

It's Never Black and White: Differences in Newspaper Coverage of Tommie Smith-John Carlos' 1968 Olympic Black Power Salute

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This paper analyzes the coverage Black and White newspapers provided of the Tommie Smith-John Carlos victory stand gesture at the 1968 Mexico City Olympic Games. It focuses on Black and White newspapers from five major American cities: the *New York Times* and *Amsterdam News*; *Washington Post* and *Washington Afro-American*; *Los Angeles Times* and *Los Angeles Sentinel*; *Chicago Tribune* and *Chicago Defender*; and *San Francisco Chronicle* and *Oakland Post*. The study examines what general differences existed between how the Black and White press covered the event, and whether there were degrees of variations between the two newspapers in each urban locale. The paper further investigates whether and how Black writers supported the efforts of Smith and Carlos in a bond of racial solidarity and conversely did White reporters condemn the actions of these two athletes.

Neither the Black nor White press, including the columnists, were monolithic in thought. Nor did race dichotomize their responses. While some Black reporters and editors defended the actions of Carlos and Smith, others did not and were often more critical of the two trackmen than their White counterparts. However, the Black press was more in agreement that the punishment exceeded the crime. White columnists generally opposed the gestures made by Smith and Carlos and few even seemed to understand, and certainly not appreciate its symbolic meaning. However, within the White liberal press, the Olympians had their supporters, most notably Shirley Povich of the *Washington Post*.

The paper frames the actions of Smith and Carlos as a profound and powerful gesture to define themselves, and needs to be understood as an expression of what DuBois termed double-consciousness. This same double-consciousness is also exhibited in the mixed responses of the Black press to the incident. The event had meanings well beyond the boundaries of the sporting world, and its ongoing significance and the indelible image that it has left emanates from its linkages to the broader societal and cultural rebellions and

changes that were occurring in 1968. It illustrates how sport emerged as a platform for protesting injustice both within sport and the larger society. It offers insight into an event that was controversial, reported differently by those within the media, and to the extent to which members of the press comprehended the breakdown of the pervasive vision of sport as separate from politics and society. In addition, the paper raises the question of why a certain event became an icon that continues to resurface in contemporary times and still remain controversial.