



PAUL ROBESON

Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson: Athletes and Activists at Armageddon

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Pablo Neruda, Nobel Laureate in Poetry, before his symbolic appearance in the film *Il Postino*, sang the praises of Paul Robeson—¹

One he did not exist
But his voice was there, waiting

Light parted from darkness,
day from night,
earth from primal waters

And the voice of Paul Robeson
Was divided from silence.

Robeson's voice was unforgettable. *New York Times* critic Brooks Atkinson likened it to "a cavernous roar". Another writer described that unique bass/baritone as "sheer, carpeted magnificence." Even a notoriously nasty reviewer from the *Herald Tribune* felt compelled to describe Robeson's voice as "celestial."² That unique voice silenced by the grand inquisitors in the 1950s and by death in 1976 uttered its first cry on April 9, 1898, the day of his birth to Rev. William Drew Robeson, a run-away slave and Maria Louisa Bustill, an educated woman. Growing up sanely in an absurd society rife with "Jim Crow" segregation, he enjoyed a spectacular career as a scholar-athlete. At Rutgers University, he won varsity letters in football, basketball, baseball and track. He excelled in the classroom too. Phi Beta Kappan, debate champion, valedictorian: Robeson towered above his classmates.

After graduating from Columbia Law School, he abandoned legal practice for the theater. He roared in the 1920s as Eugene O'Neill's Emperor Jones and as Oscar Micheaux's hero in *Body and Soul*. In 1928, Robeson electrified London audiences as Joe in Jerome Kern's *Showboat*. Two years later, his Othello won rave reviews. After almost two decades abroad, Robeson returned to his native land. On November 5, 1939 he came to CBS Radio where he sang Earl Robinson's *Ballad for Americans*. He was granted an honorary doctorate at Hamilton College in 1940 and the Donaldson Award in 1944 for his splendid Othello.

His meteoric rise brought him global fame. He seemed to embody the American dream in that giant frame. Larger than life, he was a natural for the

role of good-will ambassador. On one of his many trips, he had visited the Soviet Union in 1934. It produced a mutual love affair with serious consequences. Like Othello, he loved not too wisely but too well. For the first time in his life, Robeson felt totally welcome, unfettered, adored—indeed lionized.

As long as the common enemy was Nazi Germany or Imperial Japan, Robeson enjoyed large fame and modest fortune. The American press rarely criticized either his personal beliefs or his public statements. In fact, Paul Robeson reached a high point in 1943 when he starred in a Broadway production of *Othello* and led a delegation of Negro leaders to a meeting of major league baseball owners and their Czar, Kenesaw Mountain Landis to petition for the entry of blacks into the citadel of our national pastime. Cordially received and effusively greeted by Commissioner Landis, Robeson had every reason to believe that he had earned stature in the eyes of white America and had paved the way for Jackie Robinson's entry four years hence. It seemed like a story crafted by and for a black Horatio Alger.

But another Alger—Hiss—then appeared. Whittaker Chambers accused Hiss of communism and a new congressman, Richard Nixon, produced the "Pumpkin Papers" supposedly proving he was. The Cold War heated up in 1947. The threat of Communist-led insurgency in Greece and Turkey, the rising popularity of Communist leaders Togliatti in Italy and Thorez in France, the coup in Czechoslovakia in 1948, the triumph of Mao's armies in China in 1949 and the detonation of an A-bomb in Russia breaking our nuclear monopoly all contributed to worsening relations between the two super-powers. And Paul Robeson was caught in the cross fire.

He told a Paris Peace Conference that "It is unthinkable that American Negroes could go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against the Soviet Union, which in one generation has raised our people to full human dignity."³ Wrenched out of context, Arnold Rampersad suggests that Robeson's remarks were taken literally instead of ironically. This interpretation painted Robeson into a corner: colored red. Robeson returned from Europe, angry and belligerent. He resented attacks on his patriotism. The famous singer defied "any errand boys . . . and Uncle Toms of the Negro people, to challenge my Americanism."⁴

Biographer Martin Duberman points out that Robeson retained support in 1949. The Council of African Affairs warned against a campaign to smear a man who stood up for civil rights. Even critics like Alfred G. Clausen raised a serious question: "Why did this man gifted as a singer, an actor, an athlete and a scholar prefer the restrictive regime of Russia to the democracy of his native land?" Clearly, the critic concluded that the answer resided in American's refusal to admit all members to full participation as citizens. Duberman's analysis is cogent. Robeson, he contends, feared a preemptive United States atomic

strike. Paul Robeson Jr. has found evidence of a “big bang” option that would have rained nuclear bombs on Russian cities in “Project Boiler.”⁵ The elder Robeson firmly believed that the twin evils of racism and imperialism, endemic in America, constituted the gravest threat to humanity.⁶ Hence his oft-repeated words delivered with passionate intensity: “And we shall not put up with any hysterical raving that urges us too make war on anyone. We shall not make war on the Soviet Union.”

To rebut and isolate Robeson, HUAC hearings opened in mid July. Alvin Stokes, a man of questionable repute, testified that Communists planned to set up a Soviet republic in Dixie. He characterized Robeson as the Kremlin’s voice of America. Another paid informer, Manning Johnson, testified that Robeson was a Communist who harbored grand delusions. HUAC’s attempt at a public display of Negro loyalty seemed to be gaining ground. A de facto double standard applied. While white-Americans were required to name names, the preferred litmus-paper test for blacks was denunciation of Paul Robeson.⁷ For a knock-out blow, Committee Chair, John Wood of Georgia summoned a heavy hitter, Jackie Robinson, to rebut Robeson. The Brooklyn Dodger trailblazer felt constrained to comply.

As Robinson remembered this confrontation, he faced a dilemma. After extended discussion with wife Rachel, mentor Branch Rickey and Urban League executive Lester Granger, the brilliant second-sacker framed a reply for his appearance on July 18, 1949 to “give the lie to statements by Paul Robeson.” The summons invited skepticism and Jackie knew the score. He understood Robeson’s rage and the white establishment’s desire to get him. He realized that the target of HUAC was “an embattled and bitter man” who had suffered indignities from his Princeton childhood to his Rutgers college experience. Shunned in Nazi Germany while on tour in 1934, he was embraced in Soviet Russia. Nor was Robinson blind to the manipulation of his star-studded appearance. “I’m not fooled because I’ve had a chance open to very few Americans.”⁸ Robinson admitted that although he lacked expertise in politics, he knew his people and their experience, intimately. He too vowed to continue the struggle against racial discrimination in society as well as sports. He realized that to many blacks, as Rampersad writes: “Robeson was both a glamorous entertainer and a black man of unusual courage; among many whites, too, he was a highly respected, even revered figure.”⁹ Jackie did not want to tangle with the great singer-activist, but he could not accept Robeson’s premise regarding the behavior of Negroes vis-a-vis the Soviet Union. Except for the stridently rhetorical and patently artificial last line that reaffirmed Jackie’s determination not to squander his large investment in America “because of a siren song in bass,” the rebuttal was fairly gentle. Indeed, Robeson qualified his critique of Robeson: “He has a right to his personal views and if he wants to sound silly when he expresses them in public, that is his business and not mine.”¹⁰

Jackie felt that no one leader could speak for all African Americans, certainly no one who was pro-Soviet. Perceptively, he understood the dynamics of doubleness imposed on blacks: the external fight and the battle within. Unable to back down, blacks had to fight on both fronts. Full representation in American society depended on service—including military service—to the state. Quoting Jesse Jackson later in life, Robinson quipped: “It ain’t our government, but it’s our country.”¹¹ Biographer Arnold Rampersad succinctly summarizes Robinson’s delivery: “In homespun language, leavened only now and then by humor, Jack offered himself as both a humble man and one proud of his deeds; keenly opposed to racism in America but full of hope.”¹²

Press coverage in the main reflected a strong anti-Robeson bias. The *New York Times*, for example, put Robinson’s testimony on page one and added an editorial in support. But the paper did not dignify Robeson with a report on his press conference to answer the Dodger star.¹³ In this remarkable two-hour exchange at the Hotel Theresa, Robeson refused to be baited into a frontal attack on Robinson. “As a matter of fact, Jackie said he was for peace, and I am, too, so let’s start fighting for it.” Robeson offered to testify and urged Negroes to testify about their conditions in America. Robeson went on to blast the committee chair from Georgia for his defense of the Ku Klux Klan. He sneered at Congressman John Wood for his absence during Robinson’s appearance asserting that it was dictated by a refusal to address the witness as Mr. Robinson. Why didn’t the committee summon Joe DiMaggio—Robeson wondered aloud—to testify on the loyalty of Italians? He went on to chide Robinson—albeit mildly—for playing ball with the enemy. He clarified his Paris statement stressing the peace option in the face of war fever. He conceded that eighty-five of his engagements had been canceled because of the political reaction. He vowed to go on fighting. Robeson concluded by denying that he had written to Robinson in an effort to prevent his testimony or saying that blacks would not fight in a war against Russia.¹⁴

“Heavy hitters” like former first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt also favored Robinson as did 239 Brooklynites surveyed by The *Amsterdam News*. In contrast to the white establishment, the black press offered a more measured analysis. The Baltimore *Afro-American* featured a cartoon that depicted Jackie Robinson as a frightened little boy brandishing a huge gun tracking Robeson’s giant footprints. The caption read: “The leading player in the National Baseball League is only a tyro as a big game hunter.” Educator J. A. Rogers defended Robeson as a “loyal American.”¹⁵

To his credit, Robeson refused to attack Jackie Robinson, “I have no quarrel with Jackie. I have a great deal of respect for him, he is entitled to his view. I feel that the House Committee has insulted Jackie, it has insulted me, it has insulted the entire Negro race.”¹⁶ Paul Robeson, Jr. agrees with this assessment. At the LIU Robinson Conference, April 4, 1997, he put a different spin on

the Robinson-Robeson controversy. His illustrious father had said in effect “Hell, no, we should not go” and not “Hell, no, we won’t go.” Both blasted racism. At one game, the younger Robeson recalled that he wanted to get Jackie’s autograph. Big Paul, however, demurred. He did not want to embarrass the Brooklyn Dodger star.¹⁷

The Peekskill Riots that followed show how polarized America had become. Unwavering in his support for the Soviet Union, Robeson suffered loss of income and, worse, a diminished audience. One year later his passport was revoked. Unable to travel, he lived under virtual house arrest in his own country. But he refused “to go gently into that good night.” He raged against his persecutors. Critic Eric Bentley captures Robeson’s feisty exchange with Congressmen. By “any civilized criterion,” he observes that the great singer was singled out for depersonalization by the American “power elite.” This mirror image of Soviet treatment of dissidents began with the second Peekskill riot in which Robeson was targeted for assassination. The honor guard, acting to protect him, flushed out two nests of snipers nestled in the foliage.¹⁸ Unable to eliminate the man of courage, Robeson’s enemies curbed his travel, curtailed his income, canceled his concerts, and consigned him to oblivion.

Bentley concedes that Robeson showed a flawed sense of history when he linked Stalin with Marx, an error that he shared with Communists globally. But the astute critic presciently points out that Robeson’s defiant words anticipate the black freedom and black nationalist movements of a decade later. The testimony that he gave under duress on June 12, 1956 put him on a collision course that ultimately led to a contempt citation. He proved more defiant than the inquisitors had reason to anticipate. Proudly, indeed contemptuously, he peppered the inquisitors with pointed questions of his own. It appears that the repeated denial of his petition for a passport freed Robeson from restraint and gave vent to a righteous indignation. He demonstrated utter contempt for the members—and rightly so. Witness, if you will, these words of defiance.

“What do you mean by the Communist Party?”

“Would you like to come to the ballot box when I vote and take out the ballot and see?”

Chair: “You are directed to answer the question?”

After consultation with counsel, Robeson retorted: “I take the Fifth Amendment.”

In response to continued badgering by counsel Arens, Robeson corrected the chronology regarding his alleged remarks about Americans’ refusal to make war on the Soviets. In the absence of hot war, Robeson quipped: “So I was prophetic, was I not?”

Arens read Robeson's 1949 statements into the current record but persistently refused to allow the singer-activist to read his prepared statement. Robeson countered: "The Smith Act is a vicious document."

Rather than defend Stalin, perhaps an untenable stand anyway, Robeson attacked the American record which "wasted sixty to hundred million black people dying in slave ships and on the plantations, and don't you ask me about anybody, please."¹⁹

Even if these figures are inflated, they cut to the heart of Robeson's fierce anger. And if he misjudged Stalin, he accurately captured black rage. He also anticipated the black militancy of Malcolm X. His finest hour, however, came when he blasted Chair Francis Walter for his authorship of bills to keep colored people out of America in favor of "Teutonic Anglo-Saxon stock." And in response to that old clichéd question posed by Representative Scherer: "Why do you not stay in Russia?" he replied: "Because . . . my people died to build this country and I am going to stay here and have a part of it just like you."²⁰

Paul Robeson was one of a handful of dissidents who spoke out against the grand inquisitors during "scoundrel time." Now that the Cold War is over, it is time to assess the confrontation or, more accurately, the set-up that pitted two African-African giants. Right after the first Peekskill Riot, reporter Bill Mardo approached Jackie Robinson on August 28, 1949. He gave the Dodger star a newspaper account of this sordid event. Robinson angrily asserted that "Paul Robeson should have the right to sing, speak or do anything he wants to. These mobs make it tough on everyone. It's Robeson's right to do or be or say as he believes. They say here in America you're allowed to be whatever you want. I think those rioters ought to be investigated." Perceptively, he observed that in this country "anything progressive is called Communism."²¹ Bill Mardo demonstrates that the two alleged combatants were actually on the same side. He dubs them "a double play for the ages."

Near the end of his life, Jackie Robinson admitted his error in an aptly named autobiography, *I Never Had It Made*. "However, in those days I had more faith in the ultimate justice of the American white man than I have today [1972]. I would reject such an invitation if offered now."²² Although Robinson insisted that he never regretted his statement per se, in a searing confession he wrote: "I have grown wiser and closer to painful truths about America's destructiveness. And I do have increased respect for Paul Robeson who, over the span of that twenty years, sacrificed his career, and the wealth and comfort he once enjoyed because, I believe, he was sincerely trying to help his people."²³

Unfortunately for the great singer, the divide and conquer strategy proved effective. Like a protagonist in a Greek tragedy, the heroic Paul Robeson was brought down, ostracized, and exiled in his own land, the America that he had exalted in the famous "Ballad for Americans."

While an older generation of radical white as well as black activists continues to honor the memory of Paul Robeson, young Americans are woefully ignorant of Robeson's contributions. Perhaps they need to hear the strains of "Ol' Man River" to induce what critic Edmund Wilson called "the shock of recognition." To return to Neruda's portrait of Robeson:

Sing,
my friend,
never stop singing.
You broke the silence of the rivers
When they were dumb
because of the blood they carried.
Your voice speaks through them.

Sing:
Your voice unites
Many men who never knew each other.
Because you sing
they know that the sea exists
and that the sea sings

They know that the sea is free,
wide and full of flowers
as your voice my brother

The sun is ours. The earth will be ours
Tower of the sea, you will go on singing.²⁴

Notes

1. *Paul Robeson: The Great Forerunner* by editors of *Freedomways* (New York: Dodd & Mead, 1985), 244. This poem appeared in *Freedomways* magazine in 1971, and appears not to be included in any other edition of Neruda's works in Spanish or English. Neruda apparently wrote it for a celebration of Robeson in the United States. It is reprinted at the beginning and end of this essay courtesy of *Freedomways* and Esther James. The biographical information that follows is largely culled from the same source, 319-322 which in turn was derived from Erwin A. Salk, *DuBois-Robeson: Two Giants of the 20th Century: The Story of an Exhibit and a Bibliography* (Chicago: Columbia College Press, 1977). A more comprehensive chronology is found in Philip Foner, ed., *Paul Robeson Speaks: Writings, Speeches, Interviews 1918-1974* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1978), 27-46.
2. Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 159.
3. As quoted by Ronald A. Smith, "The Paul Robeson-Jackie Robinson Saga and A Political Collision," in Jules Tygiel, ed., *The Jackie Robinson Reader* (New York: Penguin Dutton, 1997), 180. This excellent article first published in the *Journal of Sports History* 6, (Summer 1979) is the basis for my study, but I think it is too narrowly focused. Since its publication in 1979, additional information and, a dramatic shift in Cold War dialectics provide an altered interpretation.
4. *Ibid.*, 357.
5. In a presentation at Rutgers University at Newark, February 21, 1998, the son of Paul Robeson cited documents released under the Freedom of Information Act.
6. Duberman, 354.
7. Victor Navasky, *Naming Names* (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 187.
8. Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had It Made: An Autobiography*, as told to Alfred Duckett (New York: The Echo Press, 1995), 82-83; also see Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment . . .* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 334.
9. Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 212.
10. Duberman, 360.
11. *Autobiography*, 84.
12. Rampersad, 213.
13. Foner, 521, fn. 2.
14. *Ibid.*, 219-221.
15. Duberman, 361.
16. As quoted in Rampersad, 215.
17. Richard Sandomir, *The New York Times*, April 4, 1997; also from a tape recording of Robeson's paper.
18. Robeson, Jr. at a conference, "Climbing Jacob's Ladder" held at Rutgers University at Newark, February 21, 1998. Howard Fast made the same observation in a radio interview which included this writer on WGCH 1490 AM, Connecticut. This program hosted by Jim Thompson aired on February 22, 1998.
19. The testimony is largely culled from Eric Bentley, *Thirty Years of Treason: Excerpts from Hearings Before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, 1938-1968* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 768-786.
20. As quoted in David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1978), 166.
21. Robinson's remarks first appeared in the *Daily Worker*, August 29, 1949, as quoted by author Bill Mardo on page 104 in Joseph Dorinson and Joram Warmund, eds., *Jackie Robinson: Race, Sports and the American Dream* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1998).
22. Robinson, *I Never . . .*, 84.
23. *Ibid.*, 86.
24. *The Great Forerunner*, *op. cit.*, 249-250.