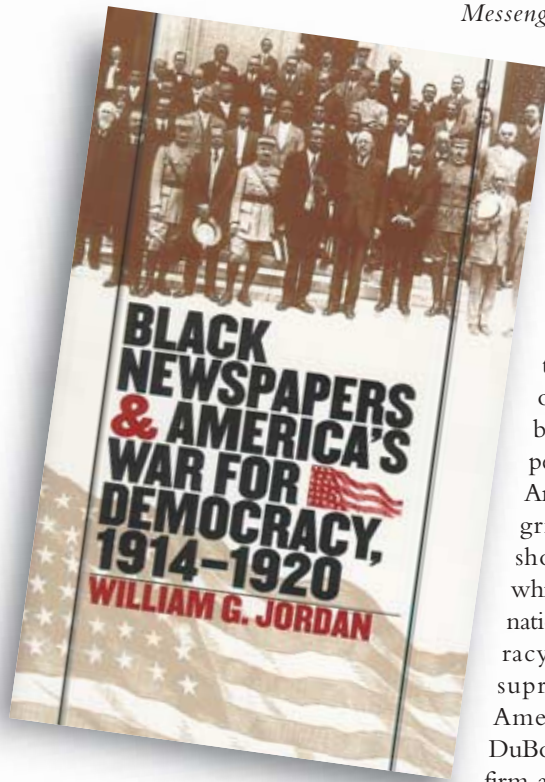


BALANCING LOYALTY AND PROTEST | By Douglas Smith '83



In his fascinating book Black Newspapers & America's War for Democracy, 1914-1920, PEA history instructor William Jordan demonstrates how black newspaper editors debated whether African Americans should support America's entry into World War I, when their own rights were so circumscribed at home.

When Woodrow Wilson asked Congress in April 1917 to declare war in order to “make the world safe for democracy,” African Americans, in general, and black newspaper editors, in particular, faced a troubling dilemma. A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen, the editors of *The Messenger*, opposed the war on the grounds that “we would rather make Georgia safe for the Negro,” a sentiment shared by many African Americans who felt that the United States ought to take concrete steps to achieve democracy within its own borders before asking blacks to fight in a foreign land. By contrast, W.E.B. DuBois, the editor of the NAACP’s *Crisis* and the best-known black editor of the period, ultimately urged African Americans to “forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy.” Deeply aware that white supremacy made a mockery of American claims to democracy, DuBois nevertheless concluded that firm assertions of loyalty on the part of African Americans were necessary for future progress. He knew as well as anyone that blacks had never failed to answer the nation’s call to arms, and he felt they must continue to do so.

In *Black Newspapers & America's War For Democracy, 1914-1920* (University of North Carolina Press), William Jordan has written a fascinating account of the efforts of black newspaper editors in the North and South to resolve this dilemma. Jordan, who has taught history at Exeter since 1997 and who was named the Harlan M. Ellis Instructor in 2002, rejects claims by other historians who see northern editors as inherently more militant than their accommodationist counterparts in the South. Instead, Jordan skillfully unveils the extent to which black editors throughout the country

engaged in a delicate, and sometimes dangerous, balancing act between loyalty and protest.

By the time the United States declared war in 1917, black editors had been developing their strategies and refining their arguments for three years, ever since the outbreak of war in Europe in 1914. During this period, as the United States debated the merits of “preparedness,” black editors used their columns not so much to reflect the views of other blacks as to engage in a national debate and to promote public policy favorable to African Americans. As Jordan emphasizes throughout his book, black editors seized upon the opportunity to address a white audience. Employing “mainstream discourse about the war to shed light on the situation of blacks in the South,” black editors set out “to make it impossible for white Americans who believed in the humanitarian ideals underlying their critique of European atrocities to continue to ignore” the horrors faced by African Americans.

In editorial after editorial, black editors protested against the treatment of African Americans at home, yet did so in a manner designed to affirm their loyalty. While black editors addressed a wide range of inequities that defined white supremacy, they repeatedly equated the worst German and Turkish war crimes with the lynching of blacks. Furthermore, black editors chided white Americans by asking why they appeared more interested in atrocities in Europe than at home. Other editors, according to Jordan, asserted that “lynching would hurt America’s credibility among the nations of the world and its ability to act on behalf of humanitarian motives.” As Woodrow Wilson moved the United States toward an official policy of preparedness in late 1915, most black editors enthusiastically supported the president, and used their support to argue that blacks were not disloyal agitators, but more loyal and more American than most southern whites, many of whom

opposed preparedness. Although genuine, such assertions of loyalty did, in fact, mask a burning desire and expectation that meaningful change would soon follow. “The intimation that African Americans would not support the war if their demands were not met was never far from the surface of their editorial pages,” writes Jordan. “Editorialists went to great pains to frame their demands for democracy in a way that made them seem in harmony with the interests of the nation.”

In producing this lively and engaging narrative, Jordan has mined hundreds of editorials written by nearly two dozen individuals, each of whom operated within different confines. William Monroe Trotter published *The Boston Guardian* without interference from white investors, and thus assumed a more assertive posture; he began to lose influence, however, after he upbraided Wilson in a White House meeting. W.E.B. DuBois, by contrast, had to temper his own militancy because of the ever-present eyes of white officials within the NAACP. His “Close Ranks” editorial reflected prevailing attitudes within the NAACP as much as his own beliefs.

Robert Abbott used the pages of *The Chicago Defender* and an ingenious distribution strategy to encourage hundreds of thousands of southern blacks to move North in the Great Migration. Abbott’s newspaper reached southern readers via railroad porters, despite the best efforts of southern whites to keep *The Defender* out of the region. Harry Smith, editor of *The Cleveland Gazette*, led an initially successful campaign to ban D.W. Griffith’s incendiary *Birth of a Nation* from theaters throughout Ohio; a judge later overturned the ban. In Richmond, VA, John Mitchell hammered white Americans over lynching and segregation in the pages of *The Richmond Planet*; a decade prior to the outbreak of war in Europe, in fact, Mitchell had led a successful boycott of the local streetcar company. Mitchell, however, was as skilled as any black editor in simultaneously affirming his own loyalty and that of black Americans in general.

After April 1917, black editors had to contend with more repressive forms of censorship and heightened expectations of loyalty. Congressional passage of the Espionage and Sedition Acts allowed the Postmaster General to censor publications deemed seditious. Consequently, few editors opposed the war so brazenly as did A. Philip Randolph and Chandler Owen (the pair were arrested, but a judge threw out the charges). Most editors, like most blacks, supported the war, but, as Jordan points out, few blacks ever forgot their “special grievances.” Writing in *The New York Age*, James Weldon Johnson came tantalizingly close to drawing the ire of censors as he warned white Americans of the trouble that lay ahead. Johnson affirmed that African Americans had “never lost faith in . . . the Government of the United States” and that no one should question their willingness to do their duty in the present conflict. But, Johnson exclaimed, “when that duty is done [they] will demand that this nation live up to the protestations of democracy that it is now making.”

The exigencies of war may have forced black editors to protest more carefully, but the needs of a nation at war also provided new opportunities. Worried about manpower needs and concerned that black Americans might not fully support the war effort, government officials finally began to listen to black grievances. In June 1918, the federal government hosted more than three dozen black leaders, most of them editors, who presented a Bill of Particulars. Among their list of demands, the editors called on federal officials to speak out against lynching, to eliminate discrimination in various war-related federal jobs, and to end segregation on railroads controlled by the federal government.

When Woodrow Wilson urged Congress to declare war to “make the world safe for democracy,” the editors of The Messenger opposed him on the grounds that they “would rather make Georgia safe for the Negro.”

Woodrow Wilson did not meet with the editors who attended the Washington Conference, but he did issue a statement a month later in which he condemned lynching as lawless; he even drew upon the tactics honed by black editors when he compared lynching to the worst German atrocities. Although Wilson did not support legislation to make lynching a federal crime, his statement was nevertheless well-received by the black editors. By the fall of 1918, a number of them saw signs that the federal government had begun to address their concerns.

The war in Europe, however, ended before significant reforms had been put in place. John Mitchell had predicted in 1917 that “the longer the war and the bloodier, the better it will be for the colored folk.” Sadly, Mitchell proved prescient. The federal government had justified reform in terms of the war; the end of the conflict meant that government officials immediately forgot the Bill of Particulars. Instead, as millions of black and white soldiers returned from overseas in 1919, the number of lynchings in the South increased dramatically and race riots erupted throughout the rest of the country. Whites throughout the United States sought to remind blacks that they remained second-class citizens. African Americans, however, interpreted the war “to make the world safe for democracy” in different terms. Writing in *The Crisis* in May 1919, W.E.B. DuBois reminded blacks of their special grievances and urged them to “return fighting” from Europe “against the forces of hell in our own land.” That battle, as William Jordan’s fine book so eloquently makes clear, required several more decades and another world war. ●

Douglas Smith '83 is the author of Managing White Supremacy: Race, Politics, and Citizenship in Jim Crow Virginia (University of North Carolina Press, 2002) which received the 2003 Library of Virginia Literary Award in Nonfiction.



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