope Edwin W. Watson to Louis, Oct. 7, 1941, Box 5, OF 93, FDRP.

73. White to Robert D. Kohn, Oct. 7, 1941, Box 365, NAACP.

74. *New York Times*, Sept. 10, 1941, 31; Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953* (Columbia, Mo., 1969), 64-68.

75. White to Eleanor Roosevelt, Sept. 22, 1941 and White to Louis, Roxborough and Black. Oct. 3, 1941, Box 365, NAACP.

76. Brigadier General F. H. Osborn to White, Oct. 1, 1941, Box 365, NAACP.

77. Memorandum to White (from Wilkins), Oct. 3, 1941, Box 365, NAACP.

Greenberg, Winthrop Rockefeller and other famous, wealthy individuals. White agreed with Wilkins and pressed the twenty-seven year old champion and his managers to squelch the story that talk of military service had been ballyhoo for the Nova bout.<sup>78</sup> And if Louis's age would prevent him from being called, White urged that he volunteer.

Black and Roxborough had other plans, however, indicating the limited influence of White and other leaders over themselves and their fighter. They opted for the draft and delayed Louis's November induction by signing a rematch with Buddy Baer. They arranged for Louis and promoter Jacobs to donate their purses for this twentieth title defense to the Navy Relief Society.<sup>79</sup> Such generosity and patriotism enhanced the champion's image and future, as well as their own and boxing's. It also brought raves from whites and sparked debate among Double V-minded blacks aware of the Navy's discrimination.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps realizing the futility of stopping the bout, White complimented Louis for acting "far bigger than the Navy" and hoped his example might influence its policy of relegating blacks to messmen status.<sup>81</sup> He played on this theme in the wake of Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor; since "the unqualified support" of every citizen was needed in this national peril, he lectured leading editors, it was time to get rid of prejudice.<sup>82</sup> He later organized NAACP Youth Councils to distribute leaflets to fight fans entering Madison Square Garden and asked Senator Arthur Clapper of Kansas to write the *New York Times*, appealing for the removal of discrimination at "the psychological moment" of the bout.<sup>83</sup>

Louis held firm to his commitment despite some black criticism. Many things were wrong with America, he agreed, "but Hitler won't fix them."<sup>84</sup> When asked by reporters why risk his million dollar championship for nothing, he corrected: "I ain't fighting for nothing, I am fighting for my country." On January 9, in "a flag-draped setting" hyped by the prefight rhetoric of Wendell Willkie, Louis destroyed Baer in round one, donated \$47,000 to the Navy Relief Society and received praise from some blacks for having drawn "loop rings" around "ding-donging and complaining" leaders.<sup>85</sup>

Three days after the Baer match Louis passed the Army physical, ending the civilian period more popular than ever before. According to the Spingarn Medal nomination for the NAACP's highest award, his clean life, unprecedented title defenses and Navy relief bout won the "respect of Americans and

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78. White to Louis, Roxborough and Black, Oct. 3, 1941, Box 365, NAACP.

79. *New York Times*, Nov. 13, 1941, 39 and Dec. 17, 1941, 41, Baer agreed to donate two and one half percent of his share to the society.

80. *Pittsburgh Courier*, Dec. 6, 1941, 17 and Dec. 13, 1941, 17.

81. White telegram to *Pittsburgh Courier*, Nov. 15, 1941, Box 365, NAACP.

82. White to Editor, *New York Times*, Dec. 15, 1941, Box 365, NAACP; he sent an identical letter to several New York dailies, which was published by at least one newspaper, the *Herald Tribune*.

83. Madison S. Jones, Jr. to Edna Scott, n.d., Memorandum to Miss Crump (from Mr. Morrow), Jan 9, 1942 and Memorandum to Mrs. Bowman (from Distribution Committee), Jan 19, 1942, Box 365, NAACP regarding the leaflets; White to Clapper, Jan. 2, 1942, *ibid.* for the quotation.

84. Quoted in "Quoted in "Our Joe," an unidentified press clipping, n.d., Box 549, NAACP.

85. *New York Times*, Jan 10, 1942, 19; *Amsterdam News*, Jan 17, 1942, 1; *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb 28, 1942, 5.

of people the world over.”<sup>86</sup> By displaying traits—particularly love of country—admired by larger society, he conformed increasingly to its criteria for heroes; by enhancing his own and black esteem, while ignoring Double V protest, he avoided having to choose one race and set of ideas over another.<sup>87</sup> Honors came to him from all quarters, including the Edward J. Neil Trophy for outstanding contribution to boxing.<sup>88</sup> He also inspired suggestions that naval units bear his name and songs and posters that celebrated his patriotism.<sup>89</sup>

Although set in motion by the war crisis, his transition from sports hero to super patriot lay ahead. Some whites still perceived Louis as a great champion, nothing more; they denied him the Spingarn Medal for this reason. Anticipating strong backing for Louis and Randolph, White inquired about the possibility of naming two recipients for the award.<sup>90</sup> Such was impossible and Randolph emerged as the Spingarn Medal Committee’s choice because he appealed to everyone, while the champion faced adamant opposition from white minister John Haynes Holmes of The Community Church in New York City.<sup>91</sup> Holmes admired Louis’s ability, his “sense of propriety, personal honor and public spirit.” Yet he considered boxing “bestial and degrading.” appealing to base instincts; those concerned with “the serious business of life” should neither admire nor recognize it. Out of touch with AfroAmerica and large segments of white society, the Park Avenue clergyman nevertheless represented those who, for similar or racial reasons, envisioned Louis as no more than an athlete.

Once Louis entered military service, this view of him eroded and, between 1932 and 1945, he became a national symbol. His physical on January 12 and assignment to Company C at Camp Upton, Long Island drew praise from reporters. Joining the service and being unable to fit into the uniform of “an ordinary man,” enhanced his image and instilled national confidence.<sup>92</sup> United States Senator Prentiss M. Brown of Michigan lauded his enlistment, which bandleader Lucky Millander memorialized in “Joe Louis Is a Mighty Man.”<sup>93</sup> Few, if any, citizens realized how his managers stalled induction for months or how he awaited formal notice rather than volunteer. Instead they believed that he chose freely to forsake luxury, jeopardize life and defend America; they knew of discriminatory military practices and of his segregated unit, making his action even more impressive. Indeed, the *New York Times*

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86. Memorandum (from the Secretary of the Springarn Medal), Jan. 26, 1942, Box 549, NAACP.

87. Wecter, *The Hero in America*, 1-16, 476-91 for the majority’s criteria for heroes; Erik H. Erikson, *Young Man Luther: Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York, 1958), 259 for the theory of meshing with different groups and ideas.

88. *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan. 3, 1942, 16, Feb. 14, 1942, 3 and Jan 10, 1942, 17.

89. Spencer Page to Roosevelt, Jan 15, 1942 OF 4884, FDRP; *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan 31, 1942, 20 and Feb. 7, 1942, 11 for the song and poster, The Boxing Writer’s Association of New York presented the Neil trophy.

90. White to Artur B. Sprinarn, Jan. 22, 1942 and Springarn to White, Jan. 23, 1942, Box 549, NAACP.

91. Holmes to White, Jan 27, 1942, Box 549, NAACP.

92. *Amsterdam News*, Jan 17, 1942, 1 and 3.

93. *Detroit Tribune*, Jan 17, 1942, 1; *Pittsburgh Courier*, Jan 31, 1942, 20.

editor reminded readers resentful of war taxes of the champion's contribution.<sup>94</sup>

Even before completing basic training, Louis boosted the war effort by agreeing to speak for the Navy Relief Society. Before 20,000 persons on March 10, he stood erect in uniform and dismissed the idea of doing more than any other "red-blooded American."<sup>95</sup> Everyone would do their part, he predicted, and "we'll win 'cause we are on God's side." His words stunned the Madison Square Garden crowd momentarily, then jubilation: tears, laughter, applause, stamping, whistles. Louis's simple, touching greatness explained columnist Bill Corum, could make him "a symbol" in troubled times. Indeed, he envisioned the global struggle a holy crusade, called it "God's War" and, in the process, fulfilled Roosevelt's request that newsmen find a name for the conflagration. Public relations consultant Carl Byoir celebrated the champion in "Joe Louis Named the War," a poem widely circulated, nationally broadcasted and praised by the President.<sup>96</sup> He wrote that unlike others who fought and claimed "God is on our side," Louis spoke more modestly and reverently of being on God's side, drawing the war's name out of his humanity and "out of some instinct that reaches back":

Back through all the struggle of mankind  
To establish the rights  
That we are fighting to keep now.<sup>97</sup>

Louis's influence continued well into the war as song writers Sammy Cahn and Jule Styne highlighted his memorable words in "Keep Your Powder Dry."<sup>98</sup>

Fascination grew for Louis as he defined the crisis evangelically. Such beckoned black participation by challenging the argument that this was "a white man's war"; such soothed white consciences by engendering moral self-worth in a racist society fighting for democracy. Blacks understood what Louis meant by being on God's side, but did whites? Given "the downright oppression" in America, "the holier than thou attitude" expressed by some white writers about the champion's statement struck one black cleric as "sinful."<sup>99</sup> Whether or not whites took the opportunity offered by war "to get on God's side," Louis again bridged racial lines and continued to appear saintly.

He returned to Madison Square Garden on March 27 for another title defense. The event replicated that staged for the Navy Relief Society.<sup>100</sup> Flags,

94. Miller. *Louis*, 163.

95. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 21, 1942, 17 and May 16, 1942, 17 for information in this paragraph; some reporters, including the *Courier's* misquoted Louis in their original stories.

96. Roosevelt to Byoir, May 4, 1942 and Byoir, "Joe Louis Named the War," PPF 2176, FDRP; Edward Anthony to Arthur B. Spingarn, May 5, 1942, Box 365, NAACP.

97. Byoir guessed that Louis found inspiration in his great grandfather, no doubt a slave; but columnist W. K. Kelsey opined that "consciously or unconsciously" he paraphrased Lincoln, who reputedly said something similar to a Southern delegation during the Civil War. However, Louis credited bandleader friend Lucky Millander for helping formulate ideas for the benefit speech: Byoir, "Joe Louis Named the War", *Detroit News*, March 22, 1941, 6; Louis, *My Life*. 1973-74.

98. *Michigan Chronicle*, Nov. 11, 1944, 14.

99. *Ibid.*, June 20, 1942, 6.

100. *New York Times*, March 28, 1942, 12; *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 4, 1942, 17; Louis, *My Life*. 174.

speeches and government figures abounded, including Under Secretary of War Robert Patterson who extolled Louis's patriotism over national and short wave broadcasts. Civilians and combat soldiers listened as Louis dispatched Abe Simon in six rounds, donating his purse of \$64,950 to the Army Emergency Relief Organization. Magnanimous as ever, he treated black G.I.'s to almost \$3,000 worth of fight tickets.

Just as the military officials exploited Louis's commercial and patriotic value, so did black organizations. National Urban Leaguers hoped to capitalize on the Simon bout by raising funds for their program to place blacks in war jobs. They sought permission from Louis's managers for one hundred girls of both races to solicit contributions from fans while distributing match books which bore the message that defense and democracy necessitated the training and hiring of all Americans.<sup>101</sup> Despite cooperation from Louis's handlers, the request never received approval.<sup>102</sup> That project failing, NUL officials asked that Louis sign letters intended for potential contributors. This was the moment, executive secretary Lester B. Granger acknowledged, when "Joe's assistance could be of inestimable value."<sup>103</sup>

Military authorities also realized Louis's worth. Placing the champion in special services, they dampened charges of favoritism by treating him routinely. He completed boot camp, rose to corporal and spoke uncomplainingly of needing to work harder for sergeant's chevrons.<sup>104</sup> A model soldier, he delighted Army personnel who assigned him several roles.

During and immediately after basic training, Louis stimulated the sale of defense bonds. Black disabled veterans in Milwaukee planned their drive around "Joe Louis Day," while he spoke before a predominantly black gathering of 20,000 hometown Detroiters who bought bonds totalling \$275,000.<sup>105</sup> Officials and private citizens requested his appearance at bond-selling rallies in New York and Memphis, claiming that such would increase sales and boost black morale.<sup>106</sup> All agreed with the Hutchinson, Kansas, correspondent that Louis stirred "the flame of patriotism" in the hearts of his people.<sup>107</sup> Much the same might have been said about his impact on whites, at least the 65,000 patrons at the Tam O'Shanter golf tournament who purchased \$933,000 worth of bonds at Louis's urgings.<sup>108</sup>

Representatives of labor, academe and mass organizations also requested Louis's services. Members of Ford Local 600 desired his presence at their

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101. Lester B. Granger to Dancy, March 6, 1942, and Dancy to John Roxborough, March 6, 1942, Reel 10, DULP.

102. Dancy to Lester B. Granger, March 9, 1942 and Ann Tanneyhill to John Roxborough, March 21, 1942, Reel 10, DULP.

103. Granger to John Roxborough, March 30, 1942, Reel 10, DULP.

104. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 21, 1942, 20; *Michigan Chronicle*, June 6, 1942, 13, privately, the Army favored Louis with passes for Blackburn's funeral, his daughter's birth and his wife's debut as a singer: Louis, *Story*, 159, 166 and 168.

105. *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 28, 1942, 16; *Michigan Chronicle*, June 6, 1942, 1.

106. Sumner A. Sirtl to Roosevelt, June 2, 1942, OF 4884 and Benjamin F. Bell, Jr., telegram to Roosevelt, Sept. 6, 1943, OF 4408 FDRP.

107. Quoted in Memo (from M.H. McIntyre), July 11, 1942, OF 4884, FDRP.

108. *Detroit News*, July 20, 1943, 19 and July 31, 1943, 14.

patriotic rally, and Malcom S. MacLean of Hampton Institute recommended he visit black colleges and uplift R.O.T.C. students with his simple talks that “weigh a ton.”<sup>109</sup> More pointedly for race relations, White solicited Louis for NAACP-sponsored events; he believed the champion would help the association achieve an “affirmative note.”<sup>110</sup> Only the United Automobile Workers’ request appears to have been acted upon favorably by government officials, who preferred direct control of Louis’s activities.

Military leaders, too, understood the value of Louis as morale builder and, especially during his first year of duty, image-maker. He promoted the service by appearing in the film “This is the Army,” speaking on the broadcast “Army Hour” and participating in “I am an American Day.”<sup>111</sup> In every instance he waxed patriotic: “this fight’s the biggest . . . I [have] ever been in, and . . . I haven’t any doubts about helping to win.” Later, in the face of the Los Angeles and Detroit race riots, the War Department moved to bolster blacks and educate whites, using clips of Louis in the widely shown docudrama “The Negro Soldier.”<sup>112</sup>

Army officials also arranged for Louis to tour military camps in the United States beginning August 30, 1943. Over the next four months the champion boxed before thousands of soldiers. He visited the G.I.’s in hospitals, lectured on good health and sparred two or three rounds daily. Shortly thereafter he visited the British Isles, France, Italy and North Africa, returning home in October of 1944. In all, he traveled fourteen months, covered 30,000 miles, entertained 2,000,000 troops and fought nearly 200 exhibition bouts overseas.<sup>113</sup> Servicemen flocked to watch him fight, “exchange quips, act in skits or just talk.” Most appreciative were the wounded, one of whom begged to have his eyes unbandaged so he could see the champion and, having his wish fulfilled, exclaimed: “This is the happiest I’ve been.”<sup>114</sup> Doubtless Louis provided “invaluable service” to the Army.<sup>115</sup>

Most black spokesmen and white officials also recognized Louis’s potential to incite, however unintended, yet check violence. Even as the champion’s prestige grew among whites in the early 1940’s, interracial conflict sprang from his victories over Conn and Baer in locales as far removed as Detroit and Gurdon, Arkansas.<sup>116</sup> Clearly Louis instilled pride, even assertiveness in some blacks, which many whites perceived as a threat to the racial status quo. “Since Joe Louis became so prominent every Negro goes around strutting his

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109. Victor G. Reuther to John Gallo, March 11, 1942, Box 31, United Automobile War Policy Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Detroit, Michigan; MacLean to Marvin H. McIntyre, Nov. 20, 1942, Box 7, OF 93, FDRP.

110. White to Charles Poletti, April 30, 1943, Box 248, NAACP.

111. *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 11, 1942, 20 and *Detroit News*, June 11, 1943, 29; *Michigan Chronicle*, May 16, 1942, 12 for the broadcast and following quotations; “Headliners,” *New York Times Magazine*, May 24, 1942, 19.

112. Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War*, 30 and 83.

113. *New York Times*, Oct. 11, 1944, 25 for statistics and the following quotation, and Sept 24, 1945, 32.

114. Quoted in Miller, *Louis*, 179.

115. *Michigan Chronicle*, Oct. 28, 1944, 15 for the Quotation of Col. Joe Triner, former chairman of the Illinois Boxing Commission.

116. *Detroit Tribune*, June 28, 1941, 3; *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 21, 1942, 11.

stuff.” complained one Michigander.<sup>117</sup> Exactly because of the champion’s influence among blacks, leaders of both races sought his assistance to curb discord. Following the spring riots of 1943 in Los Angeles, Detroit and elsewhere, Roosevelt supposedly sent Louis as goodwill emissary to Pittsburgh, “the most sensitive spot for another outbreak.”<sup>118</sup> Disorder came instead to New York where Mayor Fiorello H. LaGuardia recruited celebrities to circulate through Harlem appealing for peace.<sup>119</sup> He called for Louis, who was out of town. Frightened by the spectre of race war, scores of municipal officials created interracial committees, northern and southern liberals worked to “keep the lid on” and White sought Louis’s participation in race relation programs.<sup>120</sup> Black editors retreating from direct action admonished rioters, particularly in Harlem where blacks ignited the disorder, and invoked Louis’s example and words: “you cannot expect to win a fight by hitting foul blows.”<sup>121</sup>

Louis himself struck “fair” punches for AfroAmerica. Besides promoting social control over black soldiers and civilians, he helped integrate society and change racial attitudes. Although organized protest lay behind Roosevelt’s ordering the placement of black sailors in all naval branches, black newsmen and white officials agreed that Louis’s benefit bout for the Navy Relief Society contributed to moving the race beyond messmen duty.<sup>122</sup> Neither black pressure nor Louis’s magnanimity integrated the Navy but, judged one editor, “he slapped Jim Crow in the face.”<sup>123</sup> He weakened the segregated structure of civilian and military society elsewhere: expressing dissatisfaction with discrimination at bond rallies; integrating promotional golf tournaments; boxing with soldiers of both races before integrated audiences only. Indeed, while the Army used Louis to promote its image and the war effort, he turned the tables on more than one occasion; he informed 20,000 Detroiters that if given defense jobs and “an even break in the Army,” blacks “would show the world how to win this war.”<sup>124</sup>

When pressed by circumstances, he protested publicly. He ignored a ‘White Only’ sign in the bus depot of Camp Sibert, Alabama (which resulted

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117. B.M. Merrill to Edward J. Jeffries, Jr., March 2, 1942, box 9, Mayor’s Papers, Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Michigan.

118. Military Intelligence division, War Department, “Race Riots,” Aug 5, 1943, Box 18, Record Group 319, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Maryland (hereafter cited as WNRC). It is unclear whether Louis visited Pittsburgh.

119. Dominic J. Capeci, Jr., *The Harlem Riot of 1943* (Philadelphia, 1977), 104 for LaGuardia following White’s advice.

120. Sitkoff, “Racial Militancy and Interracial Violence in the Second World War,” 678-79 and Donald R. McCoy and Richard T. Ruetten, “Towards Equality: Blacks in the United States during the Second World War,” in A.C. Hepburn, ed., *Minorities in History* (New York, 1979), 148 for conflicting views of the significance of these committees; Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*, 108 for Jonathan Daniel’s quotation; White to John Roxborough, Aug. 18, 1943, Box 365, NAACP.

121. Finkle, “The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric,” 711; Michigan Chronicle, Aug 7, 1943, 1 for Louis Martin’s quotation.

122. Dalfume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces*, 54-55 and 101; Detroit tribune, April 11, 1942, 1 and *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 18, 1942, 16; Special Services Division, Office of War Information, “Negro Organizations and the War effort,” April 28, 1942, Box 1843, Record Group 44, WNRC.

123. *Michigan Chronicle*, May 23, 1942, 4.

124. *Ibid.*, June 6, 1942, 2.

in his and Sugar Ray Robinson's arrest) and questioned Jim Crow theater seats in Salisbury, England.<sup>125</sup> More often he inquired privately as to why blacks of Jackie Robinson's athletic ability and education could neither play for post football teams nor attend Officer's Candidate School (OCS). Later Louis exaggerated his significance in correcting some of these wrongs. Rather than single-handedly desegregating buses on Army posts, for example, his arrest merely reflected one of innumerable incidents of racial friction and low morale that dictated new policy; hence on July 8, 1944 the military command adopted the procedure of Brigadier General George Horkan of Camp Lee, Virginia, who provided sufficient vehicles, on a first come, first-served basis for all soldiers traveling between post and town.<sup>126</sup> Nevertheless Louis assisted in bringing about minor, though far from insignificant alterations. Robinson did play some football for Fort Riley, Kansas, and enter OCS, attributing the latter to Louis's efforts.<sup>127</sup> Certainly the champion's intervention in Robinson's behalf and his exhibitions with soldiers of both races "helped broaden the base of athletic competition of many posts."<sup>128</sup> He also might have been instrumental in Robinson going to OCS, but Robinson's ability and education must have been significant in themselves; in any case, military opposition to training more than token numbers of black officers continued throughout the war.<sup>129</sup> Not as assertively, consistently, dramatically or effectively as many others, Louis interacted with racist institutions and turbulent times to advance the struggle for equality.

Such occurred for several reasons. In the service Louis found himself alone, making "all kinds of decisions."<sup>130</sup> While he completed basic training, Black faced charges and Roxborough served time for running numbers and, pushing Louis to his emotional depths, Blackburn died. Military duty kept him, his mother and Marva apart, and ongoing marital problems ended in divorce two years later. Stripped of his guardians, Louis seemed more independent and concerned about racial justice, particularly for black soldiers and friends like Robinson. The war atmosphere affected him as well, for everyone from Roosevelt to Double V advocates espoused democratic principles. He became sensitized, fighting relief bouts, selling bonds and bolstering morale while witnessing discrimination in the Army; he believed that all servicemen should be treated identically "as American soldiers."<sup>131</sup> Perhaps worldwide fame also influenced him. French Tunisians asked every black soldier if he was the champion and a Soviet General looked for the man he had heard so

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125. Louis, *My Life*. 185-86 for his view of the depot and theater incidents, and 177-79 for his recollection of the Jackie Robinson episode below: Sugar Ray Robinson (with Dave Anderson), and *Sugar Ray* (New York, 1970), 122-24 and W. C. Heinz, *Once They Heard Cheers* (New York, 1979), 305-06 for their being provoked by a white Military Policeman at Camp Sibert.

126. Ulysses G Lee, Jr., *The United States Army in World War II. Special Studies: The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C. ), 323-24 (hereafter cited as *The Employment of Negro Troops*).

127. Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had It Made* (New York, 1972), 25 and 28-29.

128. Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops*, 307.

129. *Ibid.*, 203-04, 211, 270-74 and Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces*, 63-74 for military policy.

130. Louis, *My Life*, 180-81.

131. Louis, *Story*, 169.

much about: “No, not Eisenhower,” he informed a CBS correspondent. “Joe Louis.”<sup>132</sup> Despite being more independent, sensitive and popular than ever before, he rebelled rarely.

During the last months of war, Louis continued the model soldier, contemplated civilian life and basked in accolades. From his return to the United States in October 1944 until his discharge a year later, he visited defense plants to spur production or integrate labor forces.<sup>133</sup> He modestly parried efforts by admirers, like Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., to promote him from technical sergeant (his rank for “excellent work overseas”) to second lieutenant.<sup>134</sup> He joked about buying several civilian suits in “every color, except brown,” but, not wanting special treatment, preferred staying in uniform until victory.<sup>135</sup> He looked forward to boxing again, as did fans who believed him still capable of defending the title with “one hand.”<sup>136</sup> Neither had long to wait, for he mustered out of the Army on October 1 amidst great fanfare. Receiving the Legion of Merit “for exceptionally meritorious conduct in the performance of outstanding services” abroad, he expressed characteristic gratitude.<sup>137</sup> A medal and a military review, the presence of a brigadier general and national broadcast coverage of the ceremony signified Louis’s extraordinary prominence.

Quickly he returned to civilian life, as memories of his “meritorious conduct” lingered on and helped Americans adjust to peace. Many read Margery Miller’s *Joe Louis: American* and news stories of “the nice things Joe has done.”<sup>138</sup> They expressed pride in Louis for his character, his inspiration when “the Great War came” and his willingness to die so the nation might live.<sup>139</sup> Certainly citizens of both races associated themselves, their courage and commitment in the face of disaster with the champion who represented “the best ideals of Americanism.”<sup>140</sup> With victory in hand and reconstruction ahead, they again saw in him what they wanted to see in themselves: excellence.

Louis and society, then, interacted throughout the world crisis, helping to define one another. Initially, he made most blacks “unafraid of tomorrow” and some whites receptive to changing times.<sup>141</sup> Such was made possible by his awesome fistic skill and attractive human qualities; by his handlers, who understood—in the estimation of one white gradualist—“inter-racial relations and human psychology”; by black newsmen hungry for copy and their

132. *AfroAmerican* (Baltimore), May 22, 1943, 24; *Michigan Chronicle*, May 29, 1944, 7 for the quotation.

133. *New York Times*, Oct. 24, 1944, 14; Ottley, ‘*New World A-Coming*,’ 299.

134. *New York Times*, March 8, 1945, 16 and April 10, 1945, 23.

135. *Michigan Chronicle*, April 7, 1945, 7; *New York Times*, July 16, 1945, 6.

136. *New York Times*, Aug. 15, 1945, 22; *Michigan Chronicle*, March 3, 1945, for the quotation of Ford employee Arthur Mitchell of Detroit.

137. *New York Times*, Sept. 24, 1945, 32.

138. Bernard B. Perry to White, Sept. 18, 1945, Box 365, NAACP: J. H. Eliashon to Dancy, Jan 22, 1946, Reel 11, DULP.

139. Elijah P. Marrs to White, April 29, 1946, Box 91. NAACP for an example.

140. Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. to Roosevelt, March 6, 1945, OF 4884, FDRP.

141. Ottley, ‘*New World A-Coming*,’ 190 for the quotation. William Harrison to White, Oct. 19, 1941, Box 549, NAACP.

readers equally hungry for heroes; and by white promoters seeking profits and honest trainers wanting scandal-free bouts.<sup>142</sup> His politically symbolic victories over Camera and Schmeling brought increasing respect from whites and near universal decent treatment from daily presses.<sup>143</sup> His Olympian demeanor and patriotic action thrust him into more historically significant and internationally prominent roles.

Preparedness and war engendered instability and heightened societal needs for someone of Louis's stature, a hero capable of pulling everyone into "a framework of comprehensibility and control."<sup>144</sup> In providing this function, he touched on "the range of values in society:" patriotism and protest, continuity and change.<sup>145</sup> His enormous appeal and growth occurred because he identified himself with blacks personally and with all citizens representatively; he reflected both cultures and became their champion in and out of the ring.<sup>146</sup> Most importantly, he threatened neither race and unwittingly nurtured the status quo; one observer, expressing the feelings of many, extolled Louis for always having done "the right thing."<sup>147</sup> He pleased various segments of both communities who played on his prestige as a means to manipulate public behavior: black editors desiring democratic advances without rebellion, southern newsmen taking aim at Hitler without hitting Jim Crow targets, government officials seeking racial peace without social justice, white liberals wanting moral integrity without societal changes and white citizens striving for respectability without recognizing black grievances.<sup>148</sup> Occasionally, he stepped out of character and challenged discrimination, but only in military life and only very tentatively.

Genuinely the people's choice, Louis possessed that quality—"divine grace"—characteristic of heroic leadership.<sup>149</sup> He emerged more hero than leader, defining no ideology, presenting no strategy and organizing no constituency. Yet his historical significance lay in the symbolism he represented for black and white societies, their ideologies, their struggles and their "assurances of success."<sup>150</sup> Traditionally, most prominent blacks "have been pri-

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142. Guy Wells to James E. Shepard, April 22, 1942, Box 24, Howard W. Odum Papers southern Historical Collection. Wilson Library, Chapel Hill, North Carolina: St Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (rev. ed.; New York, 1962), II, 403 for an example—Chicago Defender, 1933-38—of the overwhelming coverage of Louis by black newspapers; Young, "Joe Louis, Symbol," 104.

143. White to Editor, *Life*, June 18, 1940, Box 365, NAACP.

144. Sidney Hook. *The Hero in History: A Study in Limitation and Possibility* (New York, 1943), 12; Kapp, "Heroes, Villains, and Fools as Agents of Social Control," 57 for the quotation.

145. Eldon E. Snyder and Elmer Spreitzer, *Social Aspects of Sports* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1978), 31.

146. Erik H. Erikson, *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Nonviolence* (New York, 1969), 266 and *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (New York, 1968), 31-32, respectively for the theories of individual-group Identity and cultural consolidation.

147. Carl Rowan, "Nonsense about Joe" (Springfield, Missouri) *Leader and Press*, April 2, 1981, 5-A; John Kieran, "A Champion All the Way." *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life*. XX (Feb., 1942): 48.

148. William J. Goode. *The Celebration of Heroes: Prestige as a Control System* (Berkeley, Ca., 1978), 1-2 and 10 for this theory. One federal official even suggested that Louis ask black civilians to rid themselves of venereal disease as "a patriotic measure": J. M. Ragland to White, May 12, 1942, Box 365, NAACP.

149. James MacGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York, 1978), 243.

150. Edmonds. *Joe Louis*, 86 for Louis as symbol; Lewis M. Killian and Ralph H. Turner. *Collective Behavior* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1957), 465 for the quotation: John William Ward. "The Meaning of Lind-

marily spokesmen, symbolic leaders and propagandists, rather than individuals with a solid organizational base.”<sup>151</sup> In his own way and for different racial constituencies, Louis functioned in all of these categories, played more than theatric parts in the life-and-death drama of war and educated countrymen in decency and democracy. He also marked the transition from earlier, one-dimensional paragons to contemporary, many-faceted heroes who undertake several functions and reveal themselves “warts and all.”<sup>152</sup> He laid, in a white admirer’s words, “a red rose on Abe Lincoln’s grave;” he became, from a black perspective, America’s David.<sup>153</sup> When Billy Conn wished he could have the heavyweight crown, Louis joshed that he had it for twelve rounds of their fight but “didn’t exactly know what to do with it!”<sup>154</sup> The same cannot be said of Joe Louis, multifarious hero of a society at war.

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bergh’s Flight.” *American Quarterly*, X(Spring, 1958): 3-16 for the best example of the significance of heroism that does not imply leadership.

151. August Meier and Elliot Rudwick. *Along the Color Line: Explorations in the Black Experience* (Urbana, 1976), 2.

152. Marshall Fishwick, “Prologue” in his, Ray B. Brown and Michael T. Marsden, eds. *Heroes in Popular Culture* (Bowling Green, Ohio, 1972), 7 for characteristics of old and modern heroes: Louis presented an exemplary image but played numerous roles, thereby bridging the qualities of past and future heroes.

153. *New York Times*, Oct. 12, 1942, 12 for the quotation of James Walker, and May 13, 1979, V, 3 for Reverend Jesse Jackson’s view of Louis as David-like.

154. Quoted in Young, “Joe Louis, Symbol.” 110.