THE BLACK PRESS:
SOLDIERS WITHOUT SWORDS

Transcribed from the PBS documentary "Soldiers Without Swords"

For over 150 years, African American newspapers were among the strongest institutions in Black America. They helped to create and stabilize communities. They spoke forcefully to the political and economic interests of their readers while employing thousands. Black newspapers provided a forum for debate among African Americans and gave voice to a people who were voiceless. With a pen as their weapon, they were Soldiers Without Swords.

In the early 19th century, African Americans were routinely vilified on the pages of the mainstream press and had no way to respond. And by the winter of 1827 an outraged community had had enough. Three blacks gathered on Varick Street in Lower Manhattan and decided that they, too, would use the press as a weapon. They pooled their money and started the first newspaper in the United States to be published by African Americans, *Freedom's Journal*.

Chosen as the editors of *Freedom's Journal* were 28 year-old John Russwurm, one of the first black graduates of an American university, and 32 year-old preacher Samuel Cornish. In their inaugural issue, Russwurm and Cornish set out a clear vision for the first black newspaper.

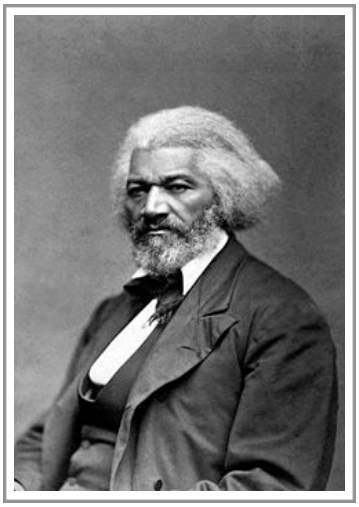
> **"Useful knowledge of every kind and every thing that relates to Africa shall find a ready admission into our columns, proving that the natives are neither so ignorant or stupid as they have generally been supposed to be. Whatever concerns us as a people will ever a ready admission in terms of the *Freedom's Journal* interwoven with all the principal news of the day."** —Freedom's Journal*, March 16th, 1827.*

Two years after its founding, *Freedom's Journal* closed following a dispute between Russwurm and Cornish over the direction of the paper. It was short lived, but *Freedom's Journal* paved the way for 24 other black newspapers published before the Civil War. The most influential of the pre-war papers appeared in 1847 with abolitionist leader Frederick Douglas as its editor. In the first issue of *The North Star*, Douglas also emphasized the need for an independent black press.

> **"In the grand struggle for liberty and equality now waging, it is (Unintell.), right, and essential that there should arrive in our ranks authors and editors as well as orators, for it is in these capacities that the most permanent good can be rendered to our cause."**
> *—Frederick Douglas, December 3rd, 1847.*

As slaves, African Americans were forbidden to read, but after the Civil War, reading became one of the sweetest fruits of freedom. For many, black newspapers were an introduction the power and the magic of the written word.

Between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century, over 500 black newspapers began publication. Many of the papers borrowed printing presses from African American churches and soon the same machines that produced programs for Sunday services were printing the news. Many lasted only a short time, but the papers appeared across the country in cities like Omaha, Mobile, Indianapolis, Cleveland, San Francisco, and in smaller towns like Galveston, Texas, Coffeeville, Kansas, and Langston City, Oklahoma Territory. But



Frederick Douglas

in the South, the optimism of the Reconstruction era ended in 1876 when President Rutherford B. Hayes withdrew federal protection for the freed slaves.

The White South called it "redemption," but for African Americans the post-Reconstruction period was a reign of terror. Mob violence directed at black Americans was ignored by the federal government and condoned by Southern white newspapers.

> **"There is nothin' which so fills the soul with horror, loathing and fury as the outragin' of a white woman by a negro. It is the race question in the ugliest, vilest, most dangerous aspect. The negro as a political factor can be controlled, but neither laws nor lynchings can subdue his lusts."** —Memphis Commercial, *May 17, 1892.*

The 29 year-old editor of another Memphis newspaper, the Free Speech, traveled the South to investigate cases of lynching. The editor was Ida B. Wells. What she found and put into print caused an uproar among White Southerners.

Ida B. Wells

On June 4th, 1892, while Ida B. Wells was in New York on her first trip North, her paper, the *Memphis Free Speech*, was attacked by a lynch mob.

Fearing for her life, Wells did not return South for 30 years. She continued her ground-breaking work on the staff of T*he New York Age.*

In 1893, the year after Wells is chased from Memphis, the Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago. At a cost of 26 million dollars, it was the largest and most expensive event of its kind in history. The purpose of the fair was to showcase American ingenuity to the world, but its omission of African Americans from exhibits on US history prompted Ida B. Wells and Frederick Douglas to issue a pamphlet in protest. The exposition's organizers offered to set aside one day for African Americans, Colored American Day. The white press ridiculed the idea. Wells denounced it, but finally Frederick Douglas accepted the compromise and agreed to speak.

On the morning of August 25th, 1893, nearly three thousand black Americans donned starched collars, bustles, and top hats and came out to enjoy the day. One of them was Robert S. Abbott, the 27 year-old printing student from Georgia on his first visit North. Abbott had come to the exposition to sing spirituals with the Hampton Institute Quartet. His presence at Frederick Douglas' speech that day would change Abbott's life and redirect the course of African American journalism. Abbott sat in Festival Hall as Frederick Douglas rose to address the audience. At 75, Douglas was visibly slowed by age. His hands shook. His voice faltered.

As Douglas began to speak, a rowdy group of whites tried to shout him down. Douglas threw aside his prepared text and drew himself up to his full commanding height. His voice rumbled through the cavernous hall.

> **"Men talk of the 'negro problem'. There is no negro problem. The problem is whether the American people have honesty enough, loyalty enough, honor enough, patriotism enough to live up to their own constitution. We intend that the American people shall learn the great lesson of the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God from our presence among them."**
> *—Frederick Douglas, August 25th, 1893.*

The New Century

In the first 20 years of the new century, airplanes, automobiles, radios, and moving pictures revolutionized communications in the United States. The newspapers were in the vanguard of this revolution, feeding the nation's growing appetite for news and information. Between 1900 and 1910, over 2600 newspapers were published in the United States, more than at any time before or since.

Black newspapers sprung up to serve growing communities from New York to the new cities of the west. In 1910 alone, over 275 black newspapers were in print with a combined readership of over half a million. Some, like *The California Eagle* in Los Angeles, had a new and radical vision of what a paper could be.

Seeking to emulate his hero, Frederick Douglas, John J. Neymour founded *The California Eagle* in 1879. The paper was already well established when Charlotta Spears Bass arrived. Her modest appearance concealed boundless energy and uncompromising politics. Bass threw herself fiercely into her work at the *Eagle* and impressed Neymour with her dedication to all aspects of the newspaper business. In 1912, Neymour summoned Bass to his bedside. "I'm dying," he said, "but I don't want the *Eagle* to die. Will you promise to keep it alive?"

In July, 1914, when Bass heard that Thomas Dixon's novel *The Klansmen* would be made into a motion picture, she immediately launched a campaign against it in the pages of *The California Eagle*. *Birth of a Nation*, directed by D.W. Griffith, depicted Reconstruction era black legislators in hideous caricature and celebrate Ku Klux Klan violence. The mainstream pressed hailed the film as a landmark cinematic achievement. The African American press, rallied by Charlotta Bass, reacted with outrage.

> **"We of the *Eagle* pioneered in an important field of social struggle, the struggle to make the film industry responsible morally for the content if its products, the struggle to lift higher artistic standards in the entertainment world, standards reflecting a sense of social duty and propriety rather than prejudice and vain glory."** — *Charlotta Bass*

Shortly before Charlotta Bass migrated to California, Robert S. Abbott left the South for Chicago, he dreaming of the new world he'd glimpsed at the Columbian Exposition. What he got was a taste of Northern bigotry.

Abbott's journalism and his perspective as a journalist was shaped by the constant discrimination he'd encountered on the way to becoming the publisher of *The Chicago Defender*. He first tried in Chicago to be a printer. That's what he was trained to be at the Hampton Institute. But becoming a full-time craftsman as a printer was simply impossible because of racial discrimination. He next tried law school. In fact, he graduated from law school as the only African American in his class.

The first issue of *The Chicago Defender*, with a press run of 300 copies, appeared on March 4th, 1905. With a showmanship and hyperbole that was to make him a fortune, Abbott heralded the four-page paper as a the "world's greatest weekly." The *Defender* was sold in Chicago and the Midwest on consignment through individual agents. As the orders poured in, Abbott made a decision that would change his fortune and shape the future for thousands of others. He sent the *Defender* into the South, home to 90 percent of the African American population. There, the *Defender* had a potential black audience nearly 200 times larger than in Chicago, an audience that was hungry to hear what Abbott had to say.

Within a decade, the *Defender* out-sold every African American newspaper in the country and Robert S. Abbott, the son of former slaves, was on his way to becoming the most powerful black man in the nation. By 1920, the *Defender*'s circulation soared to over 100,000. Each copy passed through the hands of at least five readers and Abbott's paper and it's message reached more than half a million African Americans each week.

The *Defender's* Reach and Effect

Between 1882 and 1919, three thousand African Americans were murdered by lynch mobs, one every four-and-a-half days. These murders, often ignored by the mainstream press, were kept on the front pages of black newspapers.

As Abbott lashed out against lynching, bitter sarcasm became a hallmark of the *Defender*'s style.

The racism of the mainstream press was another favorite target of Abbott's ridicule. During World War I, industrial production in the North rose to record levels, creating thousands of new jobs. With the draft, that's far fewer workers to fill them.

The Chicago Defender had always advised Southern blacks to stay at home and fight for their rights, but in response to the economic opportunities created by the war, Abbott reversed his position. With characteristic enthusiasm, Abbott used the full resources of the paper — articles, editorials, cartoons, poems, and even songs — in a campaign to urge the *Defender's* readers to come North. The paper even printed train schedules, one-way to Chicago.

Try to imagine living in a small Southern town where there's simply not as much going on as there is in a place like Chicago. You read your *Defender* and you find out that there are nine movie theaters in Chicago's African American neighborhood. You find out that there are nightclubs. You read in the *Defender* about the Eighth Illinois Regiment, which as an African American National Guard regiment that marches through the streets carrying rifles. To a black Southerner, this was very exciting.

With more than ten thousand black people leaving each month, the South's economy suffered and its leaders grew desperate. Some towns, ignoring the Constitution, even banned the sale of black papers to try to stem the tide of the migration. In Somerville, Tennessee a petition ordered that "no colored newspapers be circulated" and that "every darkie must read the local white paper." But Robert Abbott, the shrewd marketer, asked for help from the one group of African Americans who traveled freely through the South.

Between 1916 and 1919, 500,000 Americans poured out of the South bound for the cities of the North and West. In the 1920s a million more followed. The great migration permanently altered the face of America. It also transformed the fortunes of Robert S. Abbott.

Unlike his flamboyant and often strident newspaper, Abbott himself was formal and reserved. He was 50 years old before he married. He would allow neither his first nor his second wife to address him as other than "Mr. Abbott." He did not drink and avoided social activities. What he enjoyed were the trappings of wealth—the gold-headed cane, the grand tours of Europe, and even though he did not drive, the Dusenberg convertible and Rolls-Royce limousine. Like many in the black middle class, Abbott was enamored of the social graces and attempted to use the paper to teach them to his readers. He even published a list of rules for migrant's behavior.

Robert S. Abbott

But no combination of social skills and economic progress could stop tensions from rising between blacks and whites in Northern cities. In 1919, race riots exploded across the United States and hundreds of people were killed, most of them African American. It became known as "The Red Summer".

The Chicago Defender became the most powerful voice on behalf of African Americans that had ever existed. The thousands who heeded Abbott's call to move North created new urban communities and in city after city, other black newspapers were established to serve them. Nearly 500 black newspapers were in print by the early 1920s. They were a resource on which entire communities depended. But in the coming decades, the papers would also provide black readers with something intangible, hope and pride.

Between World War I and World War II, African American newspapers guided their readers through a rigidly segregated world. The papers provided information that was mundane but critical for African Americans' survival. Display ads suggested where they could shop without risking humiliation. Classified ads told them which employers did not discriminate. Sports and society pages lauded the athletes and professionals who the mainstream press ignored. Black newspapers showed the full spectrum of life in black communities. In return, African American readers treated newspaper men and women with respect and adulation. In the mainstream press, black journalists were denied the opportunity to practice their craft and earn a living, but in their world they were stars.

The absence of large revenue-generating ads forced black newspapers into a constant scramble to boost circulation. Many were in continual financial trouble and hard-hitting journalism had to share space with outrageous ads. But the lack of large advertisers had its advantaged.

For black newspapers, the truth was something different than the denigrating images of blacks in the mainstream press. Cartoon caricatures on the funny pages were often the most blatant and offensive.

The cartoonists of the black press fought back by creating their own heroes. Using cartoons as illustrations, J.A. Rogers wrote a Ripley's Believe It Or Not of black history. His syndicated feature, "Your History", was an introduction to a black past that was full of surprises.

At a time when jobs were unavailable to blacks at mainstream papers, black newspapers were a training ground for African American lithographers, pressmen, and typographers. For artists and writers, black newspapers could be an important launching pad. Author and poet Langston Hughes was a newspaper correspondent in 1937. And Pulitzer Prize winner Gwendolyn Brooks wrote poetry for *The Chicago Defender* while still a teenager. And the celebrate artist Romer Bearden began his career as a cartoonist for *The Afro American* in 1936. The black press also trained a legion of photographers who shaped images of African Americans through their own lens.

A frame from a typical cartoon. This one by Dr. Seuss

An expanding African American community turned newspapers into profitable businesses and major employers. The larger papers had their own printing presses that would get their papers to their own delivery trucks, which would put them in the hands of an army of eager newsboys. Some papers, like Marcus Garvey's *Negro World*, were short lived. But other became dynasties. The Scott Family's Atlanta World grew to be one of the few black daily newspapers. *The Baltimore Afro American*, started by the Murphy Family in 18892, would continue to be published by the Murphys more than a hundred years later. Between the wars, a new black press emerged. Many papers had both political and economic strength. *The Amsterdam News* in New York, *The Norfolk Journal* and Guide in Virginia, and the paper that after World War I would surpass the circulation of *The Chicago Defender*, Robert Vann's *Pittsburgh Courier*.

A J. A. Rogers episode of "Your History," with a focus on the accomplishments of African Americans

After Roosevelt was elected in 1932, Vann was rewarded for bringing black voters to the Democratic Party when an appointment as an Assistant Attorney General. He continued as publisher of *The Courier*, enhancing the paper by hiring many of the best minds in the country. The radical intellectual W.E.B. Dubois shared space as a columnist with a conservative George Schuyler and with Marcus Garvey, the leader of the *Back to Africa* movement. Writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston wrote for The Courier. Columns like "As An Indian Sees It," "Africa Speaks" and "A White Man's Views" offered a diversity of opinion and created the ongoing debate that was the paper's hallmark. At its height, The Courier had 15 columnists, more than any other paper in the country. When Vann died in 1940, he left The Courier as "the" most powerful black newspaper in the nation.

*A newsboy hawking copies of T*he Chicago Defender*, c. 1930s*

World War II and After

By the end of the 1930s, black newspapers had reached new heights of circulation and influence. But the black press would be tested during World War II, when the papers took on their biggest and most powerful opponent, the United States government.

United States entry into World War II led to an outpouring of American patriotism. Many whites in mainstreams newspapers were zealous cheerleaders, but for black Americans enthusiasm for the war effort was often tempered by the bitter reality of segregation.

James Thompson, a cafeteria worker from Wichita, Kansas, suggested in a letter to *The Pittsburgh Courier* that African Americans use the war overseas to press for change in their own back yard. The *Courier* received thousands of letters and telegrams and supported James Thompson's idea.

But the military considered the black press an enemy. It made every effort to keep African American newspapers from the troops. It was unofficial military policy to place black troops under the command of Southern white officers, because, according to the Army, "Southern whites knew best how to 'handle' the negro." It was the Jim Crow army of a Jim Crow country. Even the blood supply was segregated. When racial violence erupted within the Army, black newspapers took it as their duty to report the assault of black soldiers by their own countrymen.

FBI director J. Edgar Hoover decided that the black press was dangerous to America's well-being in the war and did all in his power to accuse them of sedition. He orchestrated hearings before a select committee of Congress. In 1942, Hoover presented Attorney General Francis Biddle with lengthy reports on what he saw as seditious activity by the African American press. He asked Biddle to indict a group of publishers for treason.

So in June, mid-June, 1942, John Sengstacke, the publisher of *The Chicago Defender* came to the Justice Department building in Washington. Even though Biddle threatened to take some of the black publishers to court under the Espionage Act, Sengstacke convinced him that it was the duty of the black press to present the facts and to protect blacks in the U.S. Sengstacke left the Attorney General's office with an extraordinary agreement. Biddle would not prosecute if the newspapers would not escalate their campaign during the war.

As the war ended, the campaign for equality at home and abroad had pushed the combined circulation of black newspapers for a record high of two million papers a week. But victory at home had yet to be won.

In the turbulent post-war years, African American newspapers were key actors in the quickening struggle for social change. The events of the 1950s and '60s would pose new challenges to black publishers, but ultimately for the black press, the Civil Rights Movement's success would bring the period of its greatest power to an end.

*John Sengstacke, publisher of T*he Chicago Defender*, c. 1940*

As the demand for change escalated, some black newspapers, like Charlotta Bass' *California Eagle*, led the call for immediate action. But in the poisoned atmosphere of the late 1940s and early '50s, Charlotta Bass' outspokenness made her a target.

"I want to ask our city council and all the agencies that cry "Beware of Communists" if the communists are responsible for the prices that have put foods beyond the reach of our poor people, made it impossible for GI negroes and other minorities to live in houses fit for human habitation? No, my friends, not communism, but common greed on the part of the rich and powerful and their newspaper, radio, and speaking puppets is what keeps us, the people, divided and weak!"

— Charlotta Bass

Charlotta Bass was branded a communist and a trouble-maker. African American readers began to turn away from *The California Eagle* and Bass's radical politics. Discouraged by declining community support and facing stiff competition from the younger and less militant Los Angeles Sentinel, Charlotta Bass sold The *Eagle* in 1951. She had led the paper for 40 years, but at the age of 71, Bass embarked on a new career.

In 1952, Charlotta Bass became the first black woman to run for national office as the Progressive Party's candidate for Vice President.

Charlotta Bass

The California Eagle continued under new management until July 7th, 1964. When its presses shut down for the last time, the *Eagle* had been in print for 86 years and was the oldest African American newspaper in the United States.

The explosion of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s was a tremendous national news story with African Americans at its center. And for black journalists, it was the chance of a lifetime.

The Civil Rights Movement made African Americans more visible to the rest of the nation, and big advertisers began to see black papers as a way to reach out to black consumers. Increased advertising dollars lessened the newspapers' dependence on circulation, but often advertising also had an effect on the paper's editorial policy.

As much of the black press backed away from overt confrontation, violent civil unrest erupted in cities across the country. While the riots were devastating to black communities, they had unexpected benefits for African American journalists.

In the 1960s, black newspaper circulation declined and the paper's power and influence began to wane. And even as the papers' numbers have diminished and their voices muted, the need for an independent advocacy press remains. The words written by editors Russwurm and Cornish in 1827 continued to resonate. "Too long have others spoken for us."

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