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EDITORS

WILLIE STEELE, CO-EDITOR  
Lipscomb University

DAVID PEGRAM, CO-EDITOR  
Paradise Valley Community College

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## Jackie Robinson and Paul Robeson

*The Misunderstood Relationship Between These Activist Athletes*

PETER DREIER

### INTRODUCTION

On July 19, 1949, readers across America saw the following headlines in their daily newspapers regarding a battle between two of the country's most prominent African Americans:

- "Jackie Robinson Calls Robeson Song Off-Key" (*Miami Herald*)
- "Jackie's Views on Loyalty Refreshing Contrast to Robeson's" (*Brooklyn Daily Eagle*)
- "Jackie Raps Robeson on Race Loyalty: Negroes Would Fight for U.S. Against Reds, Dodger Star Says" (*Rochester Democrat and Chronicle*)
- "Jackie Robinson Says Robeson 'Silly'; Negroes Not Pro-Red" (*Johnson City [Tennessee] Press*)

These headlines reflect how this incident is still remembered: Jackie Robinson attacked Paul Robeson for his communist views. But the story is more complicated—and more interesting—than what these headlines might convey. This paper puts the episode in its historical context and seeks to dismantle the myths surrounding the incident.

### JACKIE ROBINSON

The grandson of a slave and the son of a sharecropper, Robinson grew up in Pasadena, California, a wealthy, conservative, and racially segregated Los Angeles suburb, where his mother worked as a maid. During Robinson's youth, Black residents were only allowed to swim in the municipal pool on

Wednesdays (the day the water was changed) and could use the YMCA only one day a week.

Robinson was a star athlete at Pasadena Junior College, then became UCLA's first four-sport athlete (football, basketball, track, and baseball). He was drafted into the army in 1942. At Fort Hood, Texas, he was assigned to an all-Black tank battalion. There on July 6, 1944, the twenty-five-year-old lieutenant boarded a military bus. He sat in the middle of the bus next to a light skinned Black wife of another Black officer. The driver instructed Robinson to go to the back of the bus. Robinson refused, knowing that buses had been officially desegregated on military bases. Two military policemen soon arrived and escorted Robinson away.

He faced trumped-up charges of insubordination, disturbing the peace, drunkenness, conduct unbecoming of an officer, insulting a civilian woman, and refusing to obey the lawful orders of a superior officer. Robinson's court-martial trial on August 2, 1944, triggered news stories in the Black press and protests by the NAACP because as an athlete, he was already a public figure. The nine military judges found Robinson not guilty. By November he was honorably discharged from the army.<sup>1</sup>

Describing the ordeal Robinson later wrote, "It was a small victory, for I had learned that I was in two wars, one against the foreign enemy, the other against prejudice at home."<sup>2</sup>

After his release from the Army, Robinson joined the Negro League's Kansas City Monarchs, playing in forty-seven games in 1945 for \$400 a month. Two years later Dodgers part-owner and general manager Branch Rickey picked Robinson to integrate the major leagues. Rickey knew that Robinson had a hot temper and strong political views, but he believed that Robinson could handle the emotional pressure.

Most accounts of baseball's integration portray it as the tale of two trailblazers—Robinson, the combative athlete, and Rickey, the shrewd strategist—battling bigotry. At a time when the other fifteen owners rejected integration, Rickey deserves credit as a pioneer.<sup>3</sup>

But it was also a political victory brought about by a social protest movement. Rickey's plan came after more than a decade of effort by Black and left-wing journalists and activists to desegregate the national pastime. Black newspapers, a few white newspaper columnists, and the Communist Party's *Daily Worker* published open letters to owners demanding integration and polled white managers and players to demonstrate that most were willing to accept Black players on their teams. They brought Black players to unscheduled major league tryouts during spring training, insisting that they be given a chance to demonstrate their talents.

The New York Trade Union Athletic Association, a coalition of progressive unions, organized an "end Jim Crow in baseball" day of protest at the 1940 World's Fair in New York. Unions and civil rights groups also picketed outside Yankee Stadium, the Polo Grounds, and Ebbets Field in New York; Comiskey Park and Wrigley Field in Chicago; and Wrigley Field in Los Angeles, where the minor league Angels played.

This was all part of a broader movement to eliminate discrimination in housing, jobs, and other sectors of society. It included protests against segregation within the military, mobilizing for a federal antilynching law, marches to open up defense jobs to Black people during World War II, and boycotts against stores that refused to hire African Americans, under the banner "Don't shop where you can't work." The movement accelerated after the war when returning Black veterans expected that America would open up opportunities for African Americans.<sup>4</sup>

In his rookie year, and subsequent years, Robinson endured more verbal, psychological, and physical abuse than any professional athlete before or since. Pitchers threw at Robinson's head. Infielders spiked him when he was running the bases. He received numerous death threats. Despite all of this Robinson had an incredible season and was selected as the first ever Rookie of the Year.

That year the Dodgers set road attendance records in every National League stadium except Cincinnati's Crosley Field. Robinson appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine on September 22, 1947. At the end of the season, an Associated Press poll ranked Robinson second only to singer Bing Crosby as America's "most admired man."

Robinson recognized that his opportunity to break baseball's color line was the result of a protest movement, and he repaid that debt many times over through his own participation in the civil rights struggle. By 1949 he was an established star and became increasingly outspoken in media interviews, his newspaper column, and his many off-season speeches. In February, while speaking to a sociology class at City College in New York, he told students that he supported Danny Gardella, a former New York Giants outfielder who Commissioner A. B. "Happy" Chandler had barred from Major League Baseball for five years because he jumped to the Mexican League for a year. Robinson endorsed Gardella's lawsuit challenging the blacklist, the reserve clause, and baseball's antitrust exemption.<sup>5</sup>

By mid-July of the 1949 season, Robinson was leading the National League in five categories: batting average, hits, RBIs, runs, and stolen bases. Fans gave Robinson the second most votes for the All-Star team, right after Ted Williams.

#### PAUL ROBESON

Born in 1898 to a former runaway slave, Robeson won a four-year academic scholarship to Rutgers University. Despite violence and racism from teammates, he won fifteen varsity letters in four sports: football, baseball, basketball, and track. He was twice named to the All-American football team. He received the Phi Beta Kappa key in his junior year, belonged to the Cap and Skull Honor Society, and graduated as valedictorian of his 1919 graduating class.

Robeson worked his way through Columbia Law School while playing professional football, graduating in 1923. He took a job with a law firm but left when a white secretary refused to take dictation from him. He quit practicing law to use his artistic talents in theater and music.

From the mid-1920s to the mid-1940s, Robeson's many talents made him an international celebrity. He was a highly successful film and stage actor. In his deep baritone voice, he sang opera, show tunes, Negro spirituals, and international songs in twenty-five languages. His concerts drew huge audiences. His recordings sold well.

Robeson was radicalized by his experience with racism in the US and by his visits to Europe, where he met leaders of anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements—in Germany, specifically, he saw firsthand the threat of fascism. He performed benefit concerts for progressive causes in the United States, Europe, Africa, and the Soviet Union. He also donated proceeds of film screenings and concerts to Jewish refugees fleeing Hitler's Germany and to forces fighting fascism in the Spanish Civil War. In 1938 he visited Spain, singing to wounded soldiers in a hospital and meeting with antifascist troops on the battlefield.

Furthermore Robeson sang and spoke at rallies of striking workers and peace festivals around the world. During World War II he entertained troops at the front and sang battle songs on the radio. He participated in benefit concerts on behalf of the war effort. He also sang the Star Spangled Banner with shipyard workers in Oakland, California, in 1942.

Ironically Robeson helped pave the way for Robinson's breakthrough. In December 1943, Robeson joined the publishers of leading Black newspapers at a meeting with baseball's owners and Commissioner Kenesaw Mountain Landis. Robeson gave an impassioned twenty-minute appeal for integration. "The time has come when you must change your attitude toward Negroes," he said. "Because baseball is a national game, it is up to baseball to see that discrimination does not become an American pattern. And it should do this this

year.”<sup>6</sup> The owners gave him a rousing applause, but Landis had instructed them to ask him no questions.

At a big gala dinner in 1945, the NAACP awarded Robeson the Spingarn Medal, its highest honor, with congratulations from Eleanor Roosevelt and other dignitaries.

Robeson was an outspoken critic of European and American imperialism and a strong supporter of African and Asian nations seeking to unleash themselves from the yoke of colonialism. He believed that the US should pursue cooperation rather than conflict with Russia. That stance was acceptable when Russia and the US were allies during World War II, but it became controversial after the war ended and the Red Scare began.

#### THE RED SCARE AND THE PARIS SPEECH

After the war the Red Scare intensified. It focused on warning Americans that Communists had infiltrated Hollywood, labor unions, public schools, and universities to indoctrinate Americans with “red” propaganda. School children were taught to “duck and cover” under their desks in the event of a nuclear war started by Russia.

By questioning the loyalty of Americans who supported civil rights, labor unions, and other progressive causes, Red Scare proponents sought to squash dissent by tarnishing liberals and progressive with the “communist” or “red” label. The FBI put Robeson under surveillance for his outspoken views and his leadership of organizations like the Council on African Affairs, the National Negro Congress, and the American Crusade Against Lynching that it considered to be communist.<sup>7</sup>

By 1947, as a hint of what was to come, a growing number of lecture halls, concert halls, and public schools refused to allow Robeson to give concerts or speeches. Using leaks from the FBI, reporters and columnists hounded him over his patriotism and left-wing views.

In April 1949 leftists from around the world organized a world peace conference in Paris that the American media described the meeting as a “red” or “communist” event. Robeson, in the midst of touring Europe, was invited to address the conference. When it was his turn on the platform, Robeson sang “Joe Hill,” a pro-union ballad. He then spoke extemporaneously about the plight of Black Americans. He said that neither the Russian nor the American people wanted another world war between the two countries. A “hot” war was not inevitable, he said. Responsible people should commit themselves to avoiding it.

But it didn’t matter what Robeson really said. Before he had even delivered his speech, an Associated Press (AP) reporter had already filed a story that was reprinted in hundreds of newspapers.

Here is what Robeson actually said:

“We in America do not forget that it is on the backs of the poor whites of Europe . . . and on the backs of millions of Black people the wealth of America has been acquired. And we are resolved to share it equally among our children. And we shall not put up with any hysterical raving that urges us to make war on anyone. We shall not make war on the Soviet Union.”<sup>8</sup>

Here is what the AP quoted Robeson as saying:

“We colonial peoples have contributed to the building of the United States and are determined to share in its wealth. We denounce the policy of the United States government, which is similar to that of Hitler and Goebbels . . . It is unthinkable that American Negroes would go to war on behalf of those who have oppressed us for generations against a country which in one generation has raised our people to the full human dignity of mankind.”<sup>9</sup>

The story created a firestorm. By the next day news stories, editorials, and columns were calling Robeson a Communist and a traitor for suggesting that Black Americans wouldn’t fight for their country in a war with Russia. Typical headlines included: “Negroes Won’t Fight Soviet, Says Robeson” (*New York Daily News*, April 21, 1949) and “Negroes Loyal to Russia, Says Paul Robeson” (*Florence [South Carolina] Morning News*, April 21, 1949).

#### HUAC AND THE BACKLASH

Many Black civil rights and religious leaders criticized Robeson for the remarks reported in the press. The State Department pressured NAACP leaders Roy Wilkins and Walter White to distance the organization from Robeson, who had won its highest honor, the Spingarn Medal, four years earlier.

To stir Red Scare fears, Congressional committees, including the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), held hearings about Communist infiltration of Hollywood, universities, public schools, labor unions, and various liberal and progressive groups.

HUAC's chair Congressman John Wood was a Democrat from Georgia, arch segregationist, and former Ku Klux Klan member. To isolate Robeson politically, Wood scheduled a series of hearings on "Communist Infiltration of Minority Groups" for July 13, 14, and 18, 1949, in Washington.

In fact few Black Americans embraced communism or joined the Communist Party, which never approached even 100,000 members.<sup>10</sup> But members of Congress embraced the publicity these hearings provided. So HUAC invited several Black public figures to testify about communist efforts to influence Black Americans and to rebuke Robeson. These included Lester Granger of the National Urban League, Fisk University sociologist Charles Johnson, and well-known Baptist minister Rev. Sandy Ray.

But none of those men were as famous as Jackie Robinson. In early July Wood sent Robinson a telegram inviting him to testify and then made his request public to get media attention and pressure Robinson into testifying.<sup>11</sup> More than a week before Robinson was scheduled to testify, newspapers told readers, "Baseball's Jackie Robinson Called to Tell Off Robeson," (*Los Angeles Mirror*, July 8, 1949), "Robinson Asked to Attack Robeson's Views," (*Ft. Worth Star-Telegram*, July 8, 1949), and, "Jackie Robinson vs. Paul Robeson," (*Baltimore Sun*, July 9, 1949).

Wood wanted Robinson to attack Robeson for being a disloyal American and a communist agitator who didn't speak for Black people. He hoped to orchestrate a confrontation between the country's most admired African Americans. The media salivated at the opportunity to portray the clash of these titans as a surrogate for the Cold War between capitalism and communism.

Robinson was reluctant. "I was not sure about what to do," he wrote in his 1972 autobiography *I Never Had It Made*. "I didn't want to fall prey to the white man's game and allow myself to be pitted against another black man. I knew that Robeson was striking out against racial inequality in the way that seemed best to him. However, in those days I had much more faith in the ultimate justice of the American white man than I have today."<sup>12</sup>

Branch Rickey, a fervent anti-Communist, reminded Robinson that if he refused to testify, HUAC might subpoena him anyway. Robinson also felt a sense of responsibility to convey Black Americans' loyalty. So on the morning of July 18, Robinson and his wife Rachel flew to Washington, a city where first-class hotels were still racially segregated.

#### ROBINSON'S TESTIMONY<sup>13</sup>

With the help of Rickey and the Urban League's Lester Granger, Robinson wrote and presented a carefully worded statement that walked a tightrope. As

expected, Robinson criticized Robeson, but it was far from the harsh attack that Wood and his HUAC colleagues had hoped. Instead Robinson made an impassioned demand for racial integration and challenged America's racial hypocrisy.

He began:

[It] isn't very pleasant to find myself in the middle of a public argument that has nothing to do with the standing of the Dodgers in the pennant race—or even the pay raise I am going to ask Mr. Branch Rickey for next year. But you can put me down as an expert on being a colored American, with 30 years' experience at it. And just like any other colored person with sense enough to look around him and understand what he sees, I know that life in these United States can be mighty tough for people who are a little different from the majority—in their skin color, or the way they worship their God, or the way they spell their names.

Robinson challenged HUAC's view that Black Americans' anger and activism was the result of communist agitators and criticized "racial discrimination in the Army, and segregation on trains and buses, and job discrimination because of religious beliefs or color or place of birth." Then he pivoted to the topic of communism, but he didn't say what HUAC or the media had hoped for: "[T]he fact that because it is a Communist who denounces injustice in the courts, police brutality and lynching, when it happens, doesn't change the truth of his charges . . . Negroes were stirred up long before there was a Communist Party, and they'll stay stirred up long after the party has disappeared—unless Jim Crow has disappeared by then as well."

Finally he got to Robeson. He was careful to express skepticism that Robeson had actually made the controversial remarks attributed to him in the media:

I've been asked to express my views on Paul Robeson's statement in Paris to the effect that American Negroes would refuse to fight in any war against Russia because we love Russia so much. I haven't any comment to make, except that the statement, if Mr. Robeson actually made it, sounds very silly to me. But he has a right to his personal views and if he wants to sound silly when he expresses them in public, that is his business and not mine. He's still a famous ex-athlete and a great singer and actor . . . I can't speak for any fifteen million people any more than any other one person can, but I know that I've got too much invested for my wife and child and myself in the future of this country, and I and

other Americans of many races and faiths have so much invested in our country's welfare, for any one of us to throw it away because of a siren song sung in bass.

He added, "We not going to stop fighting race discrimination in this country until we've got it licked. . . . We can win our fight without the Communists and we don't want their help."

#### PRESS COVERAGE

Robinson flew back to New York and played in a night game at Ebbets Field against the Chicago Cubs. He hit a triple, got on base with a walk, and stole second base and home plate. "Robinson Steals Cubs Dizzy for Hatten, 3-0" headlined the *Daily News*.<sup>14</sup>

Press coverage of Robinson's testimony reflected a strong anti-Robeson bias. The *New York Times* put Robinson's entire testimony on page one under the headline "Jackie Robinson Terms Stand of Robeson on Negroes False" and added an editorial against Robeson and in support of Robinson.

Some Black newspapers, as well as the *Daily Worker*, criticized Robinson for his testimony. The *Daily Worker* (July 19, 1949) said, "Jackie Robinson Aids Un-Americans With Red Baiting." Another *Daily Worker* story that day reminded readers that "Robeson Fought for Robinson." The *New York Amsterdam News* headline (July 23, 1949) read, "Jackie Rips U.S. Bias: Robeson's Statement Is Target; Dodgers' Star Says Red Program Hurts Cause Of Negro In This Country."

#### ROBESON'S RESPONSE

The backlash against Robeson was immediate. Hundreds of newspapers and columnists attacked his loyalty, called for the State Department to cancel his passport, and called for his concerts to be cancelled and his record company to fire him.

Robeson held a two-hour press conference at Harlem's Hotel Theresa to respond. He mentioned that eighty-five of his engagements had been canceled because of his political views. But Robeson refused to be drawn into a personal feud with Robinson.

"I have no quarrel with Jackie. I have a great deal of respect for him. He is entitled to his own view. I feel that the House Committee has insulted Jackie, it has insulted me, and it has insulted the entire Negro race." He added, "The

real issue is whether Negro people would permit themselves to be divided by a group such as the Un-American Activities Committee."<sup>15</sup>

Robeson criticized Wood for defending the Ku Klux Klan. He asked, rhetorically, why HUAC didn't ask Joe DiMaggio to testify about the loyalty of Italian Americans.

Most white newspapers ignored Robeson's comments, with a few exceptions like the *Daily News* story, "Robeson Says He's a Fan, Not Foe, of Jackie" (August 2, 1949). The story in *Chicago Defender*, a Black paper, was headlined, "Robeson 'Not Mad' at Jackie" (August 1, 1949). In her "My Day" syndicated column, Eleanor Roosevelt, a staunch civil rights ally and a one-time admirer of Robeson, denounced Robeson and praised Robinson, writing, "Mr. Robeson does his people great harm in trying to line the up on the Communist side of the political picture. Jackie Robinson helped them greatly by his forthright statements."<sup>16</sup>

#### AFTERMATH

Despite the orchestrated feud between the two men, Robinson and Robeson respected each other. But after the 1949 congressional hearings, their lives and careers took very different directions because of the way they were treated by the political establishment and the media.

On September 4, 1949, Robeson performed at an integrated concert before 20,000 people in Peekskill outside New York City to raise money for the leftist Civil Rights Congress. Many newspapers, columnists, and right-wing groups denounced the event. At the end of the concert, mobs hurled racist and antisemitic epithets, attacked concertgoers with baseball bats and rocks, burned crosses, burned Robeson in effigy, and smashed cars. Hundreds were injured, thirteen seriously. Police and state troopers did nothing to stop the rioters. The press largely blamed communist agitators for provoking anti-American fervor.

The next day, after *Daily Worker* sportswriter Bill Mardo told Robinson what had happened, Robinson said, "Paul Robeson should have the right to sing, speak or doing anything he wants to . . . They say here in America you're allowed to be whatever you want. I think those rioters ought to be investigated." Robinson pointed out that being a Communist was not illegal. "If Mr. Robeson wants to believe in Communism, that's his right. I prefer not to." He told Mardo that he regretted that "anything progressive is called Communism."<sup>17</sup>

Robeson was soon banished as a public figure. Many Black leaders, whose

organizations and causes Robeson had championed, were too intimidated to defend him. In 1950 the State Department revoked his passport so he couldn't perform abroad where he was still popular. Concert venues, record companies, and TV and radio stations banned him. His annual income plummeted from over \$150,000 to less than \$3,000. At a 1956 HUAC hearing, he was asked if he was a member of the Communist Party and to name other members. Robeson reminded the committee that he was a lawyer and that the Communist Party was a legal party in the United States. He closed his testimony by saying, "You gentlemen belong with the Alien and Sedition Acts, and you are the nonpatriots, and you are the un-Americans, and you ought to be ashamed of yourselves."<sup>18</sup>

In 1958 Robeson won his lawsuit in federal court and his passport was restored. In 1960 he performed in New Zealand and Australia—his last concert tour. In ill health he retired from public life in 1963. Robeson's voice was marginalized during the 1960s civil rights movement, and his name and photo were even stricken from the college All-America football teams.

By contrast Robenson was treated as a genuine American hero. The story of Robenson crossing baseball's color line is one of the most iconic episodes of American history and culture. It has been depicted in many books, films, songs, and plays, including many targeted to young people. The integration of baseball is often portrayed as a metaphor for the American dream—the story of a courageous and hard-working individual succeeding by overcoming enormous obstacles. Whenever someone becomes the first person of his or her gender, race, religion, or ethnicity to break a barrier, they are typically described as the "Jackie Robenson" of that field.

The 1950 film *The Jackie Robinson Story*, in which Robenson played himself and Rudy Dee played his wife, reinforced the image of Robenson as a symbol of wholesome Americanism. The movie opens with the white narrator saying, "This is a story of a boy and his dream. But more than that, it's a story of an American boy and a dream that is truly American."<sup>19</sup> The film acknowledges but downplays the racism that Robenson faced. At the end of the film Robenson asks Rickey whether he should go to Washington to testify before Congress. Rickey urges him to go in order to talk about "a threat to peace that's on everybody's mind," by which he obviously means Russia. In the final scene we see Robenson reading his testimony, but the words in the film are different from those he spoke at the real hearing. In the film he warns about our country being "taken from us," and says, "Democracy works for those who are willing to fight for it," but he never made either comment.<sup>20</sup> The film ignores Robenson's attack on American racism and doesn't even mention Robeson.

Throughout his playing career Robenson was criticized for speaking out against racism in baseball and society. Many sportswriters and many other players—including some Black players content simply to be playing in the majors—considered Robenson too angry, vocal, and ungrateful. *The Sporting News* headlined one 1952 story, "Robenson Should Be a Player, Not a Crusader."<sup>21</sup> A 1953 *Sport* magazine article "Why They Boo Jackie Robinson" described him as "combative," "emotional," "calculating," a "pop-off," "whiner," "showboat," and "troublemaker."<sup>22</sup>

Yet Robenson remained vocal. In 1956 the NAACP gave him its highest honor, the Spingarn Medal—the same honor it bestowed on Robeson a decade earlier. In his acceptance speech he explained that many people had warned him "not to speak up every time I thought there was an injustice," but that he would continue to do so.<sup>23</sup>

After Robenson retired from baseball, no team offered him a position as a coach, manager, or executive. He went to work as a Vice President for Chock Full o' Nuts, a New York restaurant chain, but he continued to use his public platform—in speeches, interviews, and his weekly newspaper column—to challenge racial injustice. He was a constant presence on civil rights picket lines and rallies. He also fundraised for the NAACP, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. In 1957 he publicly urged President Dwight Eisenhower to send troops to Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect Black students seeking to desegregate its public schools. Five years later he spoke at an NAACP rally in Mississippi organized by Medgar Evers, and then, at Martin Luther King Jr.'s request, he traveled to Albany, Georgia, to draw media attention to three Black churches that segregationists had burned to the ground, then raised \$50,000 to rebuild them. In 1963 he supported King's voter registration efforts in the South and traveled to Birmingham as part of King's campaign to dismantle segregation.

"His presence in the South was very important to us," recalled Wyatt Tee Walker, King's chief of staff. King called Robenson "a sit-inner before the sit-ins, a freedom rider before the Freedom Rides."<sup>24</sup>

In 1968 Robenson publicly supported track stars John Carlos and Tommie Smith's fist-raising protest at the Olympic Games in Mexico City. And Robenson wasn't done holding Major League Baseball to account, either. He refused to participate in a 1969 Old Timers game because he didn't see "genuine interest in breaking the barriers that deny access to managerial and front office positions."<sup>25</sup> At his final public appearance, after throwing the ceremonial first pitch at the 1972 World Series, Robenson again criticized baseball for not hiring Black managers and coaches.

## CONCLUSION

The mainstream media and politicians depicted Robeson and Robinson as symbols of opposing perspectives—Robeson an outspoken Communist and dangerous subversive, Robinson a patriot, a religious man, and a rugged individualist who played by the rules. In a classic strategy among white supremacists, they sought to pit them against each other for the loyalty of Black Americans and the admiration of white Americans. The two men had their differences in both politics and temperament, but they were alike in many ways, too.

Robeson considered himself a patriot. During World War II, he supported America's war effort. At a HUAC hearing in 1956, when a congressman asked him why he didn't move to Russia, Robeson replied, "Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I am going to stay here, and have a part of it just like you."<sup>26</sup>

Robinson also thought of himself as a patriotic American. He had served in the military. He frequently acknowledged the debt he owed to the United States for the opportunities it provided him. But he was also, like Robeson, angry about racism and disappointed in the country's pace of progress on civil rights. He expressed these feelings in words and deeds, including in his testimony to Congress and as an activist in the civil rights movement. Consequently the FBI was concerned about Robinson's activism and influence and kept a file on him, just as it had on Robeson.<sup>27</sup>

In 1972, near the end of his life, Robinson apologized to Robeson, writing that he would reject HUAC's invitation "if offered now." He said, "I have grown wiser and closer to the painful truths about America's destructiveness and I do have an increased respect for Paul Robeson, who, over the span of that 20 years sacrificed himself, his career and the wealth and comfort he once enjoyed because, I believe, he was sincerely trying to help his people."<sup>28</sup>

Robinson died of a heart attack and complications from diabetes at age fifty-three on October 24, 1972. Robeson died at age seventy-seven, a lonely and broken man, on January 23, 1976.

In recent years a growing number of major league players have spoken out on social issues, including racial justice. Many of these players know that they stand on Jackie Robinson's shoulders. "Every Jackie Robinson Day is special," Los Angeles Dodgers' star Mookie Betts tweeted in 2020. "His sacrifices blessed me & countless others with the opportunity to play the game we all love today. But he stood for so much more." He thanked Robinson for "paving the way."<sup>29</sup>

Meanwhile Robeson's supporters have sought to revive his name and

restore his legacy. Stage plays (including *The Tallest Tree in the Forest*) and documentary films have been produced about him, and several buildings have been named in his honor. In 2019 Rutgers University opened the Paul Robeson Plaza on its New Brunswick campus. At the dedication Opal Tometi, a founder of Black Lives Matter, said, "Robeson is so important because he paved the way for us."<sup>30</sup>

But still, Robeson remains an almost invisible figure in American history, while Robinson has become an iconic figure.<sup>31</sup>

PETER DREIER is the E. P. Clapp Distinguished Professor of Politics at Occidental College. His articles have appeared in *The Nation*, *American Prospect*, *the New York Times*, *the Los Angeles Times*, *the Washington Post*, *Dissent*, *the New Republic*, *Ms.*, *Jacobin*, *SABR*, and many scholarly journals. He has written nine books, including *Baseball Rebels: The Players, People and Movements That Shook Up the Game and Changed America* (2022) and *Major League Rebels: Baseball Battles Over Workers Rights and American Empire* (2022), both coauthored with Rob Elias; *The 100 Greatest Americans of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century: A Social Justice Hall of Fame* (2012); *Place Matters: Metropolitica for the 21st Century* (2014); and *The Next Los Angeles: The Struggle for a Livable City* (2006).

## NOTES

1. The incident is discussed in Arnold Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1997) and other Robinson biographies.

2. Jackie Robinson, *Baseball Has Done It* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1964).

3. Rickey even moved the Dodgers' spring training camp to Cuba, where Robinson would face less racist hostility than in Florida, where the team usually trained. He assigned Robinson to the Montreal Royals, its top Minor League team, for the 1946 season. The Royals traveled to segregated cities like Louisville and Baltimore, where he couldn't stay in the same hotel or eat in the same restaurants as his white teammates. Despite these difficult circumstances, Robinson led the International League with a .349 batting average and 113 runs, finished second with 40 stolen bases, and led the team to a 100–54 season and a triumph in the Minor League World Series.

4. Peter Dreier, "The Real Story of Baseball's Integration That You Won't See in 42," *The Atlantic*, April 11, 2013, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/04/the-real-story-of-baseballs-integration-that-you-wont-see-in-42/274886>; Peter Dreier, "Before Jackie Robinson: Baseball's Civil Rights Movement," in Bill Nowlin and Glen Sparks, eds., *Jackie: Perspectives on 42*, Society for American Baseball Research, 2021, 27–37, <https://sabr.org/journal/article/before-jackie-robinson-baseballs-civil-rights-movement/>; Jules Tygiel, *Baseball's Great Experiment* (New York: Oxford Uni-



versity Press, 1983); Chris Lamb, *Conspiracy of Silence: Sportswriters and the Long Campaign to Desegregate Baseball* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012); "Labor Union to Protest Major League Color Ban at New York World Fair," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 25, 1940, 16; "10,000 at Fair Petition to End Baseball Jim Crow," *Daily Worker*, July 25, 1940; Irwin Silber, *Press Box Red: The Story of Lester Rodney, the Communist Who Helped Break the Color Line in American Sports* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003); Lee Lowenfish, *Branch Rickey: Baseball's Ferocious Gentleman* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Kelly Rusinack, "Baseball on the Radical Agenda: The Daily Worker and Sunday Worker Journalistic Campaign to Desegregate Major League Baseball, 1933–1947," in Joseph Dorinson and Joram Warmund, eds., *Jackie Robinson: Race, Sports, and the American Dream* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1998); David K. Wiggins, "Wendell Smith, The Pittsburgh Courier and the Campaign to Include Blacks in Organized Baseball 1933–1945," *Journal of Sport History* 10, no. 2 (Summer 1983): 5–29; Henry Fetter, "The Party Line and the Color Line: The American Communist Party, the 'Daily Worker,' and Jackie Robinson," *Journal of Sport History* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2001): 375–402.

5. "Gardella Has Case"—Jackie," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 26, 1949; David Mandell, "Danny Gardella and the Reserve Clause," *The National Pastime* 26, 2006, <https://sabr.org/journal/article/danny-gardella-and-the-reserve-clause/>; Charlie Weatherby, "Danny Gardella," Society for American Baseball Research, accessed September 11, 2023, <https://sabr.org/bioproj/person/danny-gardella/>.

6. Martin Duberman, *Paul Robeson* (New York: The New Press, 1995), 282–83; Wendell Smith, "Publishers Place Case of Negro Players Before Big League Owners," *Pittsburgh Courier*, December 11, 1943.

7. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 296–335. When Robeson was summoned before the Senate and asked about his affiliation with the Communist Party, he refused to answer, stating: "Some of the most brilliant and distinguished Americans are about to go to jail for the failure to answer that question, and I am going to join them, if necessary."

8. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 342; Gilbert King, "What Paul Robeson Said," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 13, 2011, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/what-paul-roberson-said-77742433/>.

9. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 342.

10. The Communist Party was one of the few organizations engaged in militant action to address racism, women's equality, antisemitism, and emerging fascism in Europe. Many non-Communists participated in CP-sponsored reading and drama clubs, adult education classes, sports leagues, and youth and choral groups. A few prominent Black Americans, including Richard Wright, Chester Himes, Ralph Ellison, Claude McKay, Louise Thompson Patterson, Langston Hughes, and Robeson, had close ties to the CP. See Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem During the Depression* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2004); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–36* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi,

1998); Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1964); Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004); Hosea Hudson and Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson, His Life As a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979); Robin Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

11. Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 211.

12. Jackie Robinson, *I Never Had it Made: An Autobiography of Jackie Robinson* (New York: Putnam, 1972), 83.

13. C. P. Trussell, "Jackie Robinson Terms Stand of Robeson On Negroes False," *New York Times*, July 19, 1949, <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1949/07/19/issue.html>; Joseph Dorinson, "Paul Robeson and Jackie Robinson: Athletes and Activists at Armageddon," *Pennsylvania History*, Winter 1999, 16–26.

14. "Robinson Steals Cubs Dizzy for Hatten, 3–0," *New York Daily News*, July 19, 1949. For a record of Robinson's performance in that game, see "Brooklyn Dodgers 3, Chicago Cubs 0," Retrosheet, accessed September 11, 2023, <https://www.retrosheet.org/boxesetc/1949/B07180BRO1949.htm>

15. Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 215; "Jackie's Entitled to Call Him Silly, Robeson Asserts," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, August 2, 1949; "Robeson Says He's a Fan, Not Foe, of Jackie," *New York Daily News*, August 2, 1949; Philip Foner, ed., "Let's Not Be Divided," in *Paul Robeson Speaks* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1978), 21; Ronald Smith, "The Paul Robeson—Jackie Robinson Saga and a Political Collision," *Journal of Sport History* 6, no. 2 (Summer 1979): 5–27.

16. Duberman, *Paul Robeson*, 361.

17. *Daily Worker*, August 29, 1949; Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 216.

18. King, "What Paul Robeson Said."

19. *The Jackie Robinson Story*, directed by Alfred E. Green (Los Angeles: Eagle-Lion Films, Inc., 1950; Beverly Hills: MGM Home Video, 2001), DVD.

20. *The Jackie Robinson Story*, Alfred E. Green.

21. "Robinson Should Be a Player—Not a Crusader," *The Sporting News*, December 10, 1952.

22. Milton Gross, "Why They Boo Jackie Robinson," *Sport*, February 1953.

23. Rampersad, *Jackie Robinson*, 302–03.

24. Martin Luther King, "Hall of Famer," *New York Amsterdam News*, August 4, 1962.

25. Peter Dreier, "Jackie Robinson: A Legacy of Activism," *The American Prospect*, January 31, 2019, <https://prospect.org/civil-rights/jackie-robinson-legacy-activism/>

26. Testimony of Paul Robeson before the House Committee on Un-American Activities, June 12, 1956, <https://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6440>

27. "Jackie Robinson's FBI Files," [paperlessarchives.com](http://paperlessarchives.com), accessed September 11, 2023, <https://www.paperlessarchives.com/robinson.html>; "Jack Roosevelt (Jackie) Robinson Part 5 of 5," FBI Records: The Vault, accessed September 11, 2023, <https://vault.fbi.gov/Jack%20Roosevelt%20%28Jackie%29%20Robinson/Jack%20Roosevelt%20%28Jackie%29%20Robinson%20Part%205%20of%205/view>

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