

“City of Champions: A History of Triumph and Defeat in Detroit”

An excerpt from Chapter 16: October 26, 1951 – Joe Louis’s Last Fight

Joe Louis’s deep ties to Detroit, now the industrial center of the war effort, probably made him an even more effective spokesman for the war. But in some ways, the most significant contribution that Joe Louis made to the war was financial, promoting government bonds that were funding the military. To that end, he gave speeches, made radio appearances, and starred in government-sponsored films about his life, produced in Hollywood and designed to persuade black America that this war was their war as well, never mind racial segregation in the country or its armed forces. *The Negro Soldier* (1944), produced by Frank Capra, is one of the most notable of these films—it was shown to almost every single African American soldier, and to significant numbers of white soldiers as well, to good reviews. Following race-based conflagrations in several major cities, not least the Detroit riot of 1943, the documentary took pains to replace the established Hollywood “Sambo” stereotypes of African Americans as lazy, foolish, and comical with an image of African Americans as thoughtful, patriotic, and brave. Langston Hughes declared it the “most remarkable Negro film ever flashed on the American screen.”

The army organized national tours for him where he would display his boxing skills to army base audiences—tours that also, however, gave him the opportunity to express his own views on segregation, which he did frequently. At one such gathering in Detroit, he caustically proclaimed that if blacks were given “an even break in the army we would show the world how to win this war.” He openly criticized the policy of not admitting well-educated blacks into the officer class, most notably in the case of Jackie Robinson, the baseball player, whom he spent time with at one army base. And on one famous occasion, at Camp Sibert in Alabama, decades before Rosa Parks’s famous protest, he joined the bus queue labeled “White Only” and refused to move to the black line—which promptly had him facing arrest. Did he allow himself to be co-opted by a war machine that could not have cared less for the civil rights of African Americans? Perhaps, but he said his piece, he quietly and not so quietly held to his convictions, and he became a hero to much of America in the process—the first black man to do so in the history of the country, it has been asserted over and over again.

There is, however, a danger of overstating the degree to which white America accepted and respected Joe Louis. It is not surprising that the individual who was permitted to become America’s first black hero was an athlete, because, much as it had done with music, the country had begun to carve out sports as one of the few niches where African Americans were allowed to excel. Neither is it a coincidence that it was a boxer: Major League Baseball would not be integrated for several years to come. As Howard Bryant observes:

Integrating team sports was a much greater threat to segregation than the rise of a fighter. . . . Team sports foreshadowed an integrated society, for if blacks and whites could live together during six weeks of spring training and six months of the baseball season, why not side by side in the classroom, the foxhole, or on Main Street? “We sent the Harlem Hellfighters to France to fight with General Pershing,” Russel Honoré said. “And when they

got there, the Congress of the United States said, 'Don't let them fight,' because if you do, they knew they'd want to come back and have social justice."

World War II did mark a turning point in American race relations, and the seeds of the later civil rights movement were planted in the 1940s—some of them by men like Joe Louis who had to walk the tightrope of respectability. But that did not mean that a man like Louis would be allowed to excel beyond the confines of boxing. In 1948, Louis, \$500,000 in debt to the IRS (including taxes he owed on sizable sums he had donated to the Navy Relief Society), wanted to acquire a Ford dealership in Chicago—selling the same cars he had helped build in the 1930s when he worked at the River Rouge factory. Henry Ford II asked for feedback from his dealers and regional managers, and thirty-five pages of the correspondence are preserved among the papers of Walker A. Williams, Ford's sales manager in the 1940s. The letters are a shocking read. District manager Johnston reports that "we feel certain that we would lose all of the State of South Carolina's business which would involve over 400 units a year in normal times and where we now enjoy a very favorable relationship," and that "many present good Ford owners would never buy another Ford product." Houston weighs in: "Believes Ford Motor Company would be boycotted in the South." Indianapolis worries that "whispering campaign might be started by competition." Pennsylvania is "bluntly told that this would be construed as supporting Harry Truman and the other left-wing groups, in an election year, and that it would definitely give us bad public re-action, as they don't given a 'damn' for Harry Truman. For your information a recent Gallup Poll shows the South to be the most conservative of all sections of the country so far as communists and left wings are concerned."

Some of the letters seem touched by a smidgen of bad conscience. Thus, Dearborn's district manager writes: "If we do not have anything to gain from a business standpoint, then in our opinion we should not make such an appointment. If, on the other hand, other factors should be given consideration such as human relations, constitutional rights or some such factors, then we would probably have to change our decision." Others don't even try. Alabama's "Mr. Lloyd strongly recommended that regardless of any circumstances, that we do not appoint Joe Louis, or any other negro, as a Ford dealer anywhere in the United States and that we keep the Ford business a white man's business." New Orleans: "Ford business is a white man's business and we do not want any negroes in it. Frankly, if we had a negro in the organization and it so happened that the writer was thrown into contact with the individual at a conference, meeting or presentation of Ford products, he would not attend."

Whether it was because Ford would lose business in the South, or because appointing a single black dealership would signal Ford's alliance with "communists of leftwings," or because respectable white dealers from the South would refuse to attend conferences, or because the competition would exploit it, or because Ford would be seen to side with Harry Truman and the civil rights legislation that was beginning its long march through Congress, one thing was clear: Ford could employ African Americans, but it certainly could not allow them to become employers in turn. If the "first black American hero" was going to find the money to pay his taxes, he had to return to the ring.

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