



**CONSPIRACY OF SILENCE**

*SPORTSWRITERS AND*

*THE LONG CAMPAIGN TO*

*DESEGREGATE BASEBALL*

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*CHAPTER 1*

**WHITE SPORTSWRITERS  
AND MINSTREL SHOWS**

On February 5, 1933, the inside of the grand ballroom of New York City's Commodore Hotel crackled with laughter during an evening of songs, skits, and speeches at the tenth annual New York Baseball Writers' Association dinner. Sportswriters took turns spoofing everyone from the guest of honor, retired New York Giants manager John McGraw, to the New York Yankees, who had defeated the Chicago Cubs in the World Series the previous October. In addition, sportswriters performed their annual minstrel show to the delight of the all-white crowd of several hundred. *New York Times* sportswriter John Drebing called the minstrel show the main entertainment for the evening. "I'm still laughing," Dan Daniel, the president of the association, gushed in his column in the *Sporting News*. Writers, ballplayers, and owners sat together with politicians, judges, businessmen, and ministers to laugh but also to glorify baseball and to honor those who made the game great. New York Yankees pitcher Herb Pennock received the

writers' award as the outstanding player of the previous year. John McGraw reflected nostalgically about his long career after receiving the "Outstanding Service to Baseball" award. Other speakers included St. Louis Cardinals vice president Branch Rickey, toastmaster Bugsy Baer, Philadelphia comic Joe Cunningham, and former sportswriter Heywood Broun of the *New York World-Telegram*, who wrote the nationally syndicated column "It Seems to Me."<sup>1</sup>

In his speech Broun responded to a recent editorial in the *New York Daily News* that called for abolishing the color line in baseball. Broun said he saw "no reason" blacks should be prohibited from the Major Leagues.<sup>2</sup> Broun wrote in his February 7 column that his suggestion was "met with no overwhelming roar of approval." Broun, however, added, "It was still a good suggestion." Broun said blacks had proven themselves good athletes. He said Yale University football coach Walter Camp twice had included Paul Robeson of Rutgers University on his All-America team. Broun said that a number of blacks, including sprinter Eddie Tolan, had competed with great success for the United States at the 1932 Olympic Games. If blacks were good enough to represent the United States in the Olympics, Broun said, "it seems a little silly that they cannot participate in a game between the Chicago White Sox and St. Louis Browns." Broun said that nothing, in particular, prevented an owner from signing a black player. "As things stand, I believe there is no set rule barring Negroes from the game. It is merely a tacit agreement," he said, "or possibly custom." If there was no rule, he continued, "Why, in the name of fair play and gate receipts, should professional baseball be so exclusive?" Broun said he had been told players would object to having black teammates. But, as things stood, players already objected to a lot of things in baseball — like being traded, fined, or having their salaries cut — but that did not stop team owners from doing these things. He said blacks would make the game more interesting and also would swell the size of crowds. "And," he added, "it would be a fair and square thing. If baseball is really the national game let the club owners go out and prove it."<sup>3</sup>

*New York Daily News* columnist Jimmy Powers responded to Broun's speech by asking several baseball executives and ballplayers if they objected to blacks in baseball. National League president John Heydler, New York Yankees owner Jacob Ruppert, and ballplayers such as Pennock, Lou Gehrig, and Frankie Frisch all told him they did not. Only McGraw objected on the record.<sup>4</sup> McGraw's response appeared uncharacteristic, given that he had shown an interest in signing blacks during his long career in baseball. In 1901 McGraw, then managing the Baltimore Orioles of the National League, tried to circumvent the color line by passing a black infielder, Charlie Grant, as a Cherokee Indian. When Grant's real ethnicity was revealed, McGraw released him. When McGraw was managing the New York Giants, he was so impressed with black pitcher "Rube" Foster that he hired him to work with his pitching staff. McGraw later said he would pay fifty thousand dollars for the black Cuban pitcher José Méndez if there had not been a color line. Black teams used the nickname "Giants" as a tribute to McGraw. Black baseball historian Larry Lester said that if black spectators saw the name "Giants" on an advertisement, it meant it was probably a black team.<sup>5</sup>

In his February 8 column, Powers wrote that he was pleased by what he called "a refreshing open-mindedness" from the baseball executives and players he had queried. This, he said, was a sign of progress in race relations. "The bulk of the players then came from the other side of the Mason Dixon line. They brought the Jim Crow . . . ideas into the North with them." Powers said it was only a matter of time before blacks were admitted into the big leagues. "I base this upon the fact that the ball player of today is more liberal than yesterday's leather-necked, tobacco-chewing sharpshooter from the cross roads." Powers agreed with Broun that Major League Baseball should sign black ballplayers. Like Broun, he mentioned that blacks had succeeded in other sports. Powers added that he was not aware of any blacks playing college football who had demonstrated anything but fair play toward whites on the field — not mentioning that the reverse probably was not true. He

ended his column by stating that there was little for the black athlete after college. He said the great Marquette University sprinter Ralph Metcalfe had returned from the Olympics to work as a "water boy" on the football team. Metcalfe, Powers suggested, could have been playing professional baseball. "They tell me he is a good outfield prospect and can thump the turnip," Powers said. "College youngsters of his type can play ball for my money any afternoon in the week."<sup>6</sup>

Powers's column appeared in the *Daily News*, which had the highest circulation of any daily newspaper in the country. Broun's column was syndicated to hundreds of newspapers. His speech was heard by a number of New York City journalists, including some of the most influential sportswriters in the country, yet, with the exception of Powers, none responded in print, including neither of Broun's fellow sportswriters on the *World-Telegram*, Tom Meany and Joe Williams. Dan Daniel wrote a lengthy column about the dinner in the *Sporting News* but said nothing about Broun — at least not right away. A year later, on January 18, 1934, Daniel mentioned Broun's speech in a column about how baseball had long served as a point of entry for immigrants to live the American dream. "Baseball," Daniel said, "is as American as America itself." He said the big leagues had players from all over the world but ignored those with black ancestry. "We will not go into the justice of the color line here and at this time, but we do know that there is a color line and that it is adhered to most strictly," Daniel wrote, adding that Broun had once raised the issue. "He wanted to know why Negroes were not permitted to play in the big leagues and he is still asking that same question." Daniel concluded his column by writing, "We all know that the Negroes of America list among their race some of the greatest ballplayers the game has seen and that right now they have a flock of stars who would be eligible for the big show except for the color line."<sup>7</sup>

The *Sporting News* also ignored Broun's comments at the baseball writers' dinner. It did, however, include articles and columns criticizing sportswriter Fred Lieb's widely distributed series, "What's Wrong with Baseball?" The series offered suggestions for reviving interest in the

national pastime. Lieb said the game was neither as good nor as colorful as it had been in the past. He said that ticket prices were too high. Lieb also suggested speeding up the pace of the game by encouraging more base stealing and aggressive baserunning. Joe Vila of the *New York Sun*, who had covered baseball for three decades, bristled at Lieb's series in his column in the *Sporting News*. "It is hard to understand how scribes who depend on baseball for a livelihood take delight in belittling it without the slightest idea of fairness, 'What is the matter with baseball?' is an unwarranted question," said Vila, who longed for the good old days when baseball writers "stood loyally by the game."<sup>8</sup>

On February 1 the *Daily News* responded with an editorial with its own suggestions for improving baseball. "Another trouble with major league baseball certainly would seem to be the color line," the editorial said. "There have been good baseball players who were Indians or part Indians, Mexicans, Cubans, etc. A Chinese Hawaiian tried out for the Giants a few years ago, and would have made the team if he had been able to play a little better ball. But good colored ball players aren't eligible." Broun's speech, consequently, had been a response to the *Daily News* editorial. Whereas most sportswriters responded — at least publicly — to Broun with their silence, Vila, a week after criticizing Lieb, chided Broun without identifying him by name for suggesting "in one of the Metropolitan rags . . . Negro players in the big leagues." Vila said that the sportswriter had brought up the idea at the dinner where baseball had honored McGraw. "McGraw," Vila said, "was the only man officially identified with the big leagues who had the guts to say that Negroes should not be permitted to play in teams with white men." Vila wrote that a talented black infielder named Grant had played for Buffalo in the National League in 1887, but that his presence caused such controversy that baseball owners secretly passed a rule forbidding any more blacks.<sup>9</sup> Vila's reference was not to Charlie Grant but to Frank Grant, who played for Buffalo in the International League, a top Minor League, when league officials barred further contracts with black ballplayers.

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On February 11 Alvin Moses of a black weekly, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, reported that the *Daily News* had criticized baseball's color line. Moses wrote that "the editorial on fair play" raised hopes for those, like himself, who had long called for blacks in baseball. The editorial, he said, "comes as water to the parched lips of a traveler who has sought in vain for many days." Year after year Moses had yearned for articles like these in white newspapers. Year after year, he added, black Babe Ruths, Lou Gehrigs, Lefty Gomezes, Lefty Groves, and Jimmie Foxxes played in anonymity because of the color of their skin. "Cry out from the shadows of yesteryear against this unholy and un-American idea of fair play to all citizens," Moses wrote. The editorial staff of the *Daily News*, Moses said, "is to be congratulated."<sup>10</sup>

On February 18 a *Courier* editorial praised Broun and Powers, quoting at length from both men's columns. In the editorial's last paragraph, the writer expressed surprise — but not disbelief — that McGraw had opposed the signing of black players because he had attempted to sign Charlie Grant. In a separate column on February 18, sports editor Chester "Ches" Washington called the story the "most significant sports news in many months." Washington praised the *Daily News*, Broun, and Powers for confronting the national pastime. Washington expressed surprise at the "refreshing openness" of those baseball executives and players who said they had no objections to blacks in baseball. Washington said white team owners would now be watching black baseball more closely for players with Major League ability. Washington urged the Negro leagues to prepare for the possibility of integrated baseball. This, he said, might involve adding black teams to the Minor Leagues of "organized professional baseball," as it was called. To prepare for this possibility, Washington called on black baseball to become better organized. This meant creating more uniform rules and better standards of play and conduct for ballplayers and fans. It also meant that ballplayers needed to act more professionally on the field.<sup>11</sup>

In the *Courier's* next issue Washington announced the beginning of the newspaper's series on baseball and race, which published the

views of big league owners, managers, ballplayers, and sportswriters. The series began with an interview with National League president John Heydler, who told the newspaper that the only requirements for the big leagues were good athletic ability and good character. "I do not recall one instance where baseball has allowed either race, creed, or color to enter into the question of the selection of its players," he said. On March 4 *Courier* assistant sports editor Rollo Wilson quoted Gerry Nugent, president of the Philadelphia Phillies, as saying, "Baseball caters to all races and creeds. . . . It is the national game and is played by all groups. Therefore, I see no objections to Negro players in the big leagues." Nugent agreed with Heydler that "ability and conduct" were the primary qualifications for the Major Leagues. Nugent questioned whether there were blacks with big league ability. "It is a long jump from the sandlots to the majors," he said, adding, "I, for one, will be glad to see Negro players in organized baseball if and when that time comes."<sup>12</sup>

Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis did not respond directly to the survey. Leslie O'Connor, the secretary-treasurer of organized baseball, however, spoke for his boss. O'Connor told the *Courier* there was no rule that kept black players out of baseball. He added that any decision to sign blacks would have to come from team owners and not the commissioner's office. Baseball, he said, had no written rule forbidding blacks. When asked if owners had an unwritten law prohibiting blacks, O'Connor "indicated that the subject of Negro ball players had never come up." In the same issue J. Louis Comiskey, president of the Chicago White Sox and the son of the team's late owner, Charles, said, "You can bet your last dime that I'll never refuse to hire a great athlete because he isn't the same color of some other player on my team."<sup>13</sup>

On March 18 Gordon Mackay of the *Philadelphia Record*, a black newspaper, said the addition of blacks into white professional baseball "would be a great thing for baseball if you could prepare for it." Mackay said there would have to be an agreement restricting black players to the Minor Leagues in the North because of segregation laws in the South. Mackay said there were "scores" of black players who could play

in the high Minors and the Major Leagues. Unlike others who clung to the myth that blacks and white could not share a ball field without a racial incident, Mackay said blacks and whites were already sharing ball fields in college football and college baseball. Mackay suggested that a game be played between the best team in the Major Leagues and the best team in black baseball for a true national championship.<sup>14</sup> But such a game would never be played because Landis and team owners were aware that it would draw attention to the color line. They also knew that if such a game were played, there was a real possibility the black team would win.

William Benswanger, president of the Pittsburgh Pirates, responded by saying he could not give his opinion without first consulting with owners and league executives. When the Pirates finally responded, it appeared not only that the team had contacted Heydler but that the league president had written the response himself. The *Courier* published the response of Samuel Walters, the team's vice president. "Exceptional playing ability and proper living habits are the main attributes and requirements for positions on major league ball clubs," Walters said. "And I don't believe that race, creed, or color have ever entered into the selection of the players on the big league clubs." The *Courier* reported that it would continue to include responses "from notables in baseball's councils." Ches Washington knew baseball had restricted black players solely on the basis of race for decades, but he did not challenge this in print, calling Heydler's comment "fair and open minded." In another column Washington said that the "emphatic declarations" of Heydler and Nugent "were worthy of commendation."<sup>15</sup>

Whether Washington really believed white baseball executives is debatable. It is likely he wrote what he did in order to open a dialogue with the baseball establishment. If this was baseball's argument for why there were no blacks, then Washington and other black sportswriters were willing to take baseball executives at their word. Black sportswriters praised the stars of the Negro leagues while lecturing ballplayers and fans on proper behavior. They sent telegrams to owners of big

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league teams, telling them the signing of black stars would improve the quality of their teams as well as put more fans in their stadiums. They urged Negro league officials to standardize rules so that black baseball could be absorbed into white baseball.<sup>16</sup> Black sportswriters would repeat these words year after year with little effect. Neither executives in the Major Leagues nor those in the Negro leagues appeared to pay any attention.

The *Courier* was not the only black newspaper to acknowledge Broun's and Powers's support for blacks in baseball. Romeo Dougherty of the *Amsterdam News*, which was published in Harlem, regretted that "brother" Broun had waited so late in his career to raise the issue. "Better late than never and we hope that something will come of it," Dougherty said. Dougherty said owners had argued that they could not sign black players because of the opposition of white players. Dougherty said it was a moot question whether players would approve of having a black teammate. If owners signed black players, white players would have to accept it. Dougherty also thought it was curious that McGraw objected to blacks in baseball. Dougherty acknowledged McGraw's interest in signing blacks. Given McGraw's recent answer to Powers, Dougherty questioned whether McGraw had ever really been interested in signing blacks. Lewis Dial of the *New York Age* also expressed his surprise that McGraw had answered as he had, "inasmuch as he is supposed to have tried to smuggle a Negro star into the [big] leagues some time ago, and at one time claimed that José Méndez . . . was one of the greatest pitchers of all time."<sup>17</sup>

Salem Tutt Whitney, a noted vaudevillian who had appeared in the Broadway run of *The Green Pastures*, wrote in the *Chicago Defender* that Major League Baseball would see an increase in attendance if it allowed black players. Whitney said he had written Joe Williams of the *New York World-Telegram* to suggest that the New York City teams—the Yankees, Giants, and Brooklyn Dodgers—would improve if they added at least one black player to their rosters. He appealed for Williams's support. Williams replied by telling him, "How can one

little typewriter break down a hundred years of prejudice?" Whitney responded by asking, "How often have we asked ourselves that same question? Prejudice is as big as all humanity and one feels that one's puny efforts at resistance will prove futile. Yet, I have an idea, it is just an idea. I may be wrong." Whitney wondered if Williams had shown the letter to Broun, his colleague at the *World-Telegram*, who had then raised the issue at the baseball writers' dinner.<sup>18</sup>

The *Defender* asked Louis Comiskey if he would sign a black player for the White Sox. Comiskey responded as he did when asked by the *Courier*. Comiskey said he had never considered whether blacks should play in the big leagues. "Had some good player come along and my manager refused to sign him because he was a Negro I am sure I would have taken action or attempted to," Comiskey said. "I cannot say that I would have insisted on hiring the player over the protest of my manager, but at least I would have taken some steps — just what steps I cannot say for sure, for the simple reason that the question has never confronted me." When Comiskey was told that pitcher Willie Foster of the Chicago American Giants would improve the team and increase attendance, Comiskey's reply was short but hardly encouraging: "Yes, I expect so." A week later the *Defender* quoted Comiskey as saying, "I have never had the question put to me squarely. But without going into it fully I'd say let them in. It might add interest and color to the sport. Certainly, if they were admitted, the White Sox would be open to employing them. Nor for that matter would I vote against the proposal to admit them into the league."<sup>19</sup> Commissioner Landis and the other owners would never put Comiskey into the uncomfortable position of having to either accept or reject a proposal to allow blacks in baseball because the issue would never be raised.

The Comiskey family, which owned the White Sox for decades, was part of the cabal that had kept blacks out of organized baseball since the 1880s. Clark Griffith, who spent more than six decades as a player, manager, and then owner of the Washington Senators, endorsed segregation. So did Connie Mack, who spent more than sixty years in

baseball, principally as the owner and manager of the Philadelphia Athletics. Tom Yawkey, the South Carolina plantation owner, had a particular aversion to blacks during the forty years he owned the Red Sox. The team was the last to become desegregated. Jacob Ruppert, who owned the mighty New York Yankees for a quarter century, and general manager Ed Barrow, the architect of the Yankees' dynasty, supported segregated baseball. So did Larry MacPhail, who succeeded Barrow with the Yankees and before that served as general manager of the Cincinnati Reds and Brooklyn Dodgers. Owners supported segregation for both personal and financial reasons. They leased their ballparks to Negro league teams, which could not afford to build their own, and therefore profited from segregation. Both white and black owners thought desegregation would hurt them economically. If the Major Leagues signed blacks, the Negro leagues would lose their best players, and fewer spectators would buy tickets. Black owners would lose money because revenues would decrease. White owners would lose money because there would be a decline in the revenues associated with exploiting black baseball. The New York Yankees, for instance, made one hundred thousand dollars a year from black baseball.<sup>20</sup> According to *New York Daily Mirror* columnist Dan Parker, whenever baseball publicized how it was helping black baseball by renting its stadiums for Negro league games, it merely demonstrated that talk was indeed cheap, though rent was not.<sup>21</sup>

Any owner who considered desegregating baseball knew he would make himself unpopular among Commissioner Landis and the other owners. When Landis was asked about the color line, he said any decision to sign blacks was left to team owners. This was, however, clearly dishonest. Landis ruled baseball with absolute control. If he wanted blacks in baseball, there would have been blacks in baseball. For twenty years Landis, whom the black press derisively called "the Great White Father," enforced baseball's color line with the complete authority of his office.<sup>22</sup> Landis did practically everything within his power to keep baseball segregated, but he could not have kept baseball

segregated without the cooperation of league executives, team owners, and sportswriters. Baseball executives rarely had to defend the color line in the mainstream press because few white sportswriters raised the issue, allowing the color line to continue year after year without being challenged or even mentioned. For this reason white baseball fans did not know that blacks were prohibited from the game. They did not know that there were black ballplayers good enough to play in the Major Leagues or that blacks had once played in organized professional baseball. They did not know that many Major League managers and players supported desegregation. The color line could not have existed as long as it did without the participation of the nation's sportswriters, who, of course, had their own color line. There were no black journalists at the New York Baseball Writers' Association dinner at the Commodore Hotel in February 1933 because the association prohibited blacks.

Baseball could not have maintained the color line as long as it did without the aid and comfort of the country's white mainstream sportswriters, who participated in what black sportswriter Joe Bostic called a "conspiracy of silence."<sup>23</sup> When Broun confronted the color line, he violated the conspiracy of silence that protected the color line. White sportswriters may have grumbled to themselves and squirmed in their seats as they listened to Broun or read what he or Powers wrote, but they said nothing about the issue in their own columns and articles. But Broun and Powers sent a message to black sportswriters that they were not alone in their opposition to segregated baseball. Black journalists continued to raise the issue throughout 1933. In late August Bill Benswanger said he had seen a lot of Negro league games and said that a number of black players, including Oscar Charleston and Josh Gibson, had the ability to play in the Major Leagues. Ches Washington expressed optimism because the comment had come from one of the men who sat on "the highest council in baseball." In October the *Chicago Defender* told its readers to write Landis and team owners. The commissioner's office steadfastly refused to comment. A *Defender* writer tried to attend the annual meeting of big league executives in

December but was prohibited. "Yet despite the disappointments," Neil Lanctot wrote in his book *Negro League Baseball: The Rise and Ruin of a Black Institution*, "the effort during 1933 had successfully raised awareness of baseball's color line, forcing previously silent Organized Baseball officials to address the subject of integration, albeit gingerly, for the first time. Moreover, the black press had demonstrated a surprisingly assertive attitude toward integration."<sup>24</sup>

The *Pittsburgh Courier*, beginning in 1933, became ground zero in the campaign to desegregate baseball. The newspaper's interest in baseball was part of a larger crusade for racial equality in America. Not coincidentally, the newspaper also would be ground zero in the campaign for greater racial equality in America. Under editor Robert L. Vann, the newspaper achieved prominence by chronicling instances of discrimination and hate crimes against blacks, demanding antilynching legislation, protesting the racial caricatures of blacks in motion pictures and on radio programs, and advocating the integration of the armed forces. During World War II the *Courier* touted the "Double V" program — one V stood for victory in Europe and Asia, the other for victory over racial discrimination in America.<sup>25</sup> The *Courier's* criticism of racial discrimination resulted in the newspaper being investigated by the FBI and the U.S. Justice Department.<sup>26</sup> Vann distributed the *Courier* throughout the South, where the newspaper confronted racism where racism flowed from the drinking fountains and hung in the air. Southern cities prohibited the newspaper's distribution. Vann's formula, according to historian Roland Wolseley, was to confront racial discrimination whenever and wherever it appeared. "These campaigns were against Jim Crowism and discrimination against blacks in major league baseball," Wolseley wrote, "two of the classic targets of papers out to fight for black rights." Between 1933 and 1945 the newspaper's circulation increased from 46,000 to more than 260,000 — more than 100,000 over its nearest rival, the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>27</sup>

Between 1933 and 1945 the *Courier*, the *Defender*, and other black newspapers recognized a critical juncture in the crusade for racial

equality in baseball and for racial equality in America and shared that story with their readers. While the issue of racial discrimination in baseball was perhaps too big for Joe Williams and other white sportswriters and journalists, it was small enough for black sportswriters and their readers to get their hands around. Black newspapers published stories that speculated about the end of the color line, and such stories dominated discussions in barbershops, diners, drugstores, and churches. When readers finished their newspapers, they passed them to others. Newspaper articles were read to those who could not read. To black America, if there could be racial equality in baseball, there could be racial equality elsewhere in U.S. society. The story of the campaign to end segregation in baseball was perhaps the most important story involving racial equality in the 1930s and 1940s.

When the Brooklyn Dodgers announced on October 23, 1945, that its president, Branch Rickey, had signed Jackie Robinson for the organization's top Minor League team, the Montreal Royals, black newspapers and their readers responded with rapture. For many black Americans, this was a moment they had dreamed about but wondered if it would ever come. To the black press and its readers, the announcement signaled the beginning of what was hoped to be a new day for fairness and equality. To black America the signing of Robinson transcended far beyond the white lines of baseball to the white lines of American society. "Coming at the end of a war that encouraged Americans to define themselves by a liberalism not found in Germany," historian William Simons wrote, "the announcement that Robinson would become the first black to participate in Organized Baseball since the late nineteenth century generated extensive public discussion about consensus, conflict, equality, liberty, opportunity, prejudice, democracy, and national character."<sup>28</sup>

The story of the campaign to desegregate baseball has never been given the context or content it deserves. This story is almost always framed around Rickey and Robinson. This version of history was Rickey's version of history. It is the version he dictated to sportswriters and

biographers — and the one told and circulated in the days, weeks, years, and decades after the signing of Robinson. The Rickey version of this story is not a fabrication, but it is an oversimplification. Rickey deserves unqualified credit for confronting his fellow owners and their racist attitudes by signing Robinson and advancing the cause of civil rights in sport and in society. But the popular version exaggerates Rickey's role at the expense of all those who played a part in ending segregated baseball, which is an injustice not only to history but also to those who worked for years to end segregated baseball. The signing of Robinson was not an isolated act, restricted to two men. It was part of a far larger narrative that had been developing for years and would continue to develop. The story of the desegregation of baseball, therefore, does not begin with Rickey and Robinson — nor does it end with them. Giving this story the historical context it deserves does not detract from what Rickey accomplished. If anything, it heightens what Rickey accomplished because it puts Robinson and Rickey on a bigger stage. Their contributions should not be restricted to baseball, and the story of the desegregation of baseball should not be told separately from the overall story of the civil rights movement. The campaign to desegregate baseball cannot be understood if one looks only at the contributions of Rickey and Robinson. The color barrier collapsed when it did for reasons that had everything to do with Rickey and Robinson, and for reasons that had little to do with them.

The story of the desegregation of baseball is part of the larger narrative of the campaign for racial equality in the years preceding and immediately following World War II. One cannot truly appreciate the story of the desegregation of baseball without having an appreciation of what was happening in race relations in the United States. The campaign for racial equality in baseball was not just a baseball story to black journalists and their readers; it foreshadowed the campaign for racial equality in the United States. William Simons called the desegregation of baseball "the most commented on episode in American race relations of its time." Simons said these discussions addressed

America's unfulfilled promise that everyone was equal.<sup>29</sup> Discrimination in baseball — like discrimination in America — was institutionalized in the years and decades prior to the civil rights movement. For most Americans, segregation went unchallenged. Before civil rights could occur, attitudes had to change. The desegregation of baseball preceded desegregation in America because the processes necessary for change clicked into place earlier in baseball than in the rest of society.

The story of the desegregation of baseball "offers an opportunity to examine the ways in which the issues of race, segregation, and civil rights were covered by the black press, as well as how they were not covered, and compare them to coverage in the white mainstream press," Brian Carroll wrote in *When to Stop the Cheering? The Black Press, the Black Community, and the Integration of Professional Baseball*.<sup>30</sup> Black journalists took up the issue in their editorials and on their front pages. Black sportswriters — such as Wendell Smith, Sam Lacy, Joe Bostic, and Fay Young — chronicled the hopes and frustrations of the campaign in their columns. The campaign for racial equality in baseball, like the campaign for racial equality in America, included prominent black civil rights activists such as writer, lecturer, and baritone Paul Robeson; U.S. Representative Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of Harlem; New York City councilman Ben Davis Jr.; and attorney William Patterson, who chaired the Chicago Committee to End Jim Crow in Baseball.<sup>31</sup> White journalists, including Broun, Powers, Joe Cumiskey, Dave Egan, Dan Parker, Bob Considine, Shirley Povich, and Westbrook Pegler, also called for the end of segregated baseball. Their columns, though appearing infrequently, would be read by mainstream Americans who otherwise had little knowledge of baseball's color line. No white did as much to desegregate baseball as Rickey. But other whites who lent their support included U.S. Representative Vito Marcantonio, New York City mayor Fiorello La Guardia, Brooklyn city councilman Peter Cacchione, Brooklyn pastor Raymond Campion, and Chicago bishop Bernard Shiel. The New York City Citizens Committee to End Jim Crow in Baseball had scores of prominent members and received letters of endorsement from Eleanor Roosevelt, Paul Robeson, and

William O'Dwyer, who would succeed La Guardia as mayor of New York City. Poet and newspaper columnist Carl Sandburg called for the end of baseball's color line. Organized labor inundated Commissioner Landis's office with telegrams calling for blacks in baseball and picketed outside Major League ballparks to draw attention to the color line.

The desegregation of baseball was affected by seemingly unrelated political, social, and even international events. In early 1933 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and German chancellor Adolf Hitler each took office. The policies and practices of these two men, though far different from one another, would each have an impact on racial discrimination in America. On January 30 Hitler became chancellor of Germany, signaling a rise in fascism in Europe and culminating with the beginning of World War II in September 1939. Hitler sought to dominate Europe with his ideology of an Aryan master race. He wanted to demonstrate German racial superiority at the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. Americans put aside their own attitudes of racism and bigotry by cheering for black sprinter Jesse Owens at the Olympics and later for heavyweight fighter Joe Louis, "the Brown Bomber," who defeated German Max Schmeling in 1938. The United States fought World War II, in part, to confront Hitler's racist ideology. But World War II revealed America's own racial dilemma. The United States opposed a racist ideology while it practiced racial discrimination against black Americans. The war forced many white Americans — especially those soldiers who served with black soldiers — to reconsider their views on discrimination. When the army weekly *Yank* asked soldiers, "What changes would you like to see made in post-war America?" the most popular response was "the need for wiping out racial and religious discrimination."<sup>32</sup>

When FDR became president, the country was in the throes of the Great Depression. Black Americans, who had little before the financial markets collapsed, lost what little they had. The Depression caused many Americans — black and white — to lose their faith in the American way of life. The United States so many had known had broken

down and appeared irreparable. The gloom and doom, the despair and hopelessness, and the fear of fascism made millions of Americans receptive to radical reform.<sup>33</sup> It was out of this climate of distrust in the established system that the U.S. Communist Party of America sought legitimacy.<sup>34</sup> The Communist Party, acting under orders from Moscow, tried to gain a foothold in U.S. society by recruiting those groups that had been either ostracized or ignored: labor unions and blacks. Nathan Glazer, author of *The Social Basis of American Communism*, wrote that the Communist Party devoted more effort to the recruitment of blacks than any other social group, except possibly industrial workers and trade unionists. Blacks, after all, were the most oppressed people in the country and were therefore the most susceptible to recruitment.<sup>35</sup>

By early 1933 Communists would become involved in two separate civil rights cases that would play out in the courts for years and would each ultimately make it to the U.S. Supreme Court. In one Angelo Herndon, a black Communist organizer, was arrested in Atlanta in 1932 while soliciting prospective party members. He was charged with insurrection. If guilty, he could be sentenced to death. On January 17 his attorney, Benjamin Davis Jr., himself a Communist, defended Herndon. "It is not Herndon who is the insurrectionist. It is the lynch mobs, the Ku Kluxers who are allowed to roam the land of this state burning innocent black people at the stake in defiance of every law of justice, humanity and right," Davis said in his summation. "Consider in your minds whether you want to see a Negro boy executed in the electric chair at a trial where Negro citizens have been denied their constitutional rights to sit on juries, a right which is guaranteed to every defendant and citizen by the Constitution of the United States." In 1931 nine young black men from Scottsboro, Alabama, were found guilty of raping two white women — even though one of the women recanted her story. The verdict was so egregious the U.S. Supreme Court ruled it violated the defendants' right of due process and ordered another trial. The guilty verdict in the second trial in early 1933 drew the scorn of both blacks and white social progressives, including Heywood Broun. "They say it was a quiet courtroom and a gentle day down in Morgan Creek

when the jury filed in after 24 hours of deliberation," Broun wrote. "But could none of them hear the wind in the rigging of the slave ship, the creaking of her timbers, and the cries of the cargo?" Broun said that the prosecuting attorney would not look at the defendants because "he was afraid of the facts. He had reason to fear."<sup>36</sup>

The *Daily Worker*, which would vigorously defend Herndon and the so-called Scottsboro Boys, began its campaign to desegregate baseball following Jesse Owens's spectacular performance at the 1936 Olympics. Over the next decade no newspaper — black or white — would publish as many articles and columns calling for the end of segregated baseball. As early as 1933 the *Worker* commented on the injustice of racial segregation in Major League Baseball. Writer Ben Field described a scene at a Brooklyn Dodgers–New York Giants game at Ebbets Field on August 29. Field told his readers about watching the New York Black Yankees play at Yankee Stadium. During the game between the Dodgers and Giants, blacks worked at the stadium, but none took the field: "You spot a few Negro fans. Negro workers make good athletes. But where are the Negroes on the field? The Black Yankees are fine semi-pro players. But the big leagues will not admit Negro players. This is something else to chalk up against capitalist-controlled sports."<sup>37</sup>

Between 1933 and 1945 the *Daily Worker* and the black press confronted racial discrimination in baseball with hundreds of editorials, columns, and articles. Black and white social progressives took their campaign to Commissioner Landis and the baseball establishment. They met individually with a number of team owners who promised tryouts and then canceled them. Petitions with perhaps a million or more names were sent to Landis calling for the end of segregated baseball. Yet the story of the campaign to desegregate baseball remained unknown to most of America. The baseball establishment could ignore the campaign as long as the campaign was ignored by the mainstream press. Americans accepted baseball's policy of racial exclusion because the baseball establishment denied the existence of a color line, and the mainstream press conspired with their silence to protect the color line.

Americans accepted the national pastime's denials, in part, because of what Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, in his study of racism in America, called "the convenience of ignorance."<sup>38</sup> In the South racial discrimination was brutally enforced. Southerners practiced apartheid against blacks, while northerners ignored what was happening in the South and gave little mind to America's racial dilemma. "The Northerners want to hear as little as possible about the Negroes, both in the South and in the North. The result is an astonishing ignorance about the Negro on the part of the white public in the North," Myrdal wrote. "There are many educated Northerners who are well informed about poverty in foreign countries but almost absolutely ignorant about the Negro condition both in their own city and in the nation as a whole."<sup>39</sup> In the two Americas of the 1930s and 1940s, white Americans had little understanding of black America. White Americans may have known the names of a few black musicians, singers, and writers. But they knew nothing about most black musicians, singers, or writers, nor did they know anything about black doctors, lawyers, politicians, educators, journalists, and businessmen, because white newspapers ignored them. Most blacks went about their days, their weeks and months, invisible to whites. "I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me," Ralph Ellison wrote in his novel *Invisible Man*. "Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination — indeed, everything and anything except me."<sup>40</sup>

White sports fans, even casual fans, knew the names of black athletes who competed against whites in the Olympics or in sports such as boxing and college football because those athletes' names appeared regularly in the sports pages. White sportswriters wrote glowingly about Jesse Owens. They condemned Adolf Hitler for reportedly refusing to shake the sprinter's hand but said nothing of the white American coaches and athletes who would not shake Owens's hand. White sportswriters applauded Owens as a first-rate athlete and a shining example

of how American democracy was superior to German fascism and racism but gave little mind to Owens's returning to the United States a third-class citizen. White sportswriters accepted Owens and Joe Louis as long as they remained silent and submissive and accepted their place in society. While blacks could be superior to the best of white athletes, they could never be equal to the least of whites in a restaurant or at a drinking fountain. Once back in the United States, Owens was no longer treated as an epic hero but as just another black person. Owens had found glory for a few days in Nazi Germany but returned to find his opportunities limited in the United States, never able to fulfill his tremendous potential as either an athlete or a man.

White sportswriters rarely wrote about racism in either sport or society. They did, however, frequently write about black athletes, and when they did so, they relied on racist stereotypes and characterizations. Westbrook Pegler, the influential columnist who got his start as a sportswriter, referred to black sprinters as "African savages" and called Joe Louis "the colored boy" and "a cotton-field Negro." Paul Gallico of the *New York Daily News* wrote that Louis "lives like an animal, fights like an animal, has all the cruelty and ferocity of a wild thing." Bill Corum of the *New York Journal American* wrote the following about Louis: "He's a big, superbly built Negro youth who was born to listen to jazz music, eat a lot of fried chicken, play ball with the gang on the corner, and never do a lick of heavy work he could escape." The southern-born Grantland Rice called boxer Jack Johnson "the Smoke" and "the Chocolate Champ," characterized Jesse Owens's performance at the Berlin Olympics as "a wild Zulu running amuck," and, in conversation, referred to Owens and later Jackie Robinson as "niggers." Furthermore, Rice, like other sportswriters, denigrated the success of black athletes by saying that their skill was "a matter of instinct" and not hard work, as was the case with white athletes. In his biography of Grantland Rice, Charles Fountain said Rice was a bigot by today's standards but was not unusual by the standards of his day and must be judged by them. "As such," Fountain concluded, "it can

be served by no apologies or defenses, and deserves damnation less than it deserves understanding."<sup>41</sup>

Writers should be judged in the context of their times, but they should not be excused simply because they lived and worked when racial epithets and stereotypes were acceptable. Their actions deserve understanding, but they also deserve damnation. If sportswriters merely used racist stereotypes or if they were unaware of blacks with the ability to play in the Major Leagues, or even if they failed to report the existence of a color line, then maybe they could be forgiven. But this was not the case. Sportswriters did not merely ignore the color line; they defended it. They did not merely ignore racial discrimination; they practiced it. They knew that blacks had once played in organized professional baseball but did not report it. They knew Major League teams had given tryouts to blacks and promised tryouts to others and then canceled them without explanation. They neither reported it nor asked owners why there had been no tryouts. If sportswriters wrote about the color line, which was not often, they justified the absence of blacks in baseball with blatant dishonesty. They said segregation would cause race riots in the bleachers. They said that there were no blacks good enough for the big leagues. They said that neither black nor white players supported desegregation. Sportswriters bear culpability for prolonging baseball's "gentlemen's agreement" — just as baseball executives and team owners have been condemned for their role in keeping the national pastime segregated. Sportswriters reflected the views of baseball's management and served as its apologists and defenders. They served as participants in the greatest offense that baseball has exacted upon any group and left their fingerprints at the scene of the crime. They were willful conspirators in the perpetration of the color line.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, sportswriter Walter Camp regularly included blacks on his annual college football All-America team. Rice, his successor, ignored that precedent and virtually excluded blacks from his All-America team for the next three

decades. White sportswriters all but ignored the Negro leagues. When sportswriters wrote about black baseball, their articles dripped with condescension. Ted Shane, writing in the *Saturday Evening Post*, said that black baseball was to white baseball what "the Harlem stomp is to ballroom dancing." Joe Williams, for instance, manipulated quotes and distorted facts to protect segregation. He wrote that Sam Lacy said that no blacks were ready for the big leagues. Lacy said he meant that black players would require socialization with whites in the Minor Leagues before playing in the big leagues. Williams, Larry MacPhail, and others used his quote "whenever it served their purpose," Lacy said. Williams responded to the signing of Robinson by saying that Rickey had signed him because of politics and not because of his ability. As a southerner, Williams said, he had seen blacks make progress, but their progress had been impeded by "pressure groups, social frauds and political demagogues." Peter Williams, the son of Joe Williams, said a number of authors had called his father, who was born in the South, a racist. Peter Williams said that his father's views were no different from those of other sportswriters of his time. If Joe Williams was a racist, Peter said, then so were most, if not all, of the other sportswriters of the day.<sup>42</sup>

J. G. Taylor Spink, editor of the *Sporting News* and the most influential sportswriter of his time, was no different from Landis and the other grand old men of baseball, including league executives and team owners. Like the grand old men of baseball, Spink defended segregated baseball with his silence. If need be, however, he did so with words. In August 1942 he wrote an editorial saying that baseball did not have a color line but that segregation was in the best interests of both blacks and whites because the mixing of races would create race riots in the ballparks. In his column Spink also said that black players opposed integration. He stated that white players and spectators objected to desegregation, but that big league executives and team owners did not. Spink's defense of segregated baseball was largely based not on fact but on fear and prejudice. Baseball did have a color line. Blacks did want to play in the big leagues. Blacks were prohibited from playing

in white baseball because of league executives and team owners and not because of fans and players. There was no more influential sportswriter than Spink and no more influential sports publication than the *Sporting News*. Spink used that influence to perpetuate the color line. Spink and other white sportswriters said nothing about the millions of blacks and whites who wanted blacks in baseball. Spink and other white sportswriters said nothing about the sportswriters, managers, and ballplayers who had gone on record supporting blacks in baseball. Spink, instead, marginalized the campaign to desegregate baseball by blaming it on Communists and other "agitators." According to Mark Ribowsky, author of *A Complete History of the Negro Leagues, 1884-1955*, Spink "constructed the platform for the big league reactionaries . . . to rest their case, at least as long as they could get away with it."<sup>43</sup>

When Broun confronted baseball's color line in 1933, many sportswriters were present, but only Jimmy Powers reported what Broun had said. Over the next decade Powers criticized the color line more than any other mainstream sportswriter. Powers, it should be noted, also wrote for the daily newspaper with the highest circulation in the country. A relative few sportswriters raised the issue in their columns and articles. These columns did not appear particularly often, but they did appear, and as the campaign to desegregate baseball intensified, they appeared more often. Some were striking in both their poignancy and their bluntness. Yet most mainstream sportswriters said nothing. Some said nothing because they did not want to run the risk of offending their editors, readers, or advertisers. Others believed that segregation was in the best interests of both baseball and the country. Decades later Shirley Povich, who supported blacks in baseball, was asked why so few white sportswriters called for the end of the color line. "I'm afraid the sportswriters were like the club owners," he said. "They thought separate was better."<sup>44</sup>