

*“A beacon to oppressed peoples
everywhere”:
Major Richard R. Wright Sr.,
National Freedom Day, and the
Rhetoric of Freedom in the 1940s*

TRADITIONS OF PUBLIC COMMEMORATION have long held an important place in African American history and culture, though scholars have only recently begun to explore the multiple functions they served, and the meanings they held, for black communities and activists since the nineteenth century. While African American commemorations have taken, and continue to take, numerous forms—monuments, the naming of institutions, birthday observances, reunions, anniversaries, and so on—public celebrations of emancipatory events have attracted the most scholarly attention, and, arguably, have played the most important role in shaping black commemorative traditions. Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, African American activists used public commemorations of freedom to serve a wide variety of social, political, economic, and cultural functions, as they challenged the dominant Eurocentric interpretations of American history and culture, constructed an empowering black collective memory and identity, and asserted fundamental citizenship rights of African Americans in the American public sphere.¹

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¹ Two monographs with different approaches to studying African American emancipation celebrations are Mitch Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom: Memory and Meaning in African American Emancipation Celebrations, 1808–1915* (Amherst, MA, 2003) and William H. Wiggins Jr.,

While emancipation celebrations played an important role for many black communities, white Americans never fully embraced the tradition, and African American attempts to create a national holiday commemorating the end of slavery consistently failed to generate white support. This situation changed dramatically in 1949, when President Harry S. Truman created a legal national holiday commemorating the abolition of slavery in the United States by designating February 1 of that year and each subsequent year as National Freedom Day. This essay explores the context in which the longstanding goal of an emancipation holiday was fulfilled and reflects on the ways in which public commemoration and historical memory interacted with domestic politics and international diplomacy in shaping American public political culture.

Since the early nineteenth century black Americans' public commemorations have consistently revolved around the universal progress of freedom, the principle around which African Americans have ordered their activism, their celebrations, and their interpretations of history. Many nineteenth-century black activists embraced an explicitly international perspective in this regard, demonstrating their knowledge of, and affinity with, freedom movements among other oppressed peoples around

O Freedom!: Afro-American Emancipation Celebrations (Knoxville, TN, 1987). Articles and books with individual chapters on the subject include Kathleen Clark, "Celebrating Freedom: Emancipation Day Celebrations and African American Memory in the Early Reconstruction South," in *Where These Memories Grow: History, Memory, and Southern Identity*, ed. W. Fitzhugh Brundage (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), 107–32; Genevieve Fabre, "African-American Commemorative Celebrations in the Nineteenth Century," in *History and Memory in African-American Culture*, ed. Fabre and Robert O'Meally (New York, 1994), 72–91; Eddie S. Glaude Jr., *Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America* (Chicago, 2000); William B. Gravely, "The Dialectic of Double-Consciousness in Black American Freedom Celebrations, 1808–1863," *Journal of Negro History* 67 (1982): 302–17; Ellen M. Litwicky, *America's Public Holidays, 1865–1920* (Washington, DC, 2000); John R. McKivigan and Jason H. Silverman, "Monarchical Liberty and Republican Slavery: West Indies Emancipation Celebrations in Upstate New York and Canada West," *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 10 (1986): 7–18; Patrick Rael, *Black Identity and Black Protest in the Antebellum North* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2002); David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997); Shane White, "'It Was a Proud Day': African Americans, Festivals, and Parades in the North, 1741–1834," *Journal of American History* 81 (1994): 13–50. Selected works dealing with other aspects of African American commemorative activities include David W. Blight, *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst, MA, 2002); Kirk Savage, *Standing Soldiers, Kneeling Slaves: Race, War, and Monument in Nineteenth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ, 1997); W. Fitzhugh Brundage, "Meta Warrick's 1907 'Negro Tableaux' and (Re)Presenting African American Historical Memory," *Journal of American History* 89 (2003): 1368–1400. See Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, chaps. 1 and 2, for a detailed analysis of the development of African American emancipation celebrations during the antebellum decades.

the world, regardless of race.² By the mid-twentieth century—especially in light of the ideological lines drawn during World War II and the early cold war—the dominant intellectual, political, and popular cultural currents of the United States had begun to merge more explicitly than ever before with African Americans' international perspective and commitment to the universal expansion of freedom. In his study of "keywords" in the contested terrain of American political discourse, historian Daniel T. Rodgers has pointed out that during the 1940s and 1950s, "the keyword of the moment was Freedom." Rodgers calls attention to the infusion of American speech with new and telling phrases like "the free world," "free enterprise," "freedom-loving nations," "free Europe," and "freedom of choice." American opposition to totalitarianism—fascist during the war, communist after—defined the world, as Franklin Roosevelt put it in 1941, as "divided between human slavery and human freedom."³

In this context, it is revealing to consider the words of Frederick Douglass in comparison with those of Franklin Roosevelt and Harry Truman a century later. Douglass, epitomizing the liberationist and transnational orientation of many nineteenth-century African American activists, claimed, at an 1847 West Indian emancipation celebration, "the right and propriety of commemorating the victories of liberty over tyranny throughout the world."⁴ In response to the European revolutions of 1848,

² Black Americans' attention to nineteenth-century global freedom movements is addressed in Mitch Kachun, "Our platform is as broad as humanity: Transatlantic Freedom Movements and the Idea of Progress in Nineteenth-Century African American Thought and Activism," *Slavery and Abolition* 24 (Dec. 2003): 1–23. African Americans' commitment to freedom and international perspective continued, of course, into the twentieth century, and historians have begun to incorporate this black globalism into our understanding of the complex interactions of race, diplomacy, and historical interpretation. See, for example, Robin D. G. Kelley, "But a Local Phase of a World Problem?: Black History's Global Vision," *Journal of American History* 86 (1999): 1045–77; Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1996), 151; Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 2; Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London, 1998); Michael L. Krenn, *Black Diplomacy: African Americans and the State Department, 1945–1969* (Armonk, NY, 1999); Lawrence S. Little, *Disciples of Liberty: The African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Age of Imperialism, 1884–1916* (Knoxville, TN, 2000).

³ Daniel T. Rodgers, *Contested Truths: Keywords in American Politics since Independence* (New York, 1987), 215–18, quotations from 216 and 218.

⁴ Speech at Canandaigua, New York, Aug. 1, 1847, in *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. John W. Blassingame, ser. 1, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT, 1982), 70–71.

Douglass effused: "We live in times which have no parallel in the history of the world. . . . The grand conflict of the angel Liberty with the monster Slavery, has at last come. The globe shakes with the contest." Douglass's juxtapositioning of slavery and freedom, as well as the global vision that allowed him to apply that language to contemporary freedom movements across the globe, has clear parallels in the language and imagery used by American leaders a century later during the early cold war. Harry Truman echoed both Douglass and Roosevelt in a special message to Congress in February 1948, in which he argued that "the peoples of the world are faced with the choice of freedom or enslavement."⁵

The 1940s, then, saw an interesting convergence. On the one hand there was what Rodgers has accurately characterized as "a Freedom talk deep in the black experience."⁶ On the other was a highly charged, globalized vision of America as "leader of the free world." Historian John Fousek has extended Rodgers's point regarding the rhetoric of freedom, emphasizing the importance of public language in shaping the parameters of ordinary citizens' thinking about public issues and arguing that "the idea of free-world leadership became the controlling metaphor in U.S. foreign policy discourse" during the postwar period. That metaphor became complicated by the ongoing realities of racial injustice. While the Truman administration presented the metaphor in terms of the stark dichotomy between American freedom and communist enslavement, many around the world, including many African Americans, envisioned the battle between liberty and tyranny as one of decolonization and civil rights activism versus white supremacist Western Imperialism.⁷

The confrontation between the rhetoric of freedom that was so pervasive in American public culture in the 1940s and the realities of racial oppression, both at home and abroad, presented U.S. policymakers with a complicated set of problems. Americans could not ignore the horror of Hitler's program first to segregate and eventually to eradicate European Jews, a program that had frightening parallels with America's own system of racial apartheid, though relatively few white Americans made such a connection at the time. The Atlantic Charter espoused by Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill in 1941 seemed to set a clear agenda

⁵ Douglass quoted from a speech at Rochester, New York, Aug. 1, 1848, in *Frederick Douglass Papers*, ed. Blassingame, ser. 1, vol. 2, 135; Truman quoted in Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 82.

⁶ Rodgers, *Contested Truths*, 221.

⁷ John Fousek, *To Lead the Free World: American Nationalism and the Cultural Roots of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000), ix, 130, 147.

for advancing all peoples' rights to free expression and political self-determination, especially in the rhetoric of American leaders who claimed to support its application not just in Europe but all over the world. Decolonization movements in Asia and Africa were prominent in global geopolitical debates. At home, the war and its aftermath helped to accelerate African Americans' ongoing struggle for full citizenship rights. As historian Brenda Gayle Plummer has put it, by the war's end, "a new era had begun, and black Americans were demanding their due." Moreover, black intellectuals and activists were also well informed about, and deeply committed to, the global implications of the intersections of race and freedom. The struggle to liberate colonized people of color around the world proceeded apace with African Americans' struggle for equality at home. These "twin efforts of the anticolonial and civil rights movements," historian Thomas Borstelmann has pointed out, "presented the U.S. government with a dilemma."⁸

It was in this political and intellectual context that one elderly former slave endeavored to forge from his freedom-based historical understanding a truly national ritual commemorating the end of American slavery. Richard Robert Wright Sr. was born on a cotton plantation near Dalton, Georgia, around 1853. After emancipation, as a student at an American Missionary Association school, Wright became nationally famous as the "black boy of Atlanta" memorialized in the John Greenleaf Whittier poem, "Howard at Atlanta." When visiting the school, the Freedmen's Bureau commissioner, General O. O. Howard, asked the gathered students for a message to deliver to the children of the North, the twelve-year-old Wright stood up and said "Tell 'em we're rising." Wright went on to become one of the first graduates of Atlanta University, receiving his BA as class valedictorian in 1876.

Wright set the pattern for his energetic life in Georgia, where he lived until 1921 as a prominent educator, journalist, and political figure. He served five times as a delegate at Republican national conventions, was appointed a United States army paymaster with the rank of major during the Spanish-American War, and declined for family and professional reasons a diplomatic post in Liberia in 1897. During World War I the governor of Georgia appointed Wright the official historian of the state's

⁸ Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: The United Nations and the African American Struggle for Human Rights, 1944-1955* (Cambridge, 2003), 17; Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 151; Borstelmann, *Cold War and the Color Line*, 2.

colored troops, an assignment which took him to England, Belgium, and France. In 1919 he was one of only a few African Americans issued passports and permitted by the U.S. government to travel to Paris during the Versailles conference. His professional life after 1891 rooted him in Savannah, Georgia, where he served for thirty years as president of the State College of Industry for Colored Youth (now Savannah State College).

Wright retired in 1921 and, by then nearing seventy, moved to Philadelphia, where several of his children resided. There he teamed with his son Richard R. Wright Jr. and daughter Lillian Wright Clayton to found the Citizens and Southern Bank and Trust Company, which remained a stable economic institution in the city even through the Depression. He later helped establish the National Negro Bankers Association and served as the organization's president. After reaching the age of eighty, Wright refused to slow his pace. In 1935 he began a trading company that imported Haitian coffee, until the outbreak of World War II curtailed that venture, and in 1945 he traveled to San Francisco as one of many African Americans who worked unofficially to incorporate their perspectives into the founding of the United Nations. The following year he received Philadelphia's "highest award for distinguished citizenship."⁹ His political, personal, and professional prominence was such that he was said to have known personally all the presidents from Hayes through Truman. Major Wright, still spry and active in his mid-nineties, was preparing to depart for Liberia, where he had been invited to attend the celebration of that nation's centennial, when he died on July 2, 1947. News of his death reportedly caused Philadelphia's Western Union offices to be inundated with thousands of messages of condolence, including telegrams from several governors, senators, congressmen, Eleanor Roosevelt, and President Truman. Wright was eulogized as "one of the treasured legends of the Negro race," and his funeral was attended by over twenty-five hundred people.¹⁰

⁹ "Major R. R. Wright, Illustrious Leader, Dies in Philadelphia," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 4, 1947, microfilm, reel 238, frame 642, *Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File*, ed. John W. Kitchens et al. (Tuskegee, AL; Sanford, NC, 1976) (hereafter *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*).

¹⁰ Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*, 40–55. Biographical information on Wright drawn from *Dictionary of American Negro Biography*, s.v. "Wright, Richard Robert Sr.," Elizabeth Ross Haynes, *The Black Boy of Atlanta* (Boston, 1952); Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 19; *The Negro Handbook* (1949): 354; Webb Waldron, "Black Banker," *Negro Digest* 3 (May 1945): 11–15; "Banker," *The New Yorker*, July 5, 1947, 16–17. Obituaries include: "Major R. R. Wright," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 6, 1947; "Major Wright Left Record of Achievement," *St. Louis Argus*, July 11, 1947; "Veteran Financier

During the second half of this long and productive life, Major Wright engaged in numerous projects relating to the definition and commemoration of African Americans' role in shaping United States history, beginning with his early advocacy of holding a semicentennial commemoration of the Emancipation Proclamation. According to one contemporary journalist, Wright proposed a freedom celebration whose "scope is worldwide and contemplates such an assembly and union of those of African descent in a world congress as will make the world sit up and take notice."¹¹ Any plan of such magnitude would be impossible to fulfill without significant white backing. As president of a southern black college during an era shaped by Washingtonian accommodationism and a general assault on black rights, Wright learned to negotiate a perilous racial terrain. While he had some early confrontations with the white power structure, he appears to have developed strategies for working within the system. One contemporary from his Savannah years recalled later that Wright at that time "probably stood better with whites than with Negroes." He developed a reputation among white leaders for "aligning himself consistently with the conservative and constructive elements of his race," a perception that surely worked to his advantage in securing endorsements for his commemorative project from Georgia's governor and senators, as well as "all the leading white newspapers." The *Augusta Chronicle* referred to him as "a practical, able, and sensible negro" whose semicentennial plan "would prove an inspiration to the negro to endeavor to further improve himself and his condition along practical and proper lines." Despite this white support, Wright's world congress never materialized.¹²

Laid to Rest in Philadelphia, Pa.," *Nashville Globe and Independent*, July 11, 1947; "Tell them we are rising," *Los Angeles Tribune*, July 12, 1947; "Noted Leader Passes in Philadelphia," *St. Louis Argus*, July 11, 1947; "Major Wright Left \$36,000 Pa. Estate," *Baltimore Afro-American*, n.d.; "Maj. R. R. Wright, 92, Dies on Eve of Trip," *Baltimore Afro-American*, July 11, 1947; "Major R. R. Wright, Banker, Dies at 92," *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 12, 1947, all found on reel 238, frame 642, 643, 645, 647, 648, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

¹¹ Haynes, *Black Boy of Atlanta; The Fisherman's Net* (n.p.), Oct. 8, 1909, microfiche 117:187, *Hampton Institute Newspaper Clipping File* (Alexandria, VA, 1987) (hereafter *Hampton Institute Clipping File*); "Major Wright Postal Stamp Effort Ends," *St. Louis Argus*, Oct. 25, 1940, reel 240, frame 1004, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

¹² "Major R. R. Wright, Banker, Dies at 92," *Pittsburgh Courier*, *The Fisherman's Net*, "A National Negro Exposition," *Augusta Chronicle*, Sept. 2, 1909, mfiche 117:97, *Hampton Institute Clipping File*; "A Negro Leader," *Birmingham News*, July 14, 1947, reel 238, frame 644, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*; Booker T. Washington to Jesse Edward Moorland, Dec. 22, 1909, and Kelly Miller to Booker T. Washington, Dec. 27, 1909, in *The Booker T. Washington Papers*, ed. Louis R. Harlan et al., vol. 10 (Urbana, IL, 1981), 250–51, 255–56; "The Emancipation Celebration," *New York Age*, July 24, 1913. Considerable differences of opinion emerged among national black leaders,

Wright's tactical accommodation to Jim Crow seems to have worn thin by the early 1920s. His 1921 retirement from the college presidency was at least in part a result of his frustrated struggle against white opposition to the development of an academic, rather than an exclusively industrial, curriculum. Wright claimed that his decision to move from the South and start a bank was his form of protest against the racial discrimination experienced by his daughter in a Georgia bank, but the reasons were likely more complex.¹³ After his move north, Wright's commemorative zeal waned temporarily while he established himself and his bank in Philadelphia during the 1920s. Although the major was among the first to contribute financially to the city's 1926 United States Sesquicentennial Celebration, and the event included a range of events and exhibits relating to African Americans, Wright's name did not appear among the many local black leaders involved with the Negro Activities Committee. But in 1933, at about eighty years of age, Wright's direct involvement with historical memory and commemoration rejuvenated. In that year he was appointed to a Pennsylvania commission overseeing the creation of the *All Wars Memorial to Colored Soldiers and Sailors*, a monument erected in Philadelphia's Fairmount Park in memory of African Americans who had died in the service of their country. In 1933 Wright also returned, after a two-decade hiatus, to promoting the commemoration of emancipation.¹⁴

Wright reinvigorated emancipation celebrations in his adopted city of Philadelphia, organizing a "70th Anniversary Celebration of Negro Progress" in 1933 that consisted of a five-day celebration featuring parades, speeches, and displays of black progress and development. Encouraged by the positive reception of the event among both white and black people in the city and state, the major successfully organized observances during subsequent years. The 1935 event attracted seven thousand

including W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington, regarding plans for a semicentennial commemoration, and in the end a number of cities held celebrations between 1913 and 1915, some of which were quite large, but none of which attained truly national status. See Kachun, *Festivals of Freedom*, chap. 7.

¹³ Haynes, *Black Boy of Atlanta*; "Banker," *The New Yorker*, 17.

¹⁴ Richard R. Wright Jr., *87 Years behind the Black Curtain* (Philadelphia, 1965), 208; Haynes, *Black Boy of Atlanta*; various newspaper articles on the Sesquicentennial, reel 240, frames 908, 910, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*; Ilene D. Lieberman, "Race and Remembrance: Philadelphia's *All Wars Memorial to Colored Soldiers and Sailors* and the Politics of Place," *American Art Journal* 29, nos. 1-2 (1998): 18-51. The soldiers and sailors monument was later moved to Logan Square, where it can be seen today.

attendees, including city officials, national black leaders, and representatives from Haiti and Ethiopia.¹⁵ The 1939 celebration was similarly large and also was used to announce the 1940 issuance of a new ten-cent commemorative postage stamp honoring Booker T. Washington, the first to so honor an African American.¹⁶ Wright was widely credited as the driving force behind the Washington stamp, but he made it clear that his initial intent was to recognize "some great historical event" connected with the race, rather than an individual.¹⁷ This broader project came to fruition soon after, when a stamp commemorating the Thirteenth Amendment was issued on October 20, 1940, in an imposing ceremony at the New York World's Fair. In his speech, Wright said he wanted to honor "some central act" that could be considered a part of "the Bill of Rights, or the Magna Charta of the American Negro." He "decided that the 13th Amendment was the key to the door of our freedom, the cornerstone of our liberty, and was, therefore worthy of a National United States Postage Stamp."¹⁸

Some Republican critics questioned the timing of its issuance—just as Franklin Roosevelt was in the final stages of his campaign for an unprecedented third term—charging that the stamp was "a further flagrant abuse

¹⁵ Haynes, *Black Boy of Atlanta*, 199; "72nd Anniversary Emancipation Celebration," advertisement, *Richmond Planet*, Aug. 31, 1935, and "7,000 Join 72nd Anniversary of Emancipation," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 5, 1935, both reel 240, frame 961, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

¹⁶ Haynes, *Black Boy of Atlanta*; *Negro Handbook* (1949), 354; Jessie Parkhurst Guzman, ed., *Negro Year Book: A Review of Events Affecting Negro Life, 1941–1946*, 10th ed. (Tuskegee, AL, 1947), 31; unidentified clipping, mfiche 273:1, *Hampton Institute Clipping File*; "7,000 Attend Joint Jubilee Celebration," *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, Oct. 7, 1939, reel 240, frame 991, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

¹⁷ "Mayor [sic] Wright Wins Seven Years Fight," *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 12, 1940, reel 240, frame 1009, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

¹⁸ "U.S. Issues 13th Amendment Stamp," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Oct. 26, 1940; "Major Wright Gives History of New Stamp," *Chicago Defender*, Oct. 26, 1940; "Major Wright Postal Stamp Effort Ends," *St. Louis Argus*, Oct. 25, 1940; "New Postage Stamp Sale Draws Crowd," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Oct. 24, 1940, all on reel 240, frames 1000, 1003, 1004, 1007, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*. Numerous articles relating to the Thirteenth Amendment stamp are collected in the *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*, reel 240, frames 994, 998–1010. The existence of the National Memorial to the Progress of the Colored Race (NMPCR), which was established under a charter granted by the District of Columbia, suggests a broader attention to African American commemoration than has been generally recognized. The organization was involved with other projects concerned with commemorating African Americans' historic role, including an elaborate memorial complex proposed for a site near the first landing place of American slaves in Jamestown, Virginia. In addition to his other activities, Major Wright chaired the NMPCR advisory board. See "Issues Stamp at Fair Oct. 20," *New York Amsterdam News*, Oct. 19, 1940, and "Post Office Will Issue Commemorative Stamp on the Thirteenth Amendment," *Washington Tribune*, Oct. 5, 1940, reel 240, frames 998 and 1002, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.



Major R. R. Wright, receiving the first stamp of the 13th Amendment series from Philadelphia, (Pa.), Postmaster J. F. Gallagher, (in window).

National Freedom Day Album (1943). Edward Martin Papers, MG-156, Pennsylvania State Archives.

of the special stamp racket for which the New Deal Administration has been notorious" and was issued primarily "to flatter colored voters."¹⁹ Roosevelt's courting of traditionally Republican black voters has been well documented. He attempted to expand his growing base of black support in a letter that was read on his behalf to the "audience of 5,000 persons, mostly colored," who braved the cold weather to attend the World's Fair ceremony. In keeping with the campaigning spirit of what one observer described as "a very good political meeting," the president told his black listeners that he took "great satisfaction" in authorizing the stamp in recognition of "the advancement of your race" since slavery's demise. The amendment, he said, was "a symbol of all that has been achieved by Negroes in the past three-quarters of a century—achieve-

¹⁹ "Says Special Stamp Distorts History; Has Political Move [sic]," *Washington Tribune*, Oct. 26, 1940, and "Charges Post Office Department Is Playing Politics and Distorts History in Special Stamp Issue," *New York Age*, Oct. 26, 1940, reel 240, frames 998 and 1010, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

ments that have enriched and enlarged and ennobled our American life." But Roosevelt also spoke to broader issues, closing his letter by using the language of slavery and freedom to situate the importance of the stamp within the current global geopolitical crisis. "It is an irony of our day," he pointed out,

that three-quarters of a century after the adoption of the amendment forever outlawing slavery under the American flag, liberty should be under violent attack. And yet over large areas of the earth the liberties which to us mean happiness and the right to live peaceful and contented lives are challenged by brute force—a force which would return the human family to that state of slavery from which emancipation came through the thirteenth amendment. As we celebrate the blessings of liberty, which our Negro citizens share under the beneficent provision, let us all, as Americans, unite in a solemn determination to defend and maintain and transmit to those who shall follow us the rich heritage of freedom which is ours today.²⁰

Roosevelt's political savvy in fusing the commemoration of African American freedom with both his election campaign and his vision of the nation's role in world affairs may well have had an impact on the thinking of Richard Robert Wright. Wright was known for his "quick intelligence," and had a reputation as "a doer . . . [and as] a canny and acquisitive person who knew how to adjust himself to his environment." As his commemorative stamp projects came to fruition in 1940, Wright was already an acknowledged "leader in the movement to establish a national Emancipation Day holiday." The government's endorsement of the significance of the Thirteenth Amendment, and the stark imagery in Roosevelt's language, seem to have confirmed Wright's commitment to a national commemoration of that event.²¹

When Wright, by this time approaching ninety, began to advocate the annual commemoration of what he designated "National Freedom Day," he seems to have very consciously appropriated the emerging national

²⁰ "U.S. Issues 13th Amendment Stamp," *Baltimore Afro-American*; "President Praises Negroes at Fair," *New York Times*, Oct. 21, 1940, reel 240, frame 1004, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*. On the Democratic Party's relationship with black voters during this period, see Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941* (Philadelphia, 1991); Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue: The Depression Decade* (1978; New York, 1981); and Nancy J. Weiss, *Farewell to the Party of Lincoln: Black Politics in the Age of FDR* (Princeton, NJ, 1983).

²¹ "A Negro Leader," *Birmingham News*; "President Praises Negroes at Fair," *New York Times*.

rhetoric of freedom of the early 1940s in support of this plan. Wright began an aggressive campaign for the designation of February 1 as the National Freedom Day holiday, commemorating the date in 1865 when Abraham Lincoln signed the joint congressional resolution creating the Thirteenth Amendment. He geared up for the first major celebration of the proposed holiday, to be held in Philadelphia on February 1, 1942. As president of the recently formed National Freedom Day Association, Wright defined the purpose of the project in language that resonated with Roosevelt's Four Freedoms defining America's ostensible goals for global peace: freedom of speech and worship and freedom from want and fear. The "adoption of National Freedom Day," Wright claimed, was consistent with the principle articulated by President Roosevelt. "This principle," he said, "implies that all men are not only equally entitled to all the freedoms, but some men in seeking to possess and enjoy these freedoms, must realize that they cannot have them without sharing them with others. In practice, they must prove that our declaration of freedom includes all men."²²

Wright approached various members of Congress in seeking sponsors for a National Freedom Day bill, which was introduced as a joint resolution of the House and Senate on January 19, 1942, by Congressman James P. McGranery and Senator Joseph F. Guffey, both Democrats from Wright's adopted state of Pennsylvania. The Senate bill was cosponsored by Democrats James Hughes of Delaware and, significantly, Harry S. Truman of Missouri, who, as president six years later, would sign a revised version of the bill establishing the holiday. Thirty-one governors supported the bill, and Congress received memorials from the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and the Philadelphia City Council. The council also appropriated five thousand dollars toward the Philadelphia celebration.²³

Wright took to the road, both before and after the 1942 celebration, to generate support for the plan, traveling some thirteen thousand miles from Georgia to Texas and California, and making a point of lobbying in black communities and in segregated African American army camps. The editor of the *Atlanta Daily World*, an important black newspaper, emphasized in a July 1942 editorial that while "there has been widespread uncertainty among Negroes as to the proper day to be set apart for

²² Haynes, *Black Boy of Atlanta*, 209–10.

²³ Excerpts from the *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 2nd sess., 1942, in official file 93-D, The Harry S. Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library, Independence, MO; "Throng Attends Meeting," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 7, 1942, reel 240, frame 1021, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

commemoration of their emancipation," he found "no sound argument why this new day should not be universally approved." Like Wright, he linked the proposed holiday with "freedom from want, freedom from fear of the future, and freedom from economic oppression," and urged black Atlantans to "come out and hear what [Major Wright] has to say." Apparently those who did liked what they heard, and "Negro Atlantans went on record as adopting officially February 1st as National Freedom Day." Another black editor, E. Washington Rhodes of the *Philadelphia Tribune*, advocated biracial working-class support of the "great movement" for the holiday, arguing that "free labor cannot compete with slave labor. Labor, white and colored, should join hands in making National Freedom Day the most significant in American history." Wright also received support from unions, fraternal orders, the National Negro Insurance Association, Atlanta University, Tuskegee Institute, and "the great denominational leaders of the Negro population of the United States." The latter included representatives of mainstream churches like the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.), of which his son Richard R. Wright Jr. was bishop; A.M.E. Zion; Colored Methodist; and the National Baptist Convention; as well as more colorful popular figures like Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux and Father Divine, the charismatic founder of the Peace Mission movement. After Wright addressed the A.M.E. Bishop's Council, the bishops explicitly identified National Freedom Day as "one of the most potent factors in national defense" because "it will serve to unite all people . . . against the onslaught of totalitarianism."²⁴

²⁴ Excerpts from the *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 2nd sess., 1942, in official file 93-D, Truman Papers; "Negroes to Gather for Emancipation Celebration," *New York Daily Worker*, Jan. 25, 1942; "National Freedom Day," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 5, 1942; "Major Wright's Great Mission," *Atlanta Daily World*, July 12, 1942, all on reel 240, frames 1020, 1022, 1024, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*; E. Washington Rhodes, "National Freedom Day Reminder of Freedom to All Americans," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Feb. 7, 1942, reprinted in *National Freedom Day Album* (n.p., 1943), Official Papers, General Correspondence, 1943-1946, box 40, file Wri-Wy, Edward Martin Papers, MG-156, Pennsylvania State Archives; "Ten Governors Sending Delegates To National Holiday Conference Here," *Columbia (SC) Palmetto Leader*, Jan. 17, 1942, reel 240, frame 1024, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*; undated broadside, box 2, folder 10, American Negro Historical Society Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania; "Extension of Remarks of Hon. James P. McGranery," Oct. 2, 1942, excerpt from *Congressional Record*, Edward Martin Papers. Father Divine's involvement may not have developed until after his move from Harlem to Philadelphia in 1946. See Jean Barth Toll and Mildred S. Gillam, eds., "'The Peace Mission Movement in Philadelphia' from 'Invisible Philadelphia, Community through Voluntary Organizations,'" <http://www.libertynet.org/fdipmm/quotes/invphitx.html>, accessed July 14, 2003; Jill Watts, *God, Harlem U.S.A.: The Father Divine Story* (Berkeley, CA, 1995).

Wright's own argument for adopting the new holiday consistently invoked black patriotism, national unity across race lines, and the exigencies of the larger international context. It was "important to celebrate the 13th Amendment just at this particular time," Wright argued, because "all the people must be knit together by such celebrations in the interest of national defense. . . . We feel that the introduction of our resolution at this time will help to insure a closer bond between all Americans, Negro and White." Barely a month after Pearl Harbor, Wright stressed that African Americans were "behind the President fully with our guns and our prayers against the common enemy. The freedom, the rise of the Negro people to citizenship should be properly commemorated to show that the Bill of Rights is a living thing." In particular, the "celebration should raise the morale of both Negro and white troops in our fight against Hitlerism and Japan."²⁵ The Freedom Day bill's congressional sponsors similarly connected National Freedom Day's importance with the global war the nation had recently entered. Congressman James McGranery asserted at the 1942 celebration that, "Now, more than ever, do we realize the value of [American Negroes'] contribution to our national life as the eyes of a troubled, a wearied, a half-enslaved world look to our shores at one of the last surviving democracies." At the same observance, Senator Joseph Guffey linked National Freedom Day with the Four Freedoms and asserted that the day should remind Americans not only "that much freedom has been won" but also that "much more freedom remains to be won The fight never ends." Republican Senator James J. Davis had his own National Freedom Day address read into the *Congressional Record*. Davis challenged Americans to meet the Axis dictators "blow for blow" in order to prevent "the enslavement of future generations by the masters of hate." "We shall prove to Hitler," he pledged, "that no slave driver can ever win a final victory over free men."²⁶

The 1943 event carried a similarly patriotic tone, but something of the era's famous "double-V" campaign worked its way into orators' addresses. The popular slogan, first coined in the *Pittsburgh Courier* newspaper, suggested that a victory against fascism and militarism abroad must be accompanied by justice and equality for African Americans in the United States. The gathering passed a resolution calling on the president to elim-

²⁵ "Negroes to Gather for Emancipation Celebration," *New York Daily Worker*.

²⁶ Speeches by James McGranery and Joseph Guffey reprinted in *National Freedom Day Album* (1943), and "Extension of Remarks of Hon. James J. Davis," Edward Martin Papers.



Representatives from twenty-eight states attending the National Freedom Day Celebration in session in Independence Hall, Philadelphia, February 1, 1942. (The children in the foreground, Careve Sims, left: Gay Mosby and Richard Wright read respectively the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution).

National Freedom Day Album (1943). Edward Martin Papers, MG-156, Pennsylvania State Archives.

inate poll taxes and to "use his influence against discrimination and for a major voice to be given the Negro people at the peace table." "President Roosevelt has got to speak out for our freedom today . . . during this war," one speaker insisted, "as Lincoln did during the Civil War." The call for a black role in determining the postwar settlement may have been a nod to delegates from Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Liberia, whose presence among the twenty-five hundred attendees attested to Wright's continued global vision.²⁷

The major's more local efforts were affected in early 1943 by the inauguration of a new Pennsylvania governor, Republican Edward Martin, a sixty-seven-year-old veteran of four wars and an outspoken anticommunist who would win election to the U.S. Senate in 1946. Just weeks after Martin took office, Wright initiated communications with Martin about National Freedom Day, appealing to Martin's ego and ambition. Wright related how he "became friends" with William McKinley at a national convention before that Republican governor became president and speculated that perhaps Martin might enjoy a similar advance in his career.

²⁷ "Freedom Day' Spurs War Effort," *New York Daily Worker*, Feb. 3, 1943, reel 240, frame 1034, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

The new governor responded favorably both to Wright and to National Freedom Day. A January 1944 press release from the governor's office stated that "this significant date in American history is worthy of commemoration as marking a new era in human progress toward freedom and enlightenment" and called for "proper ceremonies in the public schools, by patriotic organizations and in public meetings throughout the State." By February 1945, as Wright pledged his support for Martin's projected senatorial run, the governor confided to Wright that it was "most heartening to have the reassurance of staunch and stable old friends like you."²⁸ In 1945 Martin provided his old friend with letters of commendation, written at Wright's request, that helped the major acquire the necessary credentials to attend meetings at the San Francisco United Nations conference. In exchange, Wright spent part of his time "bragging to practically every Governor of the United States about what our Governor has done" in support of National Freedom Day, in addition to touting Philadelphia as a possible site for the "headquarters of the Peace Capital of the United Nations."²⁹

Wright used his political skills to play both sides of the political fence, since Martin's Democratic adversaries were well represented among the Freedom Day bill's sponsors and supporters. The 1946 Freedom Day celebration itself reflected some of the tension these conflicting alliances produced. Much of the inclusive feeling of previous celebrations remained, as more than ten thousand attended and "hundreds of Negroes and white people," including Major Wright and a Lincoln impersonator, gathered around the Liberty Bell to watch Wright place a "wreath at the shrine . . . in commemoration of the soldiers and sailors of both races who died for the preservation of freedom in all wars through the World War II." Bishop R. R. Wright Jr. expressed high hopes for the postwar era, telling the crowd "that the Negro was on the threshold of a new freedom . . . as a full-fledged citizen of the United States." But the younger Wright, nearing seventy and having lived his entire life under Jim Crow,

²⁸ Richard R. Wright to Edward Martin, Mar. 18, 1943; Martin to Wright, Mar. 24, 1943; Wright to Martin, Mar. 25, 1943; Martin to Wright, Feb. 16, 1945; press release from Edward Martin, Jan. 7, 1944, all in Edward Martin Papers. Biographical information on Edward Martin is from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission Web site, <http://www.phmc.state.pa.us/bah/dam/governors/martin.asp?secid=31>, accessed July 14, 2003.

²⁹ Richard R. Wright to Edward Martin, Mar. 28, 1945; Wright to Martin, May 2, 1945; Martin to Wright, May 3, 1945; Wright to Martin, May 8, 1945 (telegram); Wright to Martin, July 29, 1946; Martin to Wright, July 31, 1946, all in Edward Martin Papers.

cautioned that the realization of that freedom required dramatic changes in American society.³⁰

Religious leader Father Divine and Democratic senator Francis Myers, speaking separately, politicized the Freedom Day observance with more specificity as they voiced support for the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). The agency had been set up during Roosevelt's administration to prevent racial discrimination in the workplace, and its extension was currently under discussion in Congress, where many legislators were advocating its termination in the decidedly antilabor postwar climate. Divine "castigated the obstruction of the FEPC bill in Congress," and Myers championed a renewed FEPC law as "necessary for the exercise of the Bill of Rights." Both received loud applause and cheers. But their positions were challenged by Pennsylvania's Republican governor, who made it clear that in his view the threatened agency was engaged in inappropriate government coddling of black workers. "By their own effort and hard work they must lift themselves up and earn greatness," Martin maintained. "When a government gives more than the right and guarantee to liberty, opportunity and pursuit of happiness, it must make its people dependent. When they lose their independence, and become dependent, they lose, at the same time, a measure of their freedom."³¹ As Pennsylvania's political leaders used the observance to hold forth among potential black voters on issues like the FEPC bill, they also grappled with the meanings—and the limits—of freedom in postwar America, suggesting the slippery nature of the concept, as well as its centrality in national public culture. The articulation of such diverse views at the event indicates the role National Freedom Day had come to play, both as a focus around which political maneuverings could take place and as a symbolic resource embodying the competing meanings of freedom.

In this context it is not surprising that Wright's annual celebrations in Philadelphia gained national attention, or that, during the war for freedom, support for National Freedom Day expanded in political circles, even though the holiday bill, which had been introduced each year, never progressed far. By 1946 governors of twenty-nine states were reported to

³⁰ "Freedom' Rally Attracts 10,000," *Baltimore Afro-American*, Feb. 9, 1946, and "Freedom Day Observed By Both Races," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 9, 1946, reel 240, frame 1053, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

³¹ "Freedom' Rally Attracts 10,000," *Baltimore Afro-American*; "Freedom Day Observed By Both Races," *Pittsburgh Courier*; Joe William Trotter Jr., *The African American Experience* (Boston, 2001), 507–9, 520.

have approved the establishment of the national holiday, and President Roosevelt consistently had offered his praise and support for Wright's devotion to freedom, even as he withheld an official declaration of a national holiday. At least as early as the second Philadelphia celebration in 1943, Roosevelt had written to Wright emphasizing not only the appropriateness of recognizing the "steady progress of our Negro citizens" since emancipation but, more importantly, the example of "what can be accomplished by a free people in a free country." Specifically linking National Freedom Day with America's global struggle against totalitarianism, and again emphasizing an explicit dichotomy between slavery and freedom, the president identified one of the core messages that Wright himself wanted to promulgate through National Freedom Day: the centrality of the black experience to understanding the role of freedom in both the nation's history and current world affairs. "Freedom," Roosevelt asserted,

is a word which, in these days of war and struggle, means more to all Americans than it ever has before. It is freedom that we are defending on seas and continents all over the world; it is freedom that we are striving to win for the prostrate nations who are already in bondage to the slavemasters of the Axis. . . . It is a tribute to our maturing democracy that here in America all races, all creeds, are fighting side by side in the righteous crusade to make freedom possible everywhere.³²

The president, of course, overlooked the fact that black and white Americans in the segregated armed forces were not, in most situations, actually fighting "side by side." Nonetheless, Roosevelt continued to express such supportive sentiments over the next two years. In early 1945, as both the war in Europe and the president's life drew to a close, Roosevelt's secretary wrote to the National Freedom Day Association that "your celebration of National Freedom Day this year transcends its usual significance; it is a beacon to oppressed peoples everywhere." Again, he held forth black American progress to the world as an example of "the possible achievements of free people in free countries everywhere."³³

In 1947 Pennsylvania's Republican congressman Robert McGarvey

³² Franklin D. Roosevelt to Richard R. Wright, Jan. 9, 1943, reprinted in *National Freedom Day Album* (1943), Edward Martin Papers.

³³ Excerpts from the *Congressional Record*, 79th Cong., Jan. 24, 1946, official file 93-D, Truman Papers.

and Democratic senator Francis Myers, acting in response to personal requests by Major Wright, once more introduced National Freedom Day bills into both houses of Congress. The House bill died in committee, but Myers's Senate version was recommended for passage on July 25, 1947. The growing division over black rights within the Democratic Party was hinted at, however, when Democratic Louisiana senator John Holmes Overton blocked the bill's passage on the floor, asserting that "we have enough national holidays in the United States" and that, given July Fourth's celebration of freedom, "I do not know that we need another holiday to be proclaimed as 'freedom day.'" Wright's own position, of course, was that independence and emancipation were two sides of the same coin and that "if we celebrate one we must celebrate the other." Myers appealed to Overton to remove his objection, but the southerner refused to be persuaded, and the National Freedom Day bill was defeated just a few weeks after Major Wright's death in the summer of 1947. One newspaper account reported that the major's "last distinguishable words" as he lay on his deathbed were "National Freedom Day."³⁴

The following year, with the major's son Emanuel C. Wright taking over as president of the National Freedom Day Association, the National Freedom Day bill was reintroduced. This time it swept through both the House and Senate with no documented opposition and reached the desk of President Harry S. Truman, where it was signed on June 30, 1948. Both House and Senate Judiciary Committees had recommended passage and emphasized that the joint resolution would, as the House committee put it, "go far toward the spreading of good will and cooperation among the white and colored citizens of the United States." Although the president's proclamation designated not only February 1, 1949, but also "each succeeding February 1" as a national holiday, internal memos among Truman's staff indicate that the decision to cover "this and all future years" was made "in the interest of conserving the president's time," rather than from a sincere desire to create a lasting national commemoration. Moreover, the bill signed by Truman had been subtly altered from the version submitted by Myers and McGarvey in 1947. The Senate Judiciary

³⁴ Hanes Walton Jr. et al., "R. R. Wright, Congress, President Truman, and the First National African-American Holiday: National Freedom Day," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 24 (1991): 685–88; excerpts from the *Congressional Record*, 80th Cong., Feb. 19, 1947, official file 93-D, Truman Papers; "Negroes to Gather for Emancipation Celebration," *New York Daily Worker*, "National Freedom Day Association," *Birmingham Weekly Reviewer*, July 31, 1948, reel 240, frame 1060, *Tuskegee Institute Clippings File*.

Committee restricted the substance of the resolution by removing language “inviting the people of the United States to observe the day with appropriate ceremonies and thanksgiving.” Rather, Truman’s proclamation before the first sanctioned celebration in 1949 only called upon the people “to pause on that day in solemn contemplation of the glorious blessings of freedom.”³⁵ While asking Americans to “pause” fell short of advocating widespread celebration, and despite the mundane rationale for making the holiday a perpetual one, the proclamation did establish each February 1 as National Freedom Day, an anniversary which Truman, like his predecessor, consistently linked with the nation’s global battle for freedom.

Well before passage of the bill in 1948 and issuance of the proclamation in January 1949, Truman had privately recognized African Americans’ particular interest in the meaning of freedom. In January 1946, Truman had responded to a letter from Wright by acknowledging that “no one knows the meaning of freedom any better than those who have been denied it; that only they have a full appreciation of the unending struggle by which alone freedom is maintained and extended.” He went on to place Wright’s National Freedom Day crusade within a global context, including the “recently liberated peoples of Europe and Asia [who] can testify to the horrors of bondage in its modern form. . . . Having so recently freed ourselves from the involuntary servitude the Nazi and Fascist aggressors sought to impose on the world, it is well that we should pause to pay tribute to the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment” since “the freedom which it guarantees was among the freedoms the aggressors in this war sought to destroy.” In 1947 Truman also associated an important component of his domestic policy with Wright’s crusade. “The cause of freedom,” he wrote, “is one we must all work for today and every day. . . . To help you and me in the fight against intolerance, I have recently created the President’s Committee on Civil Rights. . . . I know you can count on this Committee to work, as you are working, in the cause of freedom everywhere.”³⁶

Voices from outside the United States also called Truman’s attention

³⁵ Walton et al., “R. R. Wright,” 686; and “National Freedom Day,” summary of House and Senate committee reports; memoranda between E. B. Staats and William J. Hopkins, Jan. 10, 1949; National Freedom Day Proclamation, Jan. 25, 1949, all in official file 93-D, Truman Papers.

³⁶ Memorandum summarizing communications between Richard R. Wright and Harry S. Truman, Jan. 16, 1946, official file 93-D, Truman Papers; letter to National Freedom Day celebration in Philadelphia, Jan. 31, 1947, reprinted in Haynes, *Black Boy of Atlanta*, 211–12.

to black liberation movements during this era. In addition to the cause of African decolonization, which began to gain momentum in the wake of the Atlantic Charter and the generally freedom-infused climate of the postwar years, a commemoration of the abolition of slavery in the Virgin Islands received the president's support. Longtime African American public servant William H. Hastie had been the U.S. federal judge on the islands from 1937 to 1939 and became the first black governor of any U.S. territory when Truman appointed him to that position in 1946. On June 29, 1948, just one day before signing the National Freedom Day bill, Truman responded to a letter from Hastie regarding the "special ceremonies" to be held on July 3 commemorating the one hundredth anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Virgin Islands. Truman wrote "that as part of the U.S., the Virgin Islands share in [the] fight for freedom and basic civil rights of all men. As we strive to build world peace, the record of [the] Virgin Islands in fighting racial discrimination stands as [a] challenge and [an] inspiration."³⁷

Closer to home, during the same week in June 1948, Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux, who had collaborated with Wright both on the commemorative stamp projects and on National Freedom Day, added his voice to those pushing Truman toward recognizing freedom for black Americans. In a phone call to a member of the president's staff, Michaux called attention to the potential public relations benefits of a public signing ceremony for the National Freedom Day bill: "Elder Michaux thinks it would be awfully good publicity (from the President's point of view) to let him bring in the two sons of the late Major Wright of Philadelphia, and have them photographed when the President signs the Bill. He says all the Negro papers would carry, etc. etc." A photographed public signing did indeed take place, with Truman surrounded by several African American notables, including a son and daughter of Major Wright, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune, *St. Louis Argus* editor John E. Mitchell, and Elder Michaux.³⁸

³⁷ Memorandum summarizing communications between William H. Hastie and Harry S. Truman, June 28, 1948, official file 93-D, Truman Papers; Guzman, ed., *Negro Year Book . . . 1941-1946*, 31.

³⁸ Lillian Ashcraft Webb, *About My Father's Business: The Life of Elder Michaux* (Westport, CT, 1981); "Memorandum for MJC," June 23, 1948, official file 93-D, Truman Papers. Michaux was not the only charismatic black religious leader to participate in National Freedom Day activities. Even before the national holiday became official, Father Divine and "his international Rosebud choir" joined in the Philadelphia commemoration on February 2, 1946. See Toll and Gillam, eds., "Peace Mission Movement in Philadelphia."



President Harry Truman proclaims February 1, the anniversary of the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution, as "National Freedom Day." Looking on are (left to right): Mrs. Harriet Lemons, J. E. Mitchell, Mary McCleod Bethune, E. C. Wright, Dr. C. Jernagin, and Elder Michaux. July 1, 1948, Washington, DC. © Bettmann/CORBIS.

This June 1948 "photo op" raises questions about the motivations of the Truman administration in sweeping the Freedom Day bill into law. The year 1948, of course, was a presidential election year, and Truman's base of support had been weakened on the left by Henry Wallace's candidacy and on the right by the Dixiecrat revolt. Without question, Truman was courting, successfully as it turns out, the expanding numbers of black voters in urban areas outside the South. But his signing of the Freedom Day bill seems more than a mere election-year stunt. Truman's stance on civil rights was the main reason that southern Democrats bolted in the first place. Since taking office in 1945, he had used executive orders to maintain the Fair Employment Practices Commission; he established the Committee on Civil Rights; he became the first president to address the NAACP, and the first to speak in Harlem; and he ordered the desegregation

of the U.S. armed forces shortly after signing the Freedom Day bill in 1948. In terms of National Freedom Day itself, he had been a cosponsor of the first such bill in 1942, when no political gain appears to have been involved.³⁹

After his election in 1948, some political pundits held out the hope that Truman would make “significant strides” on civil rights by making “long overdue” federal appointments of African Americans to government posts in all the executive departments. Such appointments would “represent [a] significant advance for Negro Americans” and allow all Americans to feel more confident in the nation’s commitment to human rights. Others, however, were more skeptical of Truman’s own commitment. A former Truman speechwriter contended that once Truman received the African American votes he needed, the president’s interest in black rights would fade quickly. His inaction on civil rights, Washington journalist Jay Franklin predicted, would stem “not only from political calculation but from his personal attitude.” As a “shrewd politician,” Truman “must regard the Negro, primarily, as a colored man or woman with a vote in certain key states without which no President could hope to win or hold political power.” Southern blacks, for that reason, “did not exist for President Truman *politically*.” Nonetheless, Franklin observed that “in the international field, with Communism conducting anti-American propaganda among the colored races of the world, an intelligent national policy demands that the Administration shall give proof that Jim Crow stops with the three-mile limit.”⁴⁰

National Freedom Day came into being at the intersection of several forces working within the Truman administration: the growing commitment to a civil rights agenda, the desire to attract black votes in a close election, and the concern with enhancing America’s global image in the cold war propaganda battle. As Mary Dudziak has argued, after 1946 “the federal government engaged in a sustained effort to tell a particular story about race and American democracy: a story of progress, a story of the triumph of good over evil, a story of U.S. moral superiority.” Unlike some of Truman’s other actions, the establishment of National Freedom Day had no tangible impact on black Americans’ status or experiences. It

³⁹ On Truman’s civil rights positions, see Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 24–27, 79–86.

⁴⁰ Robert J. Alexander, “What Truman Can Do About Civil Rights,” *Negro Digest* 7 (Aug. 1949): 26–29; Jay Franklin, “What Truman Really Thinks of Negroes,” *Negro Digest* 7 (June 1949): 10–14. On Truman, civil rights, and black votes, see Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*, 115–26.

moved no one toward true freedom, changed no restrictive policies, overturned no discriminatory laws, established no new rights, protected no lives. It was a purely symbolic act intended to help tell the kind of story—to black voters and the court of world opinion—that the administration needed to tell. And it was not the only such symbolic action. Truman's first few years in office saw the designation of January 5, 1946, as George Washington Carver Day, and a commemorative stamp to Carver was issued in January 1947. In 1946 a silver fifty-cent piece bearing the likeness of Booker T. Washington became the first official coin minted by the United States honoring an African American. Truman joked about the use of such symbolic gestures at the 1947 National Press Club dinner, where he "explained that organizations and individuals were constantly importuning me to make proclamations for various days & weeks, such as Cat Week, Horse Week, Foot Happiness Week, Laugh Week, Liars Week etc. Each one was discussed and elaborated to some extent and the audience seemed pleased."⁴¹

Richard Robert Wright's own appreciation for the power of symbolic resources is evident in the National Freedom Day movement itself, and in the commemorative stamp projects that preceded it. The major's tactics and maneuverings regarding National Freedom Day had revealed as much political astuteness as did those of the Truman administration. Wright recognized a moment of opportunity in the early 1940s to advance a commemorative agenda that had deep roots in African American political culture. Since the early 1800s African Americans had used public commemorations both as symbolic resources and as political tools for articulating their historical interpretations, advancing their activism, and asserting their rights in the American public sphere. Major Wright was a product of those times, coming of age during a period when emancipation celebrations were important in black public life. When an opportunity to reestablish that tradition presented itself, Wright took action.

During the war Wright strategically built first local, then state and national support for National Freedom Day. While the exigencies of war may have delayed the government's action on Wright's ultimate objective

⁴¹ Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 13; *Negro Handbook* (1949), 354; Guzman, ed., *Negro Year Book . . . 1941–1946*, 33; entry for Jan. 11, 1947, President Harry S. Truman's Diary Book, 1947 Diary and Manual of the Real Estate Board of New York, Inc., transcribed by Raymond H. Geselbracht, Truman Library, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/diary/index.html>, accessed July 10, 2003.

of a national holiday, the war effort's resonance with the language of freedom enabled him to maintain Roosevelt's attention and support. After the war the rhetoric of free world leadership and the context of cold war propaganda offered Wright and other black and white activists a golden opportunity to accelerate their respective agendas. John Fousek has pointed out that activists like W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Robeson, leftist unions, and other critics of the Truman administration and American policy often "stepped outside the bounds of legitimate discourse as defined by the prevalent notions of national greatness, global responsibility, and anti-communism." Wright, in contrast to those left-leaning activists, was a committed capitalist, a veteran, and an understated moderate on issues of race, as well as a shrewd political calculator. No accommodationist "yes-man," this respected and successful educator, banker, and businessman played his hand cannily to capitalize on his connections, and downplay any conflicts, with various white political leaders' diverse agendas in order to bring to fruition a project that antedated the cold war rhetoric of freedom and free world leadership. Wright's successors continued using references to black patriotism and global geopolitics at least into the 1950s. A 1954 press release from the National Freedom Day Association called attention to African Americans' participation in "every great battle for freedom Americans have fought . . . from Crispus Attucks at Boston to Dorie Miller at Pearl Harbor to Jesse Brown in Korea," noting that "It is especially significant that Americans who are Negro have created National Freedom Day, for in the fight against the totalitarian world, the Negro is an exceptionally strong link in the leadership of the forces for freedom."⁴²

In the decades since National Freedom Day's designation as a national holiday, it has not been widely celebrated outside Philadelphia, where events have been organized by the still extant National Freedom Day Association. Folklorist William H. Wiggins Jr., while researching twentieth-century emancipation celebrations, attended a 1973 ceremony at the Liberty Bell "along with about one hundred and fifty black bourgeoisie." That celebration seems consistent with others in the years that followed. Recent observances have been similarly small, with a luncheon, a keynote address, the singing of patriotic hymns, student essay contests on "What

⁴² Fousek, *To Lead the Free World*, 190; National Freedom Day Association press release, Jan. 25, 1954, Subject File, 1951–1955, box 30, folder 3, John S. Fine Papers, MG-206, Pennsylvania State Archives.

Freedom Means to Me,” the presentation of student scholarships by the association, and a Liberty Bell ceremony comprising the main events. Over the years observances have featured such speakers as Eleanor Roosevelt, Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King Jr., and, more recently, Colin Powell. In the year 2000 Congressman Chaka Fattah of Pennsylvania’s Second Congressional District chose to honor Wright and National Freedom Day as part of the Library of Congress’s “Local Legacies” program. There have also been recent observances in Hilton Head, South Carolina, where the annual Native Islander Gullah Celebration has incorporated National Freedom Day into the celebration of Gullah culture and history. Nonetheless, knowledge of National Freedom Day remains limited. In fact, an Internet search using that phrase is more likely to turn up references to a current movement to create a “Juneteenth National Freedom Day” holiday. That movement has generated considerable attention and support, and bills have been introduced in Congress to designate the third Saturday in June as “Juneteenth National Freedom Day.” One wonders if those activists are aware that a battle for a national commemoration of emancipation had been fought and won over a half century ago.⁴³

In one sense, the National Freedom Day movement illustrates the influence a single individual can have in stirring government to action. Truman’s dealings regarding the holiday, like those of Roosevelt and various governors and legislators before him, were almost invariably in

⁴³ Undated broadsides (c. 1960) relating to National Freedom Day, box 2, folder 10, American Negro Historical Society Papers; Wiggins, *O Freedom!* 20–24, quoted on 21; Charlene Mires, “The Difference This Day Makes,” *Pennsylvania Heritage* 24 (winter 1998): 4–11; Charlene Mires, *Independence Hall in American Memory* (Philadelphia, 2002), 205–6, 246–47; Charlene Mires, “We the People: Defining Citizenship in the Shadow of Independence Hall,” paper presented at the Organization of American Historians annual meeting, Apr. 1997, http://www.oah.org/meetings/1997/mires.htm#N_41_, accessed Feb. 22, 2004; “Congressman Fattah Sponsors Local Legacy for National Recognition,” press release, Aug. 11, 2000, http://www.house.gov/apps/list/press/pa02_fattah/locallegacies.html, accessed Apr. 24, 2001; Noah Haglund, “Island Celebrates Freedom Day,” *Island Packet*, Feb. 2, 2003, <http://www.islandpacket.com/news/local/story/2160259p-2048516c.html>, accessed Feb. 22, 2004. There are some fundamental reasons that many believe Juneteenth to be the most appropriate emancipation holiday. The date, June 19, 1865, represents the lengthy delay between Lincoln’s issuance of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation and the day when enslaved black Texans learned of their liberation. To many activists this lag symbolizes the continued delays in achieving full racial equality in America, thus making Juneteenth more representative of the emancipation process than other dates. Moreover, both the January 1 date of Lincoln’s Proclamation and the official February 1 National Freedom Day call attention primarily to the actions of white politicians, rather than to the actions of African Americans or to the complexities and contestation emancipation has engendered in American history and culture.

response to the prodding of one elderly former slave or his close associates. Major Wright devoted the last years of his life to National Freedom Day, and the persistence of his pressure on government to act is represented in his letters to governors, senators, congressmen, state and local officials, and two presidents. Wright solicited Freedom Day songs from Hollywood writers; he received support from diplomats, college presidents, unions, fraternal orders, church leaders, politicians, and foreign dignitaries; his cause received an annual appropriation from the state of Pennsylvania. And ultimately, if posthumously, he succeeded in bringing about the U.S. government's official designation of the national holiday he sought.⁴⁴

But even more interesting and complex are questions and connections involving the cultural convergence during the 1940s of National Freedom Day with various broader developments: the World War II/cold war rhetoric of freedom and the concomitant emergence of the United States as self-proclaimed leader of the free world; the Roosevelt and Truman administrations' growing attention to civil rights, and their electoral appeals to black voters; expanded activism during and after the war by black civil rights leaders, organizations, and ordinary citizens; the acceleration of global movements toward decolonization and self-determination; and the long-term trajectory of African American commemorative traditions.

Perhaps the most fundamental lesson to be drawn from the National Freedom Day movement's intersection with these multiple strands in the fabric of American political culture is that historical memory and public commemoration matter. This fact was driven home in 2003 by events in Iraq, where satellite feeds showed the world statues of Saddam Hussein being pulled to the ground, and where the new regime banned old Ba'ath Party holidays, while creating new ones commemorating Saddam's fall from power.⁴⁵ Public commemorations mattered deeply to R. R. Wright and others who worked for National Freedom Day, commemorative stamps and coins, and various other symbolic resources that they hoped would incorporate African American perspectives and experiences more fully into the main stream of American public culture. Memory and commemoration also mattered for the Truman administration's attempt

⁴⁴ Haynes, *Black Boy of Atlanta*, 209–15; Walton et al., "R. R. Wright," 685–88.

⁴⁵ "New Iraqi Council Declares Holiday," <http://msnbc.com/news/900178.asp>, accessed July 14, 2003.

to tell a particular kind of story about race and freedom in America. The fact that National Freedom Day has not been celebrated widely outside of Philadelphia suggests the limits of Truman's proclamation. But the very absence of widespread, nationally sanctioned observances of the emancipation holiday also underscores the importance of public commemoration as a window into a nation's political culture and sense of national identity. Debates in recent years surrounding the African American Civil War Monument and the Martin Luther King Jr. Day holiday also suggest that the struggle for racial justice in America is perceived by many as something mainly for blacks to celebrate, something at best tangential to white Americans'—and the nation's—interests. The absence of inclusive celebrations of National Freedom Day over the past half-century tells its own story about the continued marginalization of African Americans in American public political culture.

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