

African Americans in the Atomic Age

Postwar Perspectives on Race and the Bomb, 1945–1967

ABBY J. KINCHY

On 8 September 1945, Walter White, the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), made a prediction: “The atomic bomb will have and must have even more explosive effects on nationalist, economic and racial concepts as it has had on the half million human beings who were wiped out by two bombs in Japan.”¹ Was he right? Did the dawning atomic age bring about radical transformations in the dominant racial, colonial, and economic order, as hoped by White and other like-minded black intellectuals and activists? In some indirect ways, the answer is yes. Former colonies began to achieve independence in the postwar era, and cold war politics provided new incentives for the U.S. government to change its racist social policies.² The atomic bomb also made an impact on a variety of African-American public intellectuals, who produced surprisingly divergent conclusions about the course of social change. Indeed, the atomic bomb acted as a bifocal lens. It sharpened the

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1. Walter White, “People, Politics, and Places: Atom Bomb and Lasting Peace,” *Chicago Defender*, 8 September 1945.

2. Among recent work on this topic, see, for example, Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, N.J., 2000), and Azza Salama Layton, *International Politics and Civil Rights Policies in the United States, 1941–1960* (Cambridge, 2000).

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focus on global racial inequality, leading some writers and activists to transnational alliances and direct conflict with the U.S. government. At the same time, however, the atomic bomb revealed new possibilities for African Americans to pursue full inclusion in the postwar national project. In contrast to radical critics of nuclear weapons, some black leaders saw opportunities for the advancement of civil rights in the industries and ideologies of the atomic age.

As early as the first accounts of the nuclear attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, conflicting interpretations of what the atomic age would bring were voiced in the influential and widely distributed African-American newspapers of the time. In those pages, black newspaper editors and well-known columnists such as Langston Hughes, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Walter White raised a number of critiques of the bomb that were virtually ignored in mainstream discussions: the relationship between colonialism and atomic weapons; the extraction of resources from Africa; the racist use of the bomb against Japan; the segregation of black and white atomic workers; and the emptiness of the promise of atomic power in light of profound inequalities.³ But not all reporters and columnists writing for popular black newspapers were critical of the atomic bomb. Some found much to celebrate, particularly the contributions of black scientists, mathematicians, and workers to the construction of the weapon that ended the war. These patriotic accomplishments were held up as evidence that civil rights for African Americans were well deserved.

Disagreement over the atomic bomb is a typically overlooked dimension of the clash of political philosophies among African-American public figures during the early cold war. In a recent volume, Bruce Sinclair notes a persistent gap: "The history of race in America has been written as if technologies scarcely existed, and the history of technology as if it were utterly innocent of racial significance."⁴ Certainly, the history of the atomic bomb in American life and culture is well-worn territory,⁵ and the literature on civil rights

3. According to John Fousek, "African American voices generally expressed a radically different perspective on the bomb and the war's end. Consequently, the writings on these subjects in the African American press held an almost elliptical and at times subversive relationship to that employed by the president and the white-controlled mass media"; see Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2000), 29.

4. Bruce Sinclair, "Integrating the Histories of Race and Technology," in *Technology and the African-American Experience: Needs and Opportunities for Study*, ed. Bruce Sinclair (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 1.

5. See, for example, Paul Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1985); William Chaloupka, *Knowing Nukes: The Politics and Culture of the Atom* (Minneapolis, 1992); Peter Bacon Hales, *Atomic Spaces: Living on the Manhattan Project* (Chicago, 1997); Joseph Masco, *The Nuclear Borderlands: The Manhattan Project in Post-Cold War New Mexico* (Princeton, N.J., 2006); Laura McEnaney, *Civil Defense Begins at Home: Militarization Meets Everyday Life in the Fifties* (Princeton, N.J., 2000); Russell B. Olwell, *At Work in the Atomic*

politics during the post–World War II period is large and growing.⁶ However, most of this literature fails to observe the connections between technological change and racial struggle. References to the atomic bomb are woven through recent scholarship on the early civil rights era, without becoming a focal point, just as African Americans appear sporadically in the literature on the atomic bomb though rarely seem to take center stage.

This essay is a corrective to that bifurcation, drawing fresh insights from the secondary literature on the era and analyzing the contradictory discourses about nuclear developments circulating in the African-American press. Its focus is on what sociologist Thomas Rochon calls a “critical community”—a network of thinkers, often the forerunners of a major social movement, who produce the ideas that become the basis for new cultural values.⁷ In the 1940s, a critical community of African-American writers, activists, and intellectuals publicly questioned the dominant racial order, paving the way for the American civil rights movement. Critical communities typically develop their own channels of communication through which they identify social problems and analyze their sources and potential solu-

City: A Labor and Social History of Oak Ridge, Tennessee (Knoxville, Tenn., 2004); Kenneth Rose, *One Nation Underground: The Fallout Shelter in American Culture* (New York, 2004); Michael Scheibach, *Atomic Narratives and American Youth: Coming of Age with the Atom, 1945–1955* (Jefferson, N.C., 2003); Allan M. Winkler, *Life under a Cloud: American Anxiety about the Atom* (Urbana, Ill., 1999); Scott C. Zeman and Michael A. Amundson, eds., *Atomic Culture: How We Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (Boulder, Colo., 2004).

6. See, for example, Dudziak; Layton; Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Gerald Horne, *Black and Red: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Afro-American Response to the Cold War, 1944–1963* (Albany, N.Y., 1986); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996); Brenda Gayle Plummer, ed., *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1988* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003); Penny M. Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937–1957* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997).

7. Thomas R. Rochon, *Culture Moves: Ideas, Activism, and Changing Values* (Princeton, N.J., 1998). It should be emphasized that no claim is made here to represent the views of the African-American population as a whole. While the African-American periodicals discussed in this essay were widely read and certainly influential, a different type of study would be necessary to determine how their readership responded to the contradictory ideas about the bomb that appeared in their pages. The limited evidence available suggests that blacks were not as supportive of the use of the atomic bomb as the rest of the American population apparently was. Public-opinion polls after the war indicated strong public support for the use of atomic bombs against Hiroshima and Nagasaki, with over 75 percent of those polled saying the United States did the right thing in bombing two cities, or that the United States should have used many more of the bombs. As historian Paul Boyer observes, however, African Americans (along with the “well-to-do and the well educated”) were more likely to express support for milder actions—either not using atomic bombs at all, or first demonstrating the effects of the bomb on an unpopulated area to give the Japanese a chance to surrender; see Boyer, 183, discussing “The Fortune Survey” (*Fortune*, December 1945, 305).

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tions. The writers and editors of the major black newspapers and magazines played an important part in debating, developing, and diffusing ideas about racial equality and social change. During the World War II years—often described as a golden era for the black press—newspapers with national circulations such as the *Pittsburgh Courier* and the *Chicago Defender* served as “the main vehicle through which public intellectuals spoke to one another and their main audiences: the black middle classes and working classes.”⁸ Furthermore, popular magazines like *Ebony* and *Jet*, while less explicitly political, also challenged the status quo by representing African-American culture in a positive way and reporting the accomplishments of black people. In particular, *Ebony*’s photojournalism

detach[ed] . . . [images of blacks] from the familiar markers of degradation, spectacle and victimization to which they had always been linked if represented at all; the pictures would, instead, reproduce iconic blackness articulated to equally naturalized and sanctioned symbols of class respectability, achievement, and American national identity.⁹

Thus, contributors to *Ebony* and *Jet* are included here as part of the network of thinkers and publishers that shaped the consciousness of the emerging civil rights movement—a consciousness that included ideas about the nuclear future.

The analysis proceeds in two main sections. It begins with a discussion of the African-American voices of opposition that emerged in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The subsequent section analyzes a simultaneous strand of thought, in which African-American contributions to building the bomb and protecting nuclear secrets are emphasized as a point of pride and a justification for demanding civil rights. In both sections, the contrast between these two perspectives is illustrated by the rift between W. E. B. Du Bois and the NAACP. In the late 1940s, while Du Bois passionately advocated a communist-influenced campaign against the atomic bomb and for world peace, the NAACP used patriotic language and national-security fears in a campaign to increase em-

8. Von Eschen, 8. In the 1930s and 1940s, a transnational anticolonial critical community flourished, utilizing the American black press. Von Eschen goes on to explain: “Creatively employing the new technologies and new possibilities in communication that came out of World War II, a cast of activists, journalists and editors clustered in black American newspapers—the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Crisis*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*—formed a dense nexus with journalists and publishers from London to Lagos and Johannesburg, marshalling the resources of important black middle-class and entrepreneurial institutions to create an international anti-colonial discourse. . . . [P]rint journalism both provided the vehicle for the creation of this imagined diaspora and unified intellectuals and activists around the globe” (p. 8).

9. Maren Stange, “‘Photographs Taken in Everyday Life’: *Ebony*’s Photojournalistic Discourse,” in *The Black Press: New Literary and Historical Essays*, ed. Todd Vogel (New Brunswick, N.J., 2001), 207–27, quote on 208.

ployment opportunities for African Americans in bomb-manufacturing plants. Du Bois and his calls to ban the atomic bomb were ultimately marginalized. Nevertheless, struggles for peace and racial justice remained interconnected for a number of important African-American leaders throughout the 1950s and 1960s, as is discussed in the concluding section.

African Americans against the Bomb

In the immediate aftermath of World War II, a number of black public intellectuals drew on the ideas and discourse of the global struggle against colonialism as they attempted to make sense of the atomic bomb. Throughout the war, an important current in African-American political thought had been Pan-Africanism, a political philosophy of solidarity among all black Africans and people of black African descent. Anticolonialism was a central part of antiracist activism across the African-American political spectrum. As Mark Solomon notes, “by the end of World War II, black American intellectuals were united in believing that the battle against white racism in their own country could not be won without a larger international battle against colonial imperialism in Africa.”¹⁰ Thus, at the close of the war, Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP and a regular editorial contributor to the *Chicago Defender*, saw the bomb in colonial terms, making much of the fact that the uranium used to build it was mined in the Belgian Congo. Forecasting future struggles over control of that region, he asked: “[W]hat will happen to the economies of the world as we have known them? . . . [L]ife and death power over the rest of the world may pass to whoever controls the world’s supply of uranium.” White also expressed doubt that the atomic bomb could long be kept a secret from “Russian or Chinese or Indian or Negro scientists”; instead, he anticipated that “despairing of attainment of freedom by any other means, an atomic bomb might be launched against London from the remote fastness of some part of the British Empire.”¹¹

Paul Robeson, leader of the Pan-Africanist Council for African Affairs, also drew attention to the extraction of uranium from the Belgian Congo. In a number of speeches given between 1946 and 1950, Robeson argued that American companies and the U.S. government profited from the European imperialism that gave them access to uranium for atomic bombs, among other natural resources.¹² In the years to come, White would be-

10. Mark Solomon, “Black Critics of Colonialism and the Cold War,” in *Cold War Critics: Alternatives to American Foreign Policy in the Truman Years*, ed. Thomas G. Patterson (Chicago, 1971), 205. See also Von Eschen.

11. White, “People, Politics, and Places” (n. 1 above).

12. Paul Robeson, “Anti-Imperialists Must Defend Africa” (1946), “For Freedom and Peace” (1949), “The Negro People and the Soviet Union” (1949), and “Forge Negro-Labor Unity for Peace and Jobs” (1950), in *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches*,

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come less vocal on this topic and extremely critical of Robeson for his communist sympathies and enthusiasm for the Soviet Union.¹³ Nevertheless, at the end of the war, both openly argued that colonialism and the atomic bomb were fundamentally connected.

Some writers considered the atomic bomb to be continued evidence of American racism and aggression, drawing attention to the fact that the atomic bomb was used on Japan, a nation of “colored” people, rather than on the white Germans. During World War II, anti-racist concerns were not necessarily limited to struggles involving people of African descent; some African Americans also identified with any nonwhite peoples, including the Japanese.¹⁴ As a *Washington Afro American* editorial, published less than two weeks after the bombing of Hiroshima, noted, “use of the atomic bomb for the first time against Japan, although it was reportedly possible to have it ready for use against the Germans, has revived the feeling in some quarters that maybe the Allies are fighting a racial war after all.” This sentiment was repeated a number of times on the *Chicago Defender’s* opinion page. Langston Hughes’s recurring fictional character, Jesse B. Simple, perhaps said it best: “They just did not want to use them on white folks. Germans is white. So they wait until the war is all over in Europe to try them out on colored folks. Japs is colored.”¹⁵

In some instances, writers criticized science itself. Du Bois’s editorials in the *Chicago Defender* presented an emerging narrative of science criticism, a view that science can bring destruction rather than social progress. Not long after Japan’s surrender, he reflected on the negative and positive outcomes of the war for African Americans, noting sadly that “we have seen in

Interviews, 1918–1974, ed. Philip S. Foner (New York, 1978), 168–71, 201–22, 236–41, 243–52.

13. See Walter White, “Paul Robson: Right or Wrong—Wrong: Says Walter White,” *Negro Digest*, March 1950, 9, 14–18.

14. Historian Reginald Kearney’s research on this period indicates that while most African Americans supported the war against Japan, there was also a “radical fringe” who doubted the United States would live up to its promises and thought they would be no worse off under Japanese rule. This radical fringe, made up in part of remnants of Marcus Garvey’s “Back to Africa” movement of the 1920s, created a political space for more moderate commentators to observe the racist implications of the war against Japan. Thus, “after Pearl Harbor, in the time of the United States’ greatest crisis, not all black Americans took to the warpath pleading for the granting of deferred citizenship rights. Although this ultimately became the response of the greatest number of black Americans, there were significant numbers of African Americans who were unwilling to regard the Japanese as their enemies”; see Kearney, *African American Views of the Japanese: Solidarity or Sedition?* (Albany, N.Y., 1998), 126.

15. *Washington Afro American*, “Are We Prepared for Peace?” 18 August 1945; Langston Hughes, “Here to Yonder: Simple and the Atom Bomb,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 August 1945. Similar sentiments are expressed by Charley Cherokee in “National Grapevine: Peace It’s Wonderful,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 August 1945; and “A New Low in Thinking,” *Chicago Defender*, 15 September 1945.

this war, to our amazement and distress, a marriage between science and destruction. . . . We have always thought of science as the emancipator. We see it now as the enslaver of mankind.”¹⁶ The editors of the *Defender* also criticized the military ends to which science had been directed, wishing, like Du Bois, that scientists would turn their attention to pressing social needs rather than destruction. Observing that “science advances at a phenomenal rate to bring sacrifices to the God of Mars,” the editors argued that “it should not stagger the imagination to picture thousands of social scientists and other experts financed by the same two billion dollars that went into the atomic bomb at work in America to isolate and destroy the venom of race hate.” Speaking as Simple, Langston Hughes suggested on the same editorial page that the \$2 billion spent on atomic research would be better spent on housing, playgrounds, and schools.¹⁷

Some African-American activists joined the antinuclear movement that flourished in the early years after World War II. The Atomic Scientists’ Movement, advocates for world government, and American pacifists all agitated fiercely to prevent any future use of the new weapon.¹⁸ Participants in these movements were predominantly white, although the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation included advocacy for civil rights as part of its mission and counted the radical black pacifist Bayard Rustin among its leaders.¹⁹ Black activists against the bomb were more prominent in another campaign—the international communist-led peace movement. American communists led political and legal struggles against American racism through the Civil Rights Congress, an early radical civil rights organization founded in 1946 and led by William Patterson.²⁰ Robbie Lieberman ex-

16. In many ways, Du Bois’s views on science and technology resemble those of other observers of the time who, post-Hiroshima, began to view science with apprehension and to doubt the promise of “scientific progress”; on this, see Boyer (n. 5 above), 266–74. Du Bois’s choice of the themes of emancipation and enslavement, however, conveys a connection to antiracist struggles that other critics of science and technology did not bring into their arguments.

17. Hughes; W. E. B. Du Bois, “The Winds of Time,” *Chicago Defender*, 15 September 1945; *Chicago Defender*, “Splitting the Atom of Race Hate,” 18 August 1945.

18. For a comprehensive history of the nuclear-disarmament movement of this era, see Lawrence S. Wittner, *One World or None: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement through 1953* (Stanford, Calif., 1993).

19. On the early actions of the Fellowship of Reconciliation on racial matters, see James Tracy, *Direct Action: Radical Pacifism from the Union Eight to the Chicago Seven* (Chicago, 1996), 20–35.

20. There is some debate about the intentions of the Communist Party in its advocacy for civil rights. Noting that the party was not a consistent ally of the civil rights movement, Carol Anderson argues that black equality was only a “means to an end” for the American communists; see Anderson, “Bleached Souls and Red Negroes: The NAACP and Black Communists in the Early Cold War, 1948–1952,” in *Window on Freedom* (n. 6 above), 93–113, quote on 97. Others have argued that Anderson’s interpretation reflects an uncritical acceptance of anticommunist stereotypes; for a more favorable and nuanced evaluation of the Communist Party and the Civil Rights Con-

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plains that during World War II and the postwar period, “American Communists linked anticolonial struggles in Africa and Asia, and the civil rights struggle at home, to the cause of peace. True peace could not be achieved until discrimination and oppression were eliminated.”²¹ It therefore was not surprising that two well-known African-American leaders—Du Bois and Robeson—became central figures in the communist-led campaign for peace.

Robeson, a world-famous actor, author, artist, and activist, was already known as a supporter of the Soviet Union, believing it to be a defender of the world’s oppressed peoples. A speech he gave in 1949, in which he declared that black people would never take up arms against the Soviet Union, has become famous.²² Du Bois was not a registered member of the Communist Party (he would not join until 1961, at the age of 93); however, his radical leftist beliefs set him apart from his more moderate colleagues at the NAACP. Du Bois had helped to found the NAACP, in 1909, and he edited its magazine, *The Crisis*, until 1934. He worked for the NAACP until 1948, when he was asked to leave his position, after a long series of ideological clashes with Walter White, the organization’s politically savvy executive secretary.²³ After leaving the organization, Du Bois, already in his seventies, devoted his energies to the Council on African Affairs and to opposing the cold war escalation with the Soviet Union.²⁴ He was arguably the most prominent African-American intellectual of his time, well-known for his role in cultivating the worldwide Pan-African movement as well as for his extensive sociological writings on racism and the lived experiences of blacks in America. Although not often recognized today for his peace activities, he wrote repeatedly on the topic of world peace throughout his career, maintaining that genuine world peace could be achieved only through the elimination of institutional racism and the overthrow of colonial regimes.²⁵

Communist-led calls for peace did not necessarily mean total pacifism. Lawrence Wittner points out that world communist leaders initially expressed enthusiasm for nuclear weapons. However, once the cold war began and communist leaders around the world began to fear a U.S. attack on the

gress, see Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (Rutherford, N.J., 1988).

21. Robbie Lieberman, “‘Does That Make Peace a Bad Word?’ American Responses to the Communist Peace Offensive, 1949–1950,” *Peace & Change* 17 (1992): 198–228, quote on 202.

22. Wittner, *One World or None*, 178.

23. Manning Marable, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Black Radical Democrat* (Boston, 1986), 166–75.

24. Manning Marable, “Peace and Black Liberation: The Contributions of W. E. B. Du Bois,” *Science & Society* 47 (1983–84): 385–405, esp. 395.

25. For an insightful discussion of this aspect of Du Bois’s contributions, see *ibid.*

Soviet Union, a massive mobilization against U.S. militarism and the bomb began to take shape. At the landmark World Peace Congress in Paris in April 1949, communist-movement leaders launched the World Committee of the Partisans of Peace, the world's largest peace organization.²⁶ The U.S. delegation to the World Peace Congress included Robeson and was led by Du Bois, who praised the gathering as “the greatest meeting of human beings united in a great cause which I have ever seen.”²⁷ In 1950, after President Harry S. Truman announced the decision to produce a hydrogen bomb, the Partisans of Peace drafted a statement that came to be known as the Stockholm Peace Appeal, or Peace Pledge. The statement was circulated as a petition around the world, gathering millions of signatures.

Many signers were probably unaware of the communist origins of the petition, but its simple message was one that any peace-loving person could support. It read, in part: “[W]e demand the outlawing of atomic weapons as instruments of intimidation and mass murder of peoples. . . . We call on all men and women of good will throughout the world to sign this appeal.”²⁸ Fourteen million signatures were collected in France alone.²⁹ By one estimate, the petition gained 2.5 million American signatures (another account places the number at 1.35 million).³⁰ It received the support of prominent figures such as Thomas Mann, Albert Einstein, and Linus Pauling, a host of world religious and cultural leaders, and a variety of well-known black entertainers and intellectuals (fig. 1).³¹

As chair of the Peace Information Center (PIC), Du Bois actively promoted the petition and other communist-led peace activities in the United States. He formed the center with his future wife, Shirley Graham, and a group of other (predominantly white) radicals. Based in New York, the PIC aimed to distribute the petition and “simply to tell the people of the United States what other nations were doing and thinking about war.”³² The PIC

26. Wittner, *One World or None* (n. 18 above), 171, argues that “a key component of this campaign was an effort to stigmatize nuclear weapons and thereby undermine the military advantage of the United States in this area.” Many believe the movement was created to bolster the popularity of communist governments, which would be seen as peace-loving, in contrast to the American “warmongers.” Analysis of the underlying motives of the communist-led movement is beyond the scope of this essay. What is important is that the American government assumed that peace activists associated with the World Peace Congress and the Partisans of Peace were led by the Soviet Union.

27. Quoted in *ibid.*, 179.

28. Stockholm Peace Appeal, quoted in Horne, *Black and Red* (n. 6 above), 126. See also W. E. B. Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace* (Millwood, N.Y., 1976).

29. Wittner, *One World or None*, 183.

30. Du Bois, *In Battle for Peace*. The lower number is cited in Lawrence S. Wittner, *Rebels Against War: The American Peace Movement, 1941–1960* (New York, 1969), 204.

31. Horne, *Black and Red*, 127.

32. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois: A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (New York, 1968), 357.

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YOUR HAND CAN STOP ATOMIC WAR!

SIGN FOR PEACE!

WORLD PEACE APPEAL

*Thruout the world—
In China, Italy, Israel, in England and Brazil, in France and Mexico, in Finland and Poland, Sweden and the Soviet Union, in Africa and India and in the United States—
Tens of millions of people of all faiths and creeds, all races are signing this appeal.
If we, the people say NO to war
THERE WILL BE PEACE.*

- We demand the outlawing of the atomic weapons as instruments of aggression and mass murder of peoples.
- We demand strict international control to enforce this measure.
- We believe that any government which first uses atomic weapons against any other country whatsoever will be committing a crime against humanity and should be dealt with as a war criminal.
- We call on all men and women of good will thruout the world to sign this appeal.*

Name	Address or Occupation	Contributions
<i>Albert Einstein</i>	<i>Morcoy Sts. 112 Resurrection</i>	<i>N.Y. City</i>
<i>Henry A Wallace</i>	<i>South Salem</i>	

Return this petition to:
Collected by *Shirley Graham* Address _____

* This appeal was issued at Stockholm in March, 1950 by the "World Committee in Defense of Peace." Trygve Lie, Secretary of the United Nations, said of this Committee: "I bless everyone, every man and woman, who works for peace." (New York Times, May, 1950)

Issued by—
Campaign Committee for the World Peace Appeal—P. O. Box 349, Grand Central Station, New York City

No. 202797

FIG. 1 World Peace Appeal signed by Albert Einstein and Henry A. Wallace, collected by Shirley Graham. Graham, a noted author, playwright, composer, and activist, married W. E. B. Du Bois in 1951, following their federal indictment for their work with the Peace Information Center. (Reproduced courtesy of the Archives and Special Collections of the Vassar College Libraries.)

distributed hundreds of thousands of pieces of literature, such as “Catholics Speak for Peace” and “Israel Welcomes the World Peace Appeal,” focusing primarily on gaining support for the petition.³³ According to historian Gerald Horne, African Americans were “a conscious and special target of the Appeal,” in part because of perceived opposition among blacks to U.S. participation in the Korean War.³⁴ Robeson also advocated the petition. In an address delivered at a meeting of the National Labor Conference for Negro Rights in June 1950, he linked the plight of American workers to the struggles of colonized peoples and called upon the audience to sign the Peace Appeal. The audience replied with a “loud ‘Yes!’”—at least according to the pamphlet containing the transcript of the speech, which was distributed by the Harlem Trade Union Council and the South Side Chicago Negro Council.³⁵

The PIC and Robeson were not the only ones encouraging African Americans to sign and promote the Peace Appeal. The communist press in the United States promoted the idea that African Americans had a special stake in the campaign. The *Daily Worker* celebrated the contributions of African-American women in particular, in keeping with the efforts of the time to incorporate both women and African Americans into the communist movement. The *Daily Worker* reported that, in New York, the Harlem Women’s Committee for Peace collected signatures for the Stockholm Peace Appeal, on one weekend “conducting six street meetings and manning [*sic*] peace tables at the big intersections.” Other women’s groups reportedly sprung up in New York, including a group called the Negro Mothers’ Committee and a national group called the American Women for Peace led by Halois Moorhead, an African-American woman who toured the country, speaking out for peace as late as 1952.³⁶ In Philadelphia, the interracial Committee of Philadelphia Women for Peace collected “peace ballots” across the city, going door to door, to churches, and to labor unions. The ballot, reprinted in the *Daily Worker*, read: “To President Truman: OUTLAW THE H-BOMB . . . I vote for peace.” Mercedes Bond, the committee’s chair, drew connections between the movement for peace, black protest, and anticolonial struggles. The *Daily Worker* quoted her as saying,

Negro women have a special stake in fighting for peace in America where they are doubly oppressed, as women and as Negroes. They know how powerful a movement for peace among American women

33. Wittner, *One World or None* (n. 18 above), 203; Horne, *Black and Red*, 127.

34. Horne, *Black and Red* (n. 6 above), 127–28.

35. Robeson, “Forge Negro-Labor Unity” (n. 12 above), 251.

36. Lawrence S. Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb: A History of the World Nuclear Disarmament Movement, 1954–1970* (Stanford, Calif., 1997), 250; Elihu S. Hicks, “1,200 Sign for Peace as Harlem Women Launch Crusade,” *Daily Worker*, 11 June 1950; Ann Rivington, “Harlem Women Fight for Peace,” *Daily Worker*, 2 July 1950; *Daily Worker*, “Harlemites Spark National Crusade against Atom War,” 25 June 1950.

will be in aiding the liberation struggles of the peoples of Africa and Asia, and their own emancipation.³⁷

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The communist-led campaign against the bomb, with its central role for African Americans, did not last long in the United States. As the Red Scare took hold of the nation in the postwar period, those who spoke out against the bomb were systematically condemned and silenced. The communist-led peace movement was criticized by pacifists, religious leaders, and the noncommunist Left, all of whom viewed the efforts as insincere and motivated by Soviet interests.³⁸ Furthermore, some prominent African Americans publicly criticized the Stockholm Peace Appeal, including labor leader A. Philip Randolph and musician Duke Ellington (who first signed, and then requested that his name be removed).³⁹ The U.S. government persecuted those promoting the Peace Appeal. Secretary of State Dean Acheson publicly attacked the Peace Information Center and its efforts. Soon thereafter, in August 1950, the PIC received a letter from the U.S. Department of Justice, instructing members of the organization to register as agents of a “foreign principal.”⁴⁰ PIC members refused, and ultimately, in October 1950, the organization decided to disband after only seven months of existence. Nevertheless, in a move that shocked the world, the U.S. government sought an indictment of Du Bois, Graham, and three other members of the PIC under the Foreign Agents Registration Act (fig. 2).⁴¹

Even as the government pursued a criminal case against Du Bois, charging him with failing to register as a foreign agent, he continued to speak out against the bomb. At his arraignment on 16 February 1951, he asked: “In a world which has barely emerged from the horrors of the Second World War and which trembles on the brink of an atomic catastrophe, can it be criminal to hope and work for peace?” Speaking to a crowd in Chicago in the months leading up to his trial, Du Bois stated:

Today, in this free country, no man can be sure of earning a living, of escaping slander and personal violence, or even of keeping out of jail—unless publicly and repeatedly he proclaims that . . . [h]e believes in the use of the atom bomb or any other weapon of mass destruction, and regards anyone opposed as a traitor.

In an article published soon after his indictment, he cleverly appropriated the idioms of science and technology to criticize those responsible for the

37. Walter Lowenfels, “Housewives and Poet Close Ranks for Peace,” *Daily Worker*, 23 April 1950.

38. Wittner, *One World or None*, 186–90, 202–10.

39. Horne, *Black and Red*, 134–35.

40. Marable, “Peace and Black Liberation” (n. 24 above), 397; Lieberman (n. 21 above), 214.

41. *New York Times*, “5 of ‘Peace’ Group Here Indicted, All Sponsors of Stockholm Plea,” 19 February 1951; *New York Times*, “Du Bois is ‘Shocked,’” 10 February 1951.



FIG. 2 Du Bois, with Shirley Graham (right) and other indicted members of the Peace Information Center, in Washington prior to their court hearing. (Reproduced courtesy of the Special Collections Department, W. E. B. Du Bois Library, University of Massachusetts Amherst.)

atom bomb, arguing that those in power were working to stop what he called a “program of reason and progress,” meaning, of course, the struggle for peace.⁴²

Although Du Bois was ultimately acquitted, his opponents achieved what was arguably their main goal. Important voices of the African-American community became hesitant to endorse his critical views.⁴³ Perhaps the most crushing blow was the NAACP’s repudiation, summed up in a review of *In Battle for Peace*, a book Du Bois wrote to explain the story of the PIC

42. Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, vol. 3: *Selections, 1955–1963* (Amherst, Mass., 1978), 311; Du Bois, *Autobiography* (n. 32 above), 377. Du Bois connected capitalism, science, and the threat of nuclear destruction: “Religion, science, art and morals in America tend to be measured by the profit they bring. . . . Big Business wants war in order to keep your mind off social reform; it would rather spend your taxes for atom bombs than for schools” (quoted in David Levering Lewis, ed., *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Reader* [New York, 1995], 769).

43. “For the rest of his life . . . Du Bois would be treated as a convicted felon in his native land. Black newspapers which had proudly carried his columns and occasional essays for decades now refused even to mention his name” (Marable, “Peace and Black Liberation,” 401).

and the case brought against him. The review appeared in *The Crisis*, the journal for which, ironically, he had served as editor for many years. The reviewer, finding the book's argument ludicrous, wrote,

the most astonishing thing about *In Battle for Peace* is that the author believes, or at least he professes to believe, that the Moscow sponsored Stockholm "peace" pledge was genuine and not just another "gimmick" in the Cold War. . . . How did this great warrior for human freedom ever get himself tied up with the American Communists and the "peace" pledge in the first place?⁴⁴

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Anticommunism had won the day, and among mainstream African-American organizations like the NAACP, Du Bois's attempts to link a critique of the bomb with the politics of race and colonialism were pushed aside in favor of new narratives of national defense.

Racial Critique, Atomic Enthusiasm

In the years that followed, the African-American press became decidedly less critical of American foreign affairs than it had been during and immediately after the war.⁴⁵ Radical views were suppressed, and, according to historian Penny Von Eschen, "anti-Communist liberals who put their hopes in securing for black Americans a share in American postwar prosperity dominated African American journalism." As a result, "the tradition of criticism of American foreign policy was devastated." Thus, as the civil rights movement developed in the early 1950s, the argument that "black Americans were American first"—already circulating in the black press—superseded criticism of U.S. militarism and the bomb.⁴⁶ At the end of the war, a variety of black public commentators celebrated the development of nuclear weapons, in contrast to their more critical colleagues, discussed above. In one strand of thought evident in news stories and editorials, scientific progress was associated with racial equality, and the bomb was viewed as a point of American—and African-American—pride. Some articles in black newspapers and magazines emphasized the accomplishments of African Americans and their contributions to national security, focusing on instances where segregation and discrimination seemed nonexistent; others criticized instances of segregation or low African-American participation in science and industry, arguing that the nation's security was threatened when such disparities existed. While critical of racial injustice,

44. *The Crisis*, December 1952.

45. Von Eschen (n. 6 above), 118, 146. During the cold war, she argues, "like most liberals and critical segments of the labor movement, important sectors of African American leadership and crucial institutions such as the leading newspapers backed the Marshall Plan and embraced the Truman Doctrine" (p. 108).

46. *Ibid.*, 152.

these discussions of atomic science and weaponry lacked a critique of technology and tended to support U.S. foreign policy.

The logic of this patriotic approach to challenging racial inequality had roots in an earlier effort of critical African-American thinkers: the Double Victory, or “VV,” campaign waged by the black press during the war. The slogan stood for victory at home over discrimination as well as victory over the Axis. The campaign was initiated in the pages of the *Pittsburgh Courier* during the early stages of World War II, largely in response to black soldiers’ experiences of discrimination and racial segregation in the armed forces.⁴⁷ The concept of the Double Victory simultaneously espoused patriotic support for the war effort and sharp criticism of the hypocrisy of the U.S. government, which claimed to be fighting for freedom and democracy abroad while maintaining racist practices at home and in its own military. The campaign was quickly adopted by many other black newspapers. Journalists drew attention not only to racial segregation and injustice, but also to the dedication and accomplishments of African-American soldiers on the frontlines. These reports aimed to show that blacks deserved equal rights as citizens, though some expressed skepticism that demonstrations of national loyalty would necessarily be rewarded.⁴⁸

Consistent with the patriotic sentiment of the Double Victory campaign, journalists were quick to report the role that African Americans played in making the weapon that ended the war with Japan. The *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Washington Afro American* emphasized that African-American scientists and workers had contributed to building the bomb, and portrayed the black scientists and workers who helped with the atomic project as American heroes, equal to whites in their contributions. For example, under a bold banner headline, the *Defender* boasted that “crack Negro scientists helped produce the atom bomb that made the Japs ask for peace.” Similarly, the *Courier* reported that the African-American scientists who worked on “the world’s greatest secret[,] the atomic bomb [are now] basking in the sunlight of honor.” The article was followed with the VV symbol. In that issue of the *Courier*, prominent black journalist George Schuyler praised the “able colored men [who] worked side by side in perfect scientific comradeship with white scientists to produce the greatest feat in history.”⁴⁹

47. Ronald Takaki, *Double Victory: A Multicultural History of America in World War II* (Boston, 2000), 20.

48. For a critical discussion of the aims and effects of the Double Victory campaign, see Lee Finkle, “The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric: Black Protest during World War II,” *Journal of American History* 60 (1973): 692–713. Regarding the backlash against this campaign, including an attempt by J. Edgar Hoover to indict black publishers for treason, see Patrick S. Washburn, *A Question of Sedition: The Federal Government’s Investigation of the Black Press during World War II* (New York, 1986).

49. Richard Durham, “Negro Scientists Help Produce 1st Atom Bomb,” *Chicago Defender*, 18 August 1945; Ted Coleman, “Helped Conquer Power of Atom: Young Dr. Wil-

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Reporters for the *Washington Afro American*, however, found that such “perfect scientific comradeship” was a fiction.⁵⁰ Less than two weeks after the bombing of Hiroshima, one front-page article pointed out the discrimination that African-American atomic workers experienced, providing striking contrast to the then-common refrain that the Manhattan Project worked as a model for social cooperation across racial and national differences.⁵¹ The *Washington Afro American* printed photographs of the Oak Ridge, Tennessee, atomic bomb plant, where workers lived in secrecy, each with a descriptive caption. A photograph of the small huts in which black workers were housed was accompanied by the comment that “white workers live in modern prefabricated dormitories.” The caption to a photograph of a newly built church in the African-American area read: “Although many workers have their families there, no school is provided for any but white children.”⁵² Through these pointedly labeled photographs, the newspaper reminded readers that even though patriotic African Americans made crucial contributions to the defense of their country, they still would not be treated as equal citizens. The second “V” had not yet been won.

Criticism of racial inequality also emerged in discussions of “atoms for peace,” the anticipation that some good could come out of the splitting of the atom. Some black writers shared the enthusiasm for the amazing possibilities of atomic power that permeated mainstream discourse. White, for example, alluded to “the fantastic possibilities of atom-splitting for evil or good,” and the *Washington Afro American* wondered about the “constructive use of atomic power.”⁵³ Others, however, were skeptical that such benefits would extend to the problems of racial inequality. In a cynical column

kins among Chicago U. Laboratory Heroes,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 August 1945; George S. Schuyler, “Helped Conquer Power of Atom: Dr. William J. Knox Headed Group at Columbia University,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 August 1945. See also *Washington Afro American*, “Local Workers Play Role in Making of Atomic Bomb,” 11 August 1945.

50. Hales (n. 5 above) paints a vivid picture of racial inequalities at Oak Ridge and other sites of the Manhattan Project.

51. Other historians have noted that in mainstream American discourse immediately after the war, commentators spoke of the Manhattan Project as a model for social cooperation. In a radio broadcast a few days after Hiroshima, for example, Eleanor Roosevelt talked of the “many minds belonging to different races and different religions” that contributed to the construction of the bomb and expressed her hope that this would set a pattern for future cooperation (quoted in Boyer [n. 5 above], 138). Arthur H. Compton, director of the Manhattan Project team at the University of Chicago, also emphasized that national and racial distinctions had been set aside in pursuit of a common goal, and that this was the reason for the project’s success (*ibid.*, 139–40). More conservative elements of the African-American press, such as *Ebony*, tended to take the mainstream view.

52. *Washington Afro American*, “7,000 Colored Workers Help Maintain Huge Tennessee Project Where Atomic Bombs Are Made,” 18 August 1945.

53. White, “People, Politics, and Places” (n. 1 above); “Are We Prepared for Peace” (n. 15 above), 1.

by Schuyler—published, remarkably, on the same day as his report of “perfect scientific comradeship”—these possible “goods” were ridiculed in light of the current state of race relations:

We should be able to do all the world’s chores (if the earth survives indiscriminate use of atomic bombs) with practically no physical labor. Even the slaves in Africa, Russia, Germany, Siam, Java and Mississippi will be able to loll at ease most of the day and have no duties except to be courteous and obedient to politicians and pro-consuls set over them. . . . Negro insurance executives from Durham and Atlanta will be vacationing on the moon or Mars, albeit in the Negro section.⁵⁴

Although Schuyler, an anticommunist and critic of the Harlem Renaissance, was often at odds with the emerging civil rights movement, he was also a sharp critic of racial segregation.⁵⁵ He was all-too-aware that scientific and technological progress was no guarantee of progress in the struggle for racial equality. While new technologies may create wealth and leisure, racist social relations could continue undisrupted.

Newspapers were not the only media communicating ideas about the relationship between nuclear developments and racial inequality. *Ebony*, a popular magazine aimed at black readers, also occasionally reported on atomic research and the bomb. Modeled on *Life* magazine, *Ebony* used dominant American narratives of patriotism, individualism, and consumption to highlight African-American achievements and create a positive vision of the black middle class. A 1949 article favorably profiled ten African-American scientists working at the Argonne National Laboratory, formerly part of the Manhattan Project. Among them was Lloyd Quarterman, a junior chemist who reportedly “got interested in chemistry playing with toy sets,” who was at Columbia University and at the University of Chicago during the Manhattan Project. Quarterman, often recognized as one of the six black scientists who participated in the Manhattan Project, would go on to work at the Argonne Lab for three decades and study under Enrico Fermi.⁵⁶ Like the *Defender*, *Courier*, and *Washington Afro American*, *Ebony*’s reporting suggested that working on nuclear projects demonstrated the patriotism of African Americans and thus the unfairness of denying them their civil rights.

54. George S. Schuyler, “Views and Reviews,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 August 1945.

55. On Schuyler’s shift to conservatism, see Oscar R. Williams, “From Black Liberal to Black Conservative: George S. Schuyler, 1923–1935,” *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 21 (1997): 59.

56. *Ebony*, “Atom Scientists: Ten Negro Scientists at Argonne Lab Help in Race to Harness Atomic Materials for Peaceful Uses,” September 1949; Ivan Van Sertima, “Dr. Lloyd Quarterman—Nuclear Scientist,” in *Blacks in Science: Ancient and Modern*, ed. Ivan Van Sertima (Piscataway, N.J., 1983), 266–72; Vivian Ovelton Sammons, *Blacks in Science and Medicine* (New York, 1990), 196.

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In another example, an article published in 1950 followed nine African-American security guards watching over atomic secrets at the Atomic Energy Commission in Washington, D.C. Its author argued that “since the early days of U.S. history, American Negroes have had an unbroken, unblemished record of loyalty and devotion to their native land.” The guards were portrayed not only as successful and admirable African Americans for whom the atomic age produced new job opportunities, but also as evidence that African Americans were patriotic and loyal, committed to their country above all else.⁵⁷

Given the more critical views circulating in other venues, such an enthusiastic look at U.S. nuclear endeavors may have struck some readers as odd. By the end of the 1940s, however, enthusiasm for the bomb was part of the discourse of opposition to racial discrimination. The NAACP and the National Urban League (NUL), both of which represented the mainstream of African-American struggles for equality, were highly responsive to the political opportunities presented by the emerging conflict with the Soviet Union. The NAACP took on important legal and legislative battles, while the NUL promoted economic opportunities for African Americans. The leadership of the NAACP, in particular, believed that it needed the federal government to achieve its aims of social change. Thus the organization began to tone down its earlier anticolonialism and became openly supportive of Truman’s foreign-policy goals. The organization was initially skeptical about nuclear weapons, as evidenced by executive secretary Walter White’s comments about the colonial implications of uranium extraction, discussed earlier.⁵⁸ However, particularly after 1947, as John Fousek explains, the NAACP “willingly dampened [its] criticism of the nation’s foreign policy in the name of national loyalty” and out of the organization’s “belief in the nation’s ultimate commitment to individual freedom, equality, and justice under law.”⁵⁹ White believed that supporting the national

57. *Ebony*, “Atom Bomb Guards: Nine D.C. Negroes Help Watch over World’s Greatest Secret,” March 1948; see also *Ebony*, “Scientists: More than 200 Negroes Hold Key Scientific Jobs in Industry,” September 1950.

58. The NAACP had a strong interest in foreign affairs and the cause of anticolonialism during World War II; in the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Japan, its leaders asked serious questions about the bomb and America’s new role in the world. In September 1945, the lead editorial of its journal asked: “Why did we use the atomic bomb, a weapon so terrible that we, ourselves, feared that its use might obliterate us and civilization as we know it?” (*The Crisis*, September 1945). Not unlike many in the mainstream press at that time, the editorial raised doubts that the United States was “morally capable” of leading the world in peace. The keynote address of Archibald J. Cary Jr. at the NAACP annual conference in 1946 stressed the world-shaking significance of the atomic bomb and proclaimed, “we all must be citizens of the world” (quoted in Fousek [n. 3 above], 77). Consistent with previously quoted statements by Walter White about the peaceful possibilities of atomic research, the NAACP endorsed the internationalization of atomic energy under civilian auspices, apparently believing in the emancipatory possibilities of the peaceful use of atomic energy; see Plummer, *Rising Wind* (n. 6 above), 174.

59. Fousek, 12.

line and purging the organization of suspected communists was the best path to take in the political context he faced.⁶⁰ President Truman, in turn, expressed his commitment to civil rights and took some historic steps, among them the desegregation of the military.

The NAACP and NUL came to view the construction of atomic-bomb plants as an opportunity to fight segregation and racist hiring practices and therefore embraced the bomb as part of their campaign for fair employment for people of color, initiated in 1949. The organizations aimed to reinstate the policies of the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), which prohibited discrimination in civil service and defense hiring during World War II.⁶¹ In November 1950, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) announced that a tract of land along the Savannah River in South Carolina had been chosen as the site of a new facility for the production of the hydrogen bomb, which would employ 40,000 people in its construction and 5,000 permanent workers. The NAACP and NUL made fair employment at the Savannah River site a top priority. Historian Deborah Holland argues that the activists “wittingly invoked national security to advance their cause against social, political and economic injustice. It was a deliberate fusion of the cold war’s consummate symbol—the hydrogen bomb—and racial bias.”⁶² In a letter to the *New York Times*, NUL president Lester Granger claimed that the discriminatory policies of the AEC showed “a callous disregard for citizen morale as well as for obtaining the maximum utilization of the nation’s manpower to stem the advance of Communist imperialism and slavery.”⁶³ The American Veterans Committee, an organization of World War II veterans that campaigned for employment opportunities for former

60. White “sought to position himself as a friendly critic rather than an opponent of the Truman administration’s foreign policy” (ibid., 133). For more on White’s decision to take this approach, see Kenneth R. Janken, “From Colonial Liberation to Cold War Liberalism: Walter White, the NAACP, and Foreign Affairs, 1941–1955,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 21 (1998): 1074–95.

61. In 1941, largely as a result of labor leader A. Philip Randolph’s threat to lead 100,000 African Americans in a march on Washington, President Roosevelt issued an executive order declaring, “there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color, or national origin” (Executive Order no. 8802, Federal Register 3109 [25 June 1941]: 6). Enforced by the FEPC, the order significantly improved African Americans’ access to employment during World War II. The FEPC was dismantled after the war; for an analysis of its effects on African-American employment, see William J. Collins, “Race, Roosevelt, and Wartime Production: Fair Employment in World War II Labor Markets,” *American Economic Review* 91 (2001): 272–86.

62. Deborah J. Holland, “Steward of World Peace, Keeper of Fair Play: The American Hydrogen Bomb and Civil Rights, 1945–1954” (Ph.D. diss., Northwestern University, 2002), 3; see also *New York Times*, “Atom Plant Hiring Scored as Biased,” 27 June 1951.

63. Lester B. Granger, letter to the editor, *New York Times*, 11 October 1951. Granger had sent a memorandum to President Truman on 5 July 1951 to say that discrimination at the Savannah River plant “is indefensible at a time when the nation needs the skills of every available worker” (quoted in Holland, 83).

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soldiers, supported the campaign, emphasizing the irony that atomic weapons were being built to defend America's freedoms, while African Americans were denied the freedom of equal employment opportunities.⁶⁴

In the campaign for fair employment, the NAACP went so far as to fully embrace weapons development as a force for good. Clarence Mitchell Jr., NAACP labor secretary and lobbyist, appealed to the AEC by arguing that African Americans needed to be given an opportunity to appreciate the development of nuclear weapons. In a 1951 letter to the commission, Mitchell wrote:

Many colored people have regarded the Atom Bomb as a new device for maintaining white supremacy. It is easy for such ideas to flourish and spread when the colored citizens of the United States are shut off from full identification with Atomic Energy developments. I regret to say that too little time is spent by AEC officials in explaining this new and wonderful development to the colored citizens.⁶⁵

Despite their efforts to persuade Truman and the AEC to take action to end the discrimination at the atomic-bomb plants, however, the NAACP and the NUL met with little success. Although the Savannah River plant did hire a relatively greater number of African Americans than did other AEC plants, jobs there remained segregated, with black workers assigned to only the most menial and low-paying positions. In this case, it seems, patriotic discourse and enthusiasm for the nuclear project simply did not carry the weight needed to overcome South Carolina's Jim Crow-era hiring practices.⁶⁶

Enduring Impacts of Early Atomic Discourses

The effects of the atomic bomb on racial concepts were perhaps not as "explosive" as Walter White predicted in 1945. Indeed, White himself was largely responsible for ensuring that the NAACP's agitation would not disrupt the U.S. government's nuclear ambitions. Nevertheless, critical postwar responses to nuclear developments—and the resulting backlash—contributed to the emerging character of antiracist struggles in the United States. By the start of the 1950s, pervasive fear and persecution of communism led to the marginalization of the most prominent African-American voices against nuclear weapons, whose leftist politics and commitments to international freedom struggles put them out of step with the emerging "cold war

64. *New York Times*, "A.V.C. Scores Bias at Atomic Plants," 29 July 1951.

65. Clarence Mitchell to Fletcher Waller, 24 October 1951, quoted in Holland, 83.

66. In her study of the campaign for fair employment at the Savannah River H-bomb plant, Holland writes, "because the employment pattern had become so quickly and firmly entrenched, there was precious little racial advocates could do to bring about substantive change. . . . [T]he results never matched the promises made or came close to approaching the objectives of the activists" (*ibid.*, 142).

consensus.” The harassment of outspoken activists like W. E. B. Du Bois and Paul Robeson made many civil rights or peace organizations reluctant to appear “anti-American” and severely restricted the range of acceptable political discourse. The Stockholm Peace Appeal was quashed, and radicals like Du Bois who questioned the basic premises of American nationalism became political pariahs within the African-American mainstream.

Furthermore, the escalating conflict with the Soviet Union provided a novel opportunity to demand the extension of civil rights to African Americans. During the cold war, “race in America was thought to have a critical impact on U.S. prestige abroad.” Many black leaders argued for racial equality on the grounds that it would further the fight against global communism.⁶⁷ As White and other moderate civil rights advocates turned away from the anticolonial and broadly internationalist racial politics that had blossomed during World War II, criticism of the bomb diminished. However, African-American commentators subtly transformed the dominant discourse of nuclear enthusiasm in ways that connected the fate of the United States with the rights and political demands of African Americans. A calculated enthusiasm for the bomb was an important dimension of the early civil rights struggle. Like the NAACP and NUL, the popular black press during the 1950s often expressed fervent support for African-American participation in America’s nuclear endeavors.⁶⁸ Later, this patriotic discourse about national technology evolved into similar interest in the space race, insofar as it justified critical attention to the poor state of science education in predominantly black schools.⁶⁹

67. Dudziak (n. 2 above), 250. For a critique of African-American cooperation with this campaign to link civil rights with international diplomacy, see Gerald Horne, “Who Lost the Cold War? Africans and African Americans,” *Diplomatic History* 20 (1996): 613–26.

68. For example, *Jet*, a tabloid weekly with the same publisher as *Ebony*, did not often provide in-depth reporting on topics related to science or the atomic bomb, but when these issues were mentioned, the magazine reacted enthusiastically—in part, it seems, to distract attention from the discrimination that diminished American stature. In 1958, it reported that two African-American scientists had been delegates to the UN Atoms for Peace conference and described the event as America’s “biggest prestige victory in years,” one that would turn world attention from the racial strife in places like Little Rock and toward “Negro contributions” to the peaceful uses of atomic energy (*Jet*, “Negro Scientists Help U.S. at Swiss Atoms Conference,” 6 November 1958). Ironically, reports that a judge had upheld the segregation of restrooms in one city’s courthouse and that a Georgia minister had barely survived a beating by two unidentified white men were carried on the same page. During the cold war, the United States adopted a strategy of sending African-American representatives abroad to convince the world that Jim Crow America was progressing toward equality; see, for example, Helen Laville and Scott Lucas, “The American Way: Edith Sampson, the NAACP, and African American Identity in the Cold War,” *Diplomatic History* 20 (1996): 565–90.

69. The Russian launch of Sputnik, the first man-made satellite, in October 1957, was an important turning point in American self-perception. Some African-American journalists commented on Sputnik in terms of the struggle for civil rights, arguing that

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For these reasons, it would seem that the emerging civil rights movement was strategically linked with enthusiasm for the bomb, not opposition to it. Despite the marginalization of more radical perspectives in favor of technological enthusiasm during the early 1950s, however, the struggle for peace influenced the more radical arms of the civil rights movement, particularly as tactics began to shift toward mass demonstrations and civil disobedience. Indeed, the movements for peace and for civil rights remained connected through shared founders, members, and tactics, as evidenced in the work of black pacifist Bayard Rustin, among others. Furthermore, traces of the early critical discourses on the bomb reemerged in the words and deeds of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and other black public figures active in the racial struggles of the 1950s and 1960s.

Rustin's work during the 1940s and 1950s suggests that African-American struggles for civil rights were crucially informed by the protest strategies of the peace and antinuclear movements. For Rustin, as for many others—both pacifists and those in the communist-led peace movement discussed earlier—struggles for peace and racial equality were interdependent.⁷⁰ Rustin served as race-relations secretary for the pacifist Fellowship of Reconciliation. He organized civil disobedience against segregation on interstate buses in 1947 and also served as one of the principal members of the Peacemakers, a group that led Gandhian-style campaigns against the development of nuclear weapons in the United States.⁷¹ Rustin, a “zealous

race prejudice was to blame for America's lag in science and technology. An editorial in the *Chicago Defender*, for example, argued that Southern race relations came at “the price of the survival of the nation in deadly competition with an enemy like Red Russia” (see Victor Calverton, “Blames Race Prejudice for U.S. Scientific Lag,” *Chicago Defender*, 9 November 1957). When the first U.S. satellite was successfully orbited in 1958, the banner headline of the *New York Amsterdam News* trumpeted, “Negroes in Key Roles in U.S. Race For Space” (8 February 1958), followed by the stories “Four Tan Yanks on Firing Team” and “LI Negroes Built ‘Guts’ of Missile” (both by James L. Hicks, *New York Amsterdam News*, 8 February 1958). With these sentiments, the *Amsterdam News* echoed the enthusiastic headlines that followed the atomic bombing of Japan in August 1945.

70. James Tracy's study (n. 19 above) of radical pacifist activism from the 1940s through the 1970s demonstrates the deep connections between antiwar and black-liberation struggles in the United States. During World War II, imprisoned conscientious objectors protested racial segregation in prison; after the war, black and white pacifists organized interracial workshops on direct nonviolent action against racial segregation and protested segregation through such actions as the 1947 “Journey of Reconciliation,” a precursor of the 1961 Freedom Rides.

71. Stephen Steinberg, “Bayard Rustin and the Rise and Decline of the Black Protest Movement,” *New Politics* 6 (1997), <http://www.wpunj.edu/newpol/issue23/cont23.htm> (accessed 5 January 2009). Rustin found himself torn between two causes, despite what was, from his point of view, their clear interdependence. On 6 December 1959, he and other members of the Committee for Non-Violent Action began a 2,000-mile journey (the Sahara Project) from newly independent Ghana to where France was to test a nuclear device in the desert region of occupied Algeria. Soon after the start of the journey, Rustin acquiesced to pressure from A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King Jr.

advocate of unilateral disarmament,” was the only American speaker at the now-famous 1958 march against nuclear weapons in Aldermaston in Great Britain. Speaking to thousands of antinuclear protestors, he linked “the struggle against weapons of mass destruction with the struggle of blacks for their basic rights in America.”⁷² He went on to organize the 1963 March on Washington and helped to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.⁷³ Rustin promoted tactics of nonviolent civil disobedience, long practiced by pacifists, which became the trademark of the civil rights movement.

Civil rights organizers did not only learn from the protest strategies of pacifists, but antinuclear activism itself also remained important to some notable African-American public figures during the 1950s and 1960s. Martin Luther King Jr. was involved in antinuclear activism through the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy (SANE), an organization founded in 1957 in response to the nuclear arms race. King’s wife, Coretta Scott King, was one of the founders of SANE and remained actively involved in the nuclear-disarmament movement well into the 1960s, leading peace marches and joining peace delegations to the United Nations. Harry Belafonte, A. Philip Randolph, Ossie Davis, and Ruby Dee were among the well-known black advocates working alongside white antinuclear activists to support social change.⁷⁴

Despite these long-standing connections between civil rights and antinuclear activism, when King spoke out against the war in Vietnam in the late 1960s, his critics painted his stance as novel and divisive.⁷⁵ King became more openly critical of U.S. militarism in his public statements in the year before his assassination, calling for peace and justice in more broadly international terms and sometimes referring specifically to the threat of nuclear war. Historian Manning Marable argues that in his later years, King was influenced by the work and writings of Du Bois and, further, that he “did not skirt Du Bois’ long-standing identification with Marxism,” a stance that provided fodder for critics who accused King of promoting communist ideas.⁷⁶ The influence of Du Bois can be seen in King’s plea for internationalism in a 1967 Canadian radio broadcast:

to return to the United States and resume his work for civil rights. After leaving the Sahara Project, Rustin increasingly devoted his efforts to the civil rights movement rather than antinuclear protests (see Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I’ve Seen: A Biography* [New York, 1997], 220–21).

72. Michael Randle, quoted in Anderson, *Bayard Rustin*, 215.

73. John D’Emilio, *Lost Prophet: The Life and Times of Bayard Rustin* (New York, 2003).

74. Milton S. Katz, *Ban the Bomb: A History of SANE, the Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy, 1957–1985* (New York, 1986); Wittner, *Resisting the Bomb* (n. 36 above).

75. William M. King, “The Reemerging Revolutionary Consciousness of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 1965–1968,” *Journal of Negro History* 71 (1986): 1–22.

76. Marable, “Peace and Black Liberation” (n. 24 above), 404.

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Although it is obvious that nonviolent movements for social change must internationalize, because of the interlocking nature of the problems they all face, and because otherwise those problems will breed war, we have hardly begun to build the skills and the strategy, or even the commitment, to planetize our movement for social justice. . . .

In a world whose cultural and spiritual power lags so far behind her technological capabilities that we live each day on the verge of nuclear co-annihilation; in this world, nonviolence is no longer an option for intellectual analysis, it is an imperative for action.⁷⁷

King's words echo many of the debates of the immediate postwar period about the need for global cooperation to prevent nuclear war. As in his famous 1967 Riverside Church address opposing the Vietnam War, he combined an argument put forth by Du Bois and other anticolonialists—that global inequalities breed war—with a pacifist plea for nonviolent resistance.⁷⁸

Malcolm X, the black nationalist and spokesman for the Nation of Islam, also articulated connections between racism and the use of nuclear weapons. While his teachings of black nationalism and self-defense broke radically from the past, he shared with the earlier Pan-Africanists an understanding of racism as a global, not just domestic, issue. In a statement that recalled the opinions expressed in the *Washington Afro American* and *Chicago Defender* in August 1948, he linked the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki to the racism made obvious by the internment of Japanese Americans during the war:

Where was the A-bomb dropped . . . “to save American lives”? Can the white man be so naive as to think the clear import of this will ever be lost upon the non-white two-thirds of the earth's population? Before that bomb was dropped—right over here in the United States, what about the one hundred thousand loyal naturalized and native-

77. Martin Luther King Jr., “Conscience for Change,” *Massey Lecture* (Toronto, 1968).

78. On 4 April 1967, King delivered a speech at a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned at Riverside Church in New York City. In it, he said that “many persons have questioned me about the wisdom of my path. . . . ‘Why are you speaking about war, Dr. King?’ . . . ‘Peace and civil rights don’t mix,’ they say. . . . And when I hear them, though I often understand the source of their concern, I am nevertheless greatly saddened, for such questions mean that the inquirers have not really known me, my commitment or my calling.” See “Beyond Vietnam,” in *A Call to Conscience: The Landmark Speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. Clayborne Carson, Kris Shepard, and Andrew Young (New York, 2001), 141.

79. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1964; rept., New York, 1992), 308. Few are aware of Malcolm X's interest in the struggles of the Japanese and Japanese Americans. In 1964, as the result of his friendship with Japanese-American activist Yuri Kochiyama, he had the opportunity to meet with Japanese journalists who were also atomic-bomb survivors; he is quoted as telling them: “You may have scars from the bombing. We were also bombed. The bomb they dropped on us was racism”; see Diane C. Fujino, “Revolu-

born Japanese-American citizens who were herded into camps, behind barbed wire? But how many German-born naturalized Americans were herded behind barbed wire? They were *white*!⁷⁹

In sum, the politics of race and the politics of the nuclear bomb intersected in multiple ways during the early years of the atomic age. The nature of the interaction between racial and nuclear politics was affected by both international solidarities and reactionary domestic politics, as these forces shifted over time. The most prominent voices connecting struggles against racial oppression to the opposition to nuclear weapons were marginalized by the early 1950s, yet these ideas did not disappear. Radical pacifists like Bayard Rustin (as well as his white pacifist colleagues) continued to treat the two struggles as interconnected. Even as the civil rights movement became a massive popular mobilization, some black activists also found time to protest the nuclear arms race. And by the late 1960s, two of the most important African-American leaders—Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—could not ignore the relevance of nuclear weapons to global struggles for social justice and racial equality. Criticism of nuclear weapons similar to that expressed by anticolonial intellectuals in the immediate post–World War II period began to reemerge as black leaders of the 1960s paid renewed attention to global racism and U.S. foreign policy. The resurgence of these critiques of the bomb suggests that the ideas articulated by black public figures immediately after the war remained an undercurrent in African-American political thought and activism at least through the mid-1960s. For black intellectuals and activists who continued to believe that the struggle for racial liberation in the United States was tied to the struggles of other oppressed people around the world, the matters of war, peace, and the justice of using nuclear weapons remained on the agenda for social change.

tion's from the Heart: The Making of an Asian-American Woman Activist, Yuri Kochiyama," in *Dragon Ladies: Asian American Feminists Breathe Fire*, ed. Sonia Shah (Boston, 1997), 172.

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