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# **THE NEGRO SOLDIER (1944): FILM PROPAGANDA IN BLACK AND WHITE**

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AFTER YEARS DURING WHICH BLACKS AND POLICE ENGAGED IN PITCHED battles in small Southern towns and large Northern cities, Nicholas Katzenbach, Attorney General under Lyndon B. Johnson, termed television "the central means of making a private moral conviction public, of impelling people all over to see and confront ideas they otherwise would turn away from." Black activists considered television, in the words of a network producer, "the chosen instrument of the black revolution."<sup>1</sup> But television was not the first electronic medium used to further social change. The United States Army's orientation film, *The Negro Soldier*, released in January 1944, is one of those rare instances which allows the historian of mass media to speak confidently about conception, execution, and—to a degree—results both intended and unintended, of a specific controversial film. The uses eventually made of the Army's motion picture illustrate the difficulty of gauging in advance the impact of mass communication on social change.

During World War II the Army was officially committed to maintaining existing patterns of segregation. But the liberal rhetoric of official war aims proved fatal to thoughts of maintaining the *status quo* at home. By inducting 875,000 Negroes into a fighting force of some twelve million, the Army discovered that it was operating a social relations laboratory.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Thomas Cripps, "The Noble Black Savage: A Problem in the Politics of Television Art," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 8 (Spring 1975), 687-95.

<sup>2</sup> See Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops: Special Studies* (Washington, D. C.: Office of Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, G.P.O., 1966), a volume in the official series, *The United States Army in World War II*; see also Richard M. Dalfiume, *Desegregation of the United States Armed Forces: Fighting on Two Fronts, 1939-1953* (Columbia, Mo.: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1969); and Alan M. Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces During World War II: The Problem of Race Relations* (Washington, D. C.: Office of Air Force History, G.P.O., 1977).

In spite of the wishes of many whites, the Army became a half-way house for those who believed that wartime should bring substantial racial progress.

The relationship between racial tensions and film can best be explained by a metaphor. The biologist defines symbiosis as an association of two different organisms which live attached to each other and contribute to each other's support. This article will describe the making and distribution of *The Negro Soldier* as an example of social symbiosis, for the idea did not come from one person, but emerged from a coalition of four wary interest groups which came together in antagonistic cooperation. The film offered important lessons to those who made post-war Hollywood "message" films, while black pressure groups discovered a new way to further social change through the distribution of motion pictures.

In retrospect, the four groups and their aims are easy to identify. First is the Army itself. By the time of Pearl Harbor both civilian and military leaders in America recognized motion pictures as a significant propaganda medium; they believed film could instill in citizens a spirit of patriotism and a will to fight.<sup>3</sup> Chief of Staff George C. Marshall believed that film should play a major military role in wartime.<sup>4</sup> Convinced that lectures about patriotism and recent history generally made no impact on draftees, he concluded that film could present serious material in a lively and interesting fashion. Thanks to Marshall, the Army chose Hollywood's Frank Capra to head an elite film unit assigned to make feature-length morale films intended to build enthusiasm for official war aims. To Marshall the key to morale for the educated soldier was to give a reason for fighting.<sup>5</sup> Capra's *Why We Fight* series, mandatory viewing for every

<sup>3</sup> Roger Manvell, *Films and the Second World War* (South Brunswick, N. J.: A. S. Barnes, 1974); David Culbert, "Walt Disney's Private Snafu: The Use of Humor in World War II Army Film," in Jack Salzman, ed., *Prospects: An Annual Journal of American Cultural Studies*, 1 (Dec. 1975), 80-96, and Richard Dyer MacCann, *The People's Films: A Political History of U.S. Government Motion Pictures* (New York: Hastings House, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> For an introduction see Richard Griffith, "The Use of Films by the U.S. Armed Forces," in Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (3d ed.; London: Faber and Faber, 1952), 344-58; on Marshall see Forrest C. Pogue, *George C. Marshall: Organizer of Victory 1943-1945* (New York: Viking, 1975), 91-92; Frank Capra, *The Name Above the Title: An Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 325-70; and three official histories from *The United States in World War II: Dulany Terrett, The Signal Corps: The Emergency (To December 1941)* (Washington, D. C.: Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Army, G.P.O., 1956), 78-82, 223-30; George Raynor Thompson et al., *The Signal Corps: The Test (December 1941 to July 1943)* (Washington, D. C., 1957), 387-426; and George Raynor Thompson and Dixie R. Harris, *The Signal Corps: The Outcome (Mid-1943 Through 1945)* (Washington, D. C., 1966), 540-79.

<sup>5</sup> There is a vast literature about morale and its importance. See Wesley Frank Craven and James Lea Cate, eds., *Services Around the World*, vol. VII of *The Army Air Forces in World War II* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1958), 431-76, for a good introduction to the

soldier, defined official war aims in a way no other medium could match. Marshall hoped that a Capra-unit film about the Negro would provide a reason why racial tolerance was necessary to a unified military effort.

Capra's credentials for his assignment were considerable. A Sicilian immigrant, he began his Hollywood career by working on comic short subjects. Every film he made in the 1930s showed the "little guy" as eventually triumphant, a message bound to find a sympathetic reception in hard times. Above all, Capra's name became synonymous with the box office: no other Hollywood director could match his unbroken string of hits: *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936), *Lost Horizon* (1937), *You Can't Take It With You* (1938), *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), and *Meet John Doe* (1941). Capra was living proof that the American Dream did come true; to him patriotism was a high calling, though he masked his ardor with a deft comic touch. Capra's War Department film unit quickly attracted many of Hollywood's most talented cutters, scriptwriters, and directors. When the unit's first *Why We Fight* film, *Prelude to War*, appeared in November 1942, Capra's preeminent position in military filmmaking was assured.<sup>6</sup>

The second group is the blacks themselves, who saw World War II as a time to bring an end to longstanding discrimination. To black America, Franklin D. Roosevelt's Four Freedoms—freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from fear, and freedom from want—were totally incompatible with segregation. The desires of black America must not be measured by the standard of today's activist rhetoric. In World War II most Negroes sought "racial tolerance" as a first step. Though there was violence, particularly race riots in Detroit and Harlem, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), headed by Walter White, looked to the courts, and to white liberals, to bring about gradual change.

Earlier government films relating to blacks suggested progress more glacial than gradual. In World War I official Signal Corps footage used

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problem. The scientific study of morale was an outgrowth of World War I. See Edward L. Munson, *The Management of Men: A Handbook on the Systematic Development of Morale and the Control of Human Behavior* (New York: H. Holt and Co. 1921); Munson's son became Capra's superior in I&E; he too wrote a widely used guide to morale: Colonel Edward Lyman Munson, Jr., *Leadership for American Army Leaders*, in *The Fighting Forces Series* (rev. ed.; Washington, D. C.: The Infantry Journal, 1944).

<sup>6</sup> Production files for "Prelude to War" are located in 062.2 ocsigo, Box 1, Records of the Chief Signal Officer, RG 111, Film Section, National Archives, where a viewing print may also be found [hereafter FS-NA]. See also 062.2 ocsigo, Box 12, A52-248, Washington National Records Center, Suitland, Maryland, for additional production material [hereafter WNRC-Suitland]. Concerning the optimism of Capra's films see Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), 205-14.

Negroes for comic relief. During the 1930s, Pare Lorentz's conservationist films, *The Plow That Broke the Plains* and *The River*, contained only a few black faces. The first two years of the war saw little change. Blacks were patronized in the few films with specific Negro themes released by federal agencies, either by overpraising Jim Crow schools (*Negro Colleges in Wartime*), or by celebrating "safe" heroes such as George Washington Carver.

*Henry Browne, Farmer*, a Department of Agriculture film, failed to convince anyone that racial tolerance was desirable. Browne was the perfect obedient Negro: possessor of forty acres, some chickens, a son in the black 99th Pursuit Squadron, and a willingness to grow peanuts because his country needed their oil. To make matters worse, a low budget made the entire enterprise look second-rate. The Negro journalist who originally suggested the idea termed the finished product "an insipid little story far from our original purpose."<sup>7</sup>

Something more substantial was needed because the 1940 Selective Service Act prohibited racial discrimination. The Army looked to Negro manpower. At the same time, military compliance with segregation somehow did not, as the approved Army manual phrased it, "endorse any theory of racial superiority or inferiority."<sup>8</sup> The resulting situation was made worse by a pervasive hostility toward Negro soldiers, who tended to score lowest on the Army General Classification Tests. Deputy Chief of Staff Joseph T. McNarney voiced a prevalent Army attitude: "there is no use having colored troops standing by and eating their heads off if their lack of aptitude is such that they can never be used overseas."<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Claude A. Barnett, head of the Associated Negro Press, to Victor Roudin, copy, March 26, 1953, in Barnett MSS, Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Ill. As one black critic suggested, "Is there only one Negro family in the war and is the only thing they are doing farming?" William Ashby, Springfield [Ill.] Urban League, to Elmer Davis, Box 1431, entry 264, RG 208. Prints of both films are located in FS-NA. An official OWI analysis of *Negro Colleges in Wartime* is located in Box 1490, entry 271, RG 208; the script is in Box 1569, entry 302, RG 208; Box 1571, entry 302, RG 208, has nearly fifty photographs "taken for Negro Colleges but scenes not included in film"; stills from *Henry Browne, Farmer* are in Box 1569, entry 302, RG 208; the lack of appeal of *Negro Colleges in Wartime* is discussed in "Distribution of and Use of OWI Non-theatrical Films in April 1943," Box 1483, entry 268, RG 208, where only one film of all in OWI distribution had fewer bookings per print. All in WNRC-Suitland.

<sup>8</sup> [Donald Young], *Leadership and the Negro Soldier*, Manual M5 (Oct. 1944), 4. In keeping with wartime practice the author's name is not given. Culbert interview with Donald Young, Macungie, Pa., February 13, 1977. A copy of Manual M5 is located in Box 1011, Records of the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Manpower Personnel & Reserve, Record Group 330, Modern Military Records, National Archives, Washington, D. C. [hereafter MMR-NA].

<sup>9</sup> Secret Minutes, Meeting of General Council, May 31, 1943, 3-4, 334 cos, Box 30, Records of the Office of Chief of Staff, RG 165, MMR-NA.

Bitter racial prejudice did not distinguish among aptitude scores. Lacking an effective means of mass persuasion, the Army could only place "excessive faith in the effectiveness of hortatives" as a means of encouraging black and white soldiers to fight together for democracy. This approach was not enough. Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson's Civilian Aide for Negro Affairs, William Hastie, collected a file of outrageous racial incidents in which black soldiers, trained for the most part in the South, had been beaten by local rednecks. Such incidents, reported in the black press, offered a compelling reason for Negroes to reject official pleas for wartime unity.<sup>10</sup>

A group of leading social scientists employed by the Army's Information and Education Division (I&E) felt that scientific research could identify precisely what kind of film might bring white and black America closer together; these civilians made up the third group, and they wanted a documentary film about the Negro.<sup>11</sup> The idea for using motion pictures for persuasion was greatly aided by the fact that Capra's unit and the Research Branch worked side-by-side in I&E.

Brigadier General Frederick H. Osborn headed the Division. A wealthy New Yorker without prior military service, Osborn had family connections and a flair for administration. His father was one of Stimson's close friends, and an uncle, Henry Fairfield Osborn, had been largely responsible for bringing New York's Museum of Natural History to international prominence. Osborn, a board member of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), had a scholarly study of eugenics to his credit. He came to the Army persuaded that morale could be determined by scientific means, and that traditional morale boosters—sports, camp songfests, "decks of cards and dice and tonettes"—belonged to a bygone era.<sup>12</sup> Osborn's advocacy, together with the support of both Marshall and Stimson, proved crucial to the military's adoption of both film and social science research.

Osborn was in an ambivalent position. Personally interested in statistical research, he headed a division concerned more with practical education and morale services within the Army than matters of sampling technique. I&E represented an unstable alliance between Capra's faith in film as entertainment, and faith in film as pedagogical tool, the latter the

<sup>10</sup> Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 330.

<sup>11</sup> For a fine discussion of I&E see Neil Minihan, "A History of the Information and Education Division," manuscript loaned to Culbert. Also helpful is "Study of I&E Activities in World War II," typewritten, copy in Box 1, Francis Spaulding MSS, Archives of Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Donald Young, February 13, 1977; telephone interview with Frederick Osborn, November 5, 1976; telephone interview with Paul Horgan, November 10, 1976; Osborn, *Preface to Eugenics* (New York: Harper, 1940).

attitude of Samuel Stouffer, the University of Chicago sociologist who headed the professional staff of the Research Branch.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, everyone in I&E shared an ardent belief in salesmanship. Wartime was no time for recondite speculation. Ideas were measured by their practical value. Capra needed no instruction in sales techniques: since the days of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939) he had been selling democracy in his feature films. Less familiar, however, is the hucksterism of the social scientists. The Research Branch published its findings in *What the Soldier Thinks*, where numerous graphs and charts promoted the technique of "scientific" sampling along with practical results assured by asking questions incapable of complex answers.<sup>14</sup>

The social scientists realized that a morale film about race relations was a perfect place to test ideas about social engineering.<sup>15</sup> This outgrowth of behaviorial psychology argued that human behavior could be manipulated towards socially desirable goals. Critics of industrial societies had long complained that as technology spread its benefits, it also eroded traditional values. Stouffer and Donald Young, the War Department's official expert on race relations, believed that a "humane" or "liberal" use of film could reaffirm the values of a democratic society.<sup>16</sup> They also accepted a doctrine employed by most American propagandists in World War II—the "strategy of truth" or "propaganda of fact."<sup>17</sup> One was scrupulous about that which supported one's side while passing over the

<sup>13</sup> Culbert interview with Donald Young, February 13, 1977; letter of Young to Culbert, December 27, 1976.

<sup>14</sup> Stouffer publicized his attitude surveys in *What the Soldier Thinks*, complete copies of which are found in RG 330, MMR-NA, along with supporting unpublished data. In summary form they appear in Samuel A. Stouffer, et al., *Studies in Social Psychology in World War II: Vol. I, The American Soldier: Adjustment During Army Life; Vol. II, Combat and Its Aftermath; Vol. III, Experiments on Mass Communication; Vol. IV, Measurement and Prediction* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949-50). The methodology of these surveys is brilliantly attacked in Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes* (New York: Vintage, 1973), in particular 259-302.

<sup>15</sup> A good discussion of social engineering is found in Robert K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (rev. ed; Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), in particular chapter 16, "Science and Democratic Social Structure." See also Alvin M. Weinberg, "Can Technology Replace Social Engineering," in Albert H. Teich, ed., *Technology and Man's Future* (New York: St. Martins, 1972), 27-35. For the origin of the term see H. S. Person, "Engineering," in Edwin R. A. Seligman, et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, volume V-VI (New York, 1931), 542.

<sup>16</sup> For Young's pre-war work see his *Motion Pictures: A Study in Social Legislation* (Philadelphia: Westbrook, 1922); he also edited two special issues of the *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: The American Negro*, 90 (1928) and *Minority Peoples in a Nation at War*, 223 (1942).

<sup>17</sup> For a good discussion of the problem see Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "The Psychological Analysis of Propaganda," in *Writers' Congress. The Proceedings of the Conference Held in October 1943 under the Sponsorship of the Hollywood Writers' Mobilization and the University of California* (Berkeley, Cal., 1944), 362-80.

rest in silence. The result often sounded like a lawyer's brief pretending to objectivity.

The fourth group was the Hollywood film community. The fact that Capra's unit was staffed with regulars from the major studios, and that the films were actually made in Hollywood, meant that military filmmaking was followed on a daily basis. *The Negro Soldier* played a significant part in furthering a dramatic shift in the kinds of roles blacks received in feature films; after 1945 the era of the "message" film was at hand. Only *The Negro Soldier*, of all wartime films depicting blacks, actually tried to weave the Negro into the fabric of American life; this characteristic made the Army's film a model for filmmakers wishing to break through ingrained industry stereotypes.

Before 1939, virtually every black role was intended as comic relief.<sup>18</sup> The War Department's officer's training manual, *Leadership and the Negro Soldier*, described this stock figure vividly: "When the Negro is portrayed in the movies, or elsewhere, as a lazy, shiftless, no-good, slew-footed, happy-go-lucky, razor-toting, tap-dancing vagrant, a step has been taken in the direction of fixing this mental picture of the Negro in the minds of whites."<sup>19</sup> The NAACP's Walter White went to Hollywood twice in 1942 to urge a better future for blacks in feature films.<sup>20</sup> White, according to producer Darryl F. Zanuck of Twentieth Century-Fox, wanted Negroes "used as often as possible in the more heroic roles—in the positions which they occupy in real life."<sup>21</sup> In *Sahara* (1943), a black even acted as spokesman for democratic values. But such roles, however well-intentioned, were but more sophisticated versions of earlier attempts which overpraised Negro colleges.

To understand *The Negro Soldier* as a product of Hollywood technique and social science prescriptions, it is necessary to follow the evolution of the script. In March 1942 Frank Capra asked the Research Branch to draw up a list of "do's and don'ts" regarding the cinematic depiction of blacks. Sociologist Donald Young, who had devoted his pre-war career to the study of racial minorities and the impact of motion pictures, prepared a memorandum filled with well-meaning cautions, the ideas of a liberal who above all sought racial tolerance: avoid stereotypes such as the Negroes' alleged affinity for watermelon or pork; also avoid strong images of racial identity ("play down colored soldiers most Negroid in appearance" and

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1977).

<sup>19</sup> *Leadership and the Negro Soldier*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Cripps, *Slow Fade to Black*, 375–76.

<sup>21</sup> Zanuck to screenwriter Eric Knight, July 22, 1942, Eric Knight MSS, Quakertown, Penna.



omit “Lincoln, emancipation, or any race leaders or friends of the Negro”). Young also favored intraracial politesse: “Show colored officers in command of troops, but don’t play them up too much. The Negro masses have learned that colored men who get commissions tend to look down on the masses.”<sup>22</sup>

The first script for *The Negro Soldier* was prepared by Marc Connelly. As writer for *Green Pastures* (1930) he had a reputation for sympathetic treatment of Negro themes.<sup>23</sup> Connelly began working in Washington in May 1942 and followed Capra to Hollywood when the unit moved there in June. The script, which has disappeared, was deemed “too dramatic” for the Army’s tastes. A second draft, prepared by Ben Hecht and Jo Swerling, was also rejected because I&E continued to insist that the Negro film be “documentary”—i.e., an example of the “propaganda of fact.”<sup>24</sup>

During script revisions, Capra gave little attention to the project; in fact, he planned to assign the film to his friend William Wyler, but the latter “got a better offer from the Air Force.” In the fall of 1942 Capra chose Stuart Heisler, a comparatively young director (see Figure 1).<sup>25</sup> Heisler already had extensive experience as a studio technician and seemed knowledgeable about racial matters after having made *The Biscuit Eater*, a 1940 film shot on location in Georgia with an interracial cast. Heisler immediately accepted the offer, asking only that Capra provide him with “somebody that *really* knows the background of the Negro.”<sup>26</sup>

As a result, Carlton Moss, a black writer, was pressed into service. Moss had attended Columbia University and had worked for the Federal Theater Project under John Houseman, who in turn recommended him to Capra. According to both Heisler and Moss the two “hit it off like magic.” Moss remembers working on his version of the script in Washington at the Library of Congress, but not because it put him near the books he needed. It was hard to write about racial harmony while eating in Jim Crow restaurants; the Library’s cafeteria was an unsegregated “oasis.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>22</sup> “Suggested Motion Picture of the Negro in the U.S. Army,” n.d. [Mar. 1942], copy in Young to Culbert, December 27, 1976; the final memorandum is discussed in Lee, *Employment of Negro Troops*, 387; Culbert interview with Donald Young, February 13, 1977.

<sup>23</sup> Capra, *Name Above the Title*, 337.

<sup>24</sup> Carlton Moss to Donald Young, August 26, 1942; Box 224, Records of the Civilian Aide to the Secretary of War (Hastie File), RG 107, MMR-NA.

<sup>25</sup> Cripps interview with Frank Capra, La Quinta, Cal., December 31, 1976; Axel Madsen, *William Wyler: The Authorized Biography* (New York: Crowell, 1973), 224–25.

<sup>26</sup> Cripps telephone interview with Stuart Heisler, February 17, 1977.

<sup>27</sup> Cripps interviews with Carlton Moss, Hollywood, Cal., June 1970; Boston, Mass., April 1973; Iowa City, Iowa, July, 1974. Moss attended Morgan State College and wrote radio scripts for Dr. Channing Tobias, head of the black YMCA.



Figure 1. *The Negro Soldier* was directed by Stuart Heisler, shown here at left. Copy in Stuart Heisler MSS, Theater Arts Library, UCLA. (Courtesy of UCLA.)

Shooting began in January 1943. Heisler, Moss, Research Branch representative Charles Dollard, and a camera crew travelled the United States, visiting nineteen Army posts, virtually every location where black troops trained in large numbers. In Philadelphia, Donald Young arranged for added scenes to be shot at the homes of prominent Negroes. Heisler prepared a number of sequences in which black officers directed the training of soldiers. Most of this footage never appeared because the final version relied more on a docudrama than a documentary style.

The finished film, 43 minutes long, received official approval in January 1944.<sup>28</sup> *The Negro Soldier* (OF 51) unfolded in classic studio style, with a narrative spinning out a flashback device, flawless lighting, and technically perfect optical effects punctuating the sequences. To black audiences, in particular, this technical quality was especially significant. Never before had a film purporting to document black American achievement been made with such professional competence. At the same time, the movie served the Army as propaganda for both black and white troops and as a teacher of comradely regard across racial lines without explicitly violating Army policy toward racial segregation.

A summary of the film's visual content shows how this was accomplished. Neat, clean, orderly, responsible, patriotic: these are the middle-class values which the film presents in image after image. Following the opening credits, a wide establishing shot places us in a splendid stone Gothic church. From the point of view of the congregation we see a black soldier, in uniform, singing a solo; we hear a chorus of extraordinary ability. As the last notes fade away a handsome young preacher (played by Carlton Moss) turns from his prepared text to introduce representative soldiers in the pews.<sup>29</sup> The camera cuts to a sailor, a soldier, even a beautiful light-skinned WAC, "Private Parks, First Class." "First class, indeed," says the preacher with undisguised pride.

The well-dressed, attentive congregation, full of servicemen in uniform, inspires Moss to reflect on the achievements of black Americans: newsreel clips show Joe Louis with his "American fist" recovering the heavyweight championship from Max Schmeling; black athletes defeat Nazi Germany's best at the 1936 Berlin Olympic games. It seems that black America is showing the world what democratic competition can do, and what happens when a Negro gets a fair chance to compete on equal terms. Moss reminds his congregation that the war is being fought to

<sup>28</sup> A copy of the original version of OF 51 is found in FS-NA.

<sup>29</sup> A complete copy of the final photographic scenario, May 31, 1943, plus an earlier version dated September 17, 1942, may be found in proj. 6022, 062.2 ocsigo, Box 12, A52-248, WNRC-Suitland. Moss ended up playing the preacher himself only after rejecting a succession of Hollywood Negroes who seemed tied to traditional black acting styles.

defend the American way of life. A Nazi training film shows Schmeling learning to be a parachutist; more newsreel footage shows Joe Louis, in uniform, going through Army basic training. Moss produces a copy of *Mein Kampf* and reads a passage in which Hitler describes the futility of teaching a "half-ape" to be a doctor or lawyer. The congregation looks appropriately shocked to learn what the Nazis really think about Negroes (see Figure 2).

Moss then reflects upon the heroism of blacks in earlier American wars. To recreate historic battles, Heisler used neither complete reenactment nor mere reproduction of old paintings and engravings. The shooting script called for transparencies or "glass shots" made from contemporary illustrative materials, while black and white actors dressed as soldiers passed in the foreground carrying powder and shot to their cannons.<sup>30</sup> The "glass shots," intercut with interracial closeups for emphasis, illuminated the black role in earlier wars, along with the settlement of the West. To Negroes the very idea of any black past other than slavery was for the most part a complete surprise. Here was visual proof that America owed its freedom to its entire population. This lesson in race pride made an indelible impression on those whose education included virtually no mention of black history.

For events after 1898, it was possible to use newsreel footage. Flickering images drawn from archival film allowed audiences to see documentary evidence of Negroes in Cuba and laborers digging the Panama Canal. A wonderful character ("Hi, I'm Jim"—who looks old enough to have fought in 1898) is superimposed over the documentary footage. He tells us about "cleaning up" in Cuba and digging the canal. He sounds so matter-of-fact that we are swept along into accepting the unspoken message: patriotic, dependable blacks have been working to keep America safe all along. For World War I there is footage of the 369th National Guard in the uniform of the French Army. The historical account ends with a staged sequence featuring a black sailor, sure to be taken for Dorie Miller, a steward in the segregated Navy who had taken up a fallen gunner's weapon at Pearl Harbor and became the first black in World War II

<sup>30</sup> The script's shooting instructions for achieving this result are instructive: "(NOTE: This scene will be used as a transparency to work in two or three Negro soldiers with white soldiers passing in the foreground carrying shot and powder for cannons.)"; "(NOTE: Beginning with the Revolutionary period, down through all the wars, including World War I IMPRESSIONISTIC CLOSEUPS—white and Negro—mostly recognizable Negro faces—will be shot for dressing up and emphasizing that there were Negro soldiers in all of these wars.)" Script, May 31, 1943, p. 12, A52-248, WNRC-Suitland. The official production budget under the heading "Bits and Extras" called for "Battle of New Orleans. 5 Negroes 1 day at \$10.50 a day." Copy in 333.9, ig, Box 1160, Records of the Inspector General, RG 159, WNRC-Suitland.

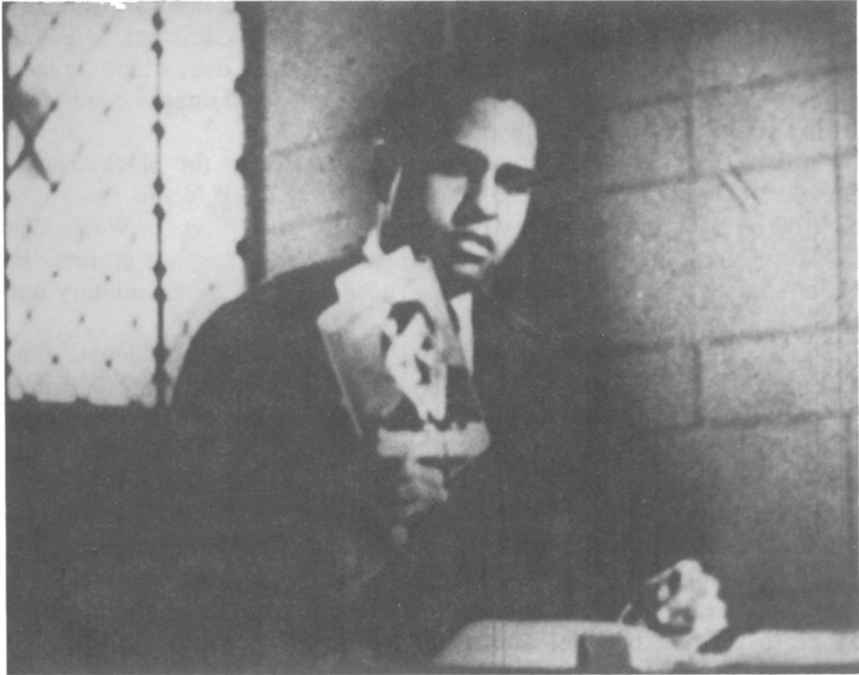


Figure 2. Carlton Moss, holding a copy of *Mein Kampf*. Moss not only wrote the script but also starred as the minister.

to fire at the enemy. The Japanese attack provides Moss with an opportunity to make another point: "And there are those who will still tell you that Japan is the saviour of the colored races," thereby suggesting the opposite—neither Hitler nor Hirohito have anything but contempt for Negroes.

The film now makes an abrupt transition from past performance to present opportunities. Mrs. Bronson, a handsome middle-aged woman wearing a suit and small fur stole (a scrupulous middle-class image in keeping with Donald Young's prescription), stands up in church to read a letter from her son who has just become an Army officer. As she reads the letter, the film cuts to scenes of basic training. Young Bronson is the very picture of light skinned, muscular leadership. He drills in the snow, goes to a segregated dance, meets a nice young girl, and back at camp, is introduced to the poetry of Langston Hughes. After soldiering all week Bronson heads for church on Sunday. The camp chaplain offers a pep talk describing improbably broad opportunities for blacks to get into Officer Candidates School and even West Point: Army units are shown as eager to

accept black recruits (see Figure 3). The film ends back in Mrs. Bronson's church as the congregation rises to sing "Onward Christian Soldiers" which segues into "Joshua Fit' de Battle ob Jericho," over which we see a montage of marching men and women. The songs and images combine in a final emotional appeal for wartime unity.

At first, *The Negro Soldier* was intended solely for black troops. Donald Young wrote an official manual, *Leadership of Negro Troops*, to be used by the white officers who commanded black units in World War II.<sup>31</sup> But even before the film was released, two of the four groups, the social scientists and the blacks, began to agitate for wider military and civilian distribution.

Such talk resulted in an extraordinary amount of official debate. The film's director, Stuart Heisler, remembers representatives of more than fifty federal offices screening the rough cut and reading revisions of the script.<sup>32</sup> Nobody seemed sure what the impact of the film might be on black soldiers. To learn if the film would encourage rioting by Negro troops, Heisler, Moss, and Charles Dollard, the Research Branch representative, took their product to a "Negro camp outside of San Diego." The commander, who "knew" his men, insisted that the film would provoke violence. He brought in a special unit of nearly one hundred military police to prevent trouble. The result was hardly what the commander expected. Enthusiastic black recruits threatened to riot unless *all* Negro troops on the post saw the film.<sup>33</sup>

White soldiers offered a different problem. Here another group, the Army leadership, took a direct hand to ensure that the final product would be safe enough to appeal to the widest possible audience. Anatole Litvak, Heisler's superior in the Capra unit, hand-carried the completed "answer print" of *The Negro Soldier* to the Pentagon in October 1943. Marshall Stimson, Osborn, the head of the Army's Bureau of Public Relations, General A. D. Surlles, and Assistant Secretary of War John J. McCloy

<sup>31</sup> Osur, *Blacks in the Army Air Forces*, 80–81, notes opposition within the Army to issuing Manual M5. The foreword to *Leadership and the Negro Soldier*, p. iv, specifically suggests that *The Negro Soldier* be shown as part of the course of instruction, "preferably the second meeting," and also suggests, p. 64, that one of the Capra *Why We Fight* films, *Divide and Conquer*, be shown to combat racial "hate" rumors within the United States. Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* (New York: Harper, 1944), is given particular emphasis in the manual's list of suggested readings, p. 101.

<sup>32</sup> Cripps telephone interview with Heisler, February 17, 1977; *The National Film Board News Letter*, February 4, 1944, 2, reported that "in Washington there are about sixty different bureaus or sub-bureaus of the U.S. Government concerned with either the production, distribution, or utilization of films." Copy in Box 1486, entry 269, RG 208, WNRC-Suitland.

<sup>33</sup> Cripps interview with Heisler, February 17, 1977.

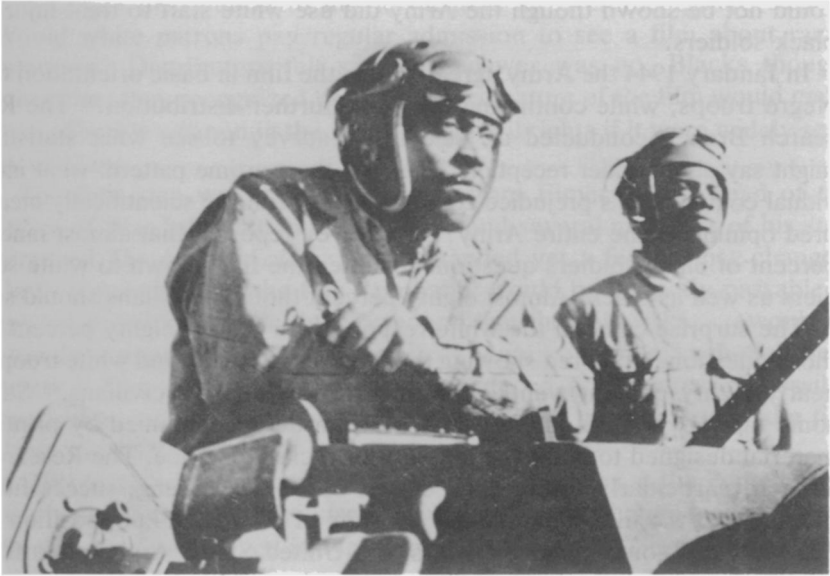


Figure 3. Location footage of black troops revealed a wide range of military specialties and roles of blacks along with continuing segregation. (Courtesy of Film Stills Archive, Museum of Modern Art.)

personally viewed the film. On November 1, after much discussion, Litvak received a detailed memorandum outlining specific changes intended to make the film more factually accurate and to mollify racial sensibilities of audiences.<sup>34</sup> Heisler had already been ordered to cut the footage showing men “under the command of Negro officers.”<sup>35</sup> War Department officials insisted that a section of the film dealing with World War I include “a small amount of footage which would show that Negroes did something other than engage in combat in the front line.” Emphasis on black combat experience in the current war also had to be “toned down” since it “would give an erroneous conception of the overall job of the Army.” Finally, every nicety of customary racial etiquette was to be preserved. For example: “The sequence showing a [white] nurse or physiotherapy attendant massaging the [black] soldier’s back will be eliminated.”<sup>36</sup> This momentary visual breach of racial and sexual taboos

<sup>34</sup> Munson to Litvak, November 1, 1943, 062.2 cos, Box 304, Records of the Chief of Staff, Troop Information & Education, RG 319, MMR-NA.

<sup>35</sup> Cripps telephone interview with Heisler, Feb. 17, 1977.

<sup>36</sup> Munson to Litvak, Nov. 1, 1943, Box 304, RG 319, MMR-NA.

could not be shown though the Army did use white staff to treat injured black soldiers.

In January 1944 the Army agreed to use the film in basic orientation for Negro troops, while continuing to debate further distribution.<sup>37</sup> The Research Branch conducted a "scientific" survey to see what statistics might say about wider reception. This was the wartime pattern: what individual commander's prejudice could compete with the scientifically measured opinion of the entire Army? The survey reported that almost ninety percent of black soldiers questioned wanted the film shown to white soldiers as well as black. Almost eighty percent thought civilians should see it. The surprise came in the white response, for almost eighty percent of those questioned favored showing the film to both black and white troops; nearly eighty percent wanted the film shown to white civilians.<sup>38</sup> Still, some military leaders insisted that the film be accompanied by printed material designed to blunt the message of racial tolerance. The Research Branch, particularly through the efforts of Donald Young, successfully insisted that the film stand alone.<sup>39</sup> In spite of itself, and in opposition to the wishes of some military leaders, the United States Army had a film based on social engineering precepts to teach racial brotherhood.

In the end, OF 51 became "mandatory" viewing for all troops at replacement centers within the United States.<sup>40</sup> Between February 1944 and August 1945, when the order was rescinded, almost every black in the Army and Air Corps saw this film; millions of white soldiers also viewed it as part of I&E's standard orientation program.<sup>41</sup> Though overseas combat zones could not enforce mandatory viewing for all soldiers, the Army still used the film late in 1946. Harry Truman's 1948 desegregation order marked the end of OF 51's official usefulness.<sup>42</sup>

The film had been made for military audiences. What would happen if it joined the ranks of a few other Army orientation films (including *Prelude to War* and *The Battle of Russia* from the *Why We Fight* series) and found

<sup>37</sup> Karl Marks to John Hubbell, Jan. 12, 1944, copy in OF 51 production files, 062.2 ocsigo, Box 14, RG 111, FS-NA.

<sup>38</sup> Report B-102, "Reactions of Negro and White Soldiers to the film *The Negro Soldier*, April 17, 1944. 439 blacks and 510 whites at Camp Pickett, Virginia, previewed the film. In addition almost 91 percent of the whites described it as "very good." Copy in Box 992, RG 330, MMR-NA.

<sup>39</sup> Memorandum, Maj. Gen. Ray Porter, Assistant Chief of Staff G-3, to Osborn, May 4, 1944, 413.53 ag, Box 3241, Records of the Adjutant General, RG 407, MMR-NA; Karl Marks to ocsigo, Apr. 15, 1944, 062.2 ocsigo, Box 44, A45-196, WNRC-Suitland.

<sup>40</sup> War Department Circular 208, May 25, 1944, 413.56 ag, Box 3241, RG 407, MMR-NA.

<sup>41</sup> War Department Circular 283, September 19, 1945, 413.53 ag, Box 3237, RG 407, MMR-NA.

<sup>42</sup> Brig. Gen. C. T. Lanham, Director, I&E Div., to Karl Korter, June 6, 1946, 062.2 cos, Box 374, RG 319, MMR-NA.



commercial distribution to movie theaters all over the United States? Would white patrons pay regular admission to see a film about racial tolerance? Distributors felt sure the answer was no. Blacks thought otherwise; they recognized that the official nature of the film would make it an effective weapon in the struggle for civil rights if it were widely seen by civilians.

The first step was official approval from Elmer Davis, head of the Office of War Information (OWI).<sup>43</sup> He and several members of his staff screened *The Negro Soldier* and demanded yet a few further changes. Davis concluded that the film “probably would be perfectly passable in any theatres whatever in the North; and that the only risks . . . would be attendant upon showing it in, say, Atlanta, or some such Southern center.” One member of his staff introduced a new area of possible opposition—whether or not “the Negro press” might consider the film “just icing.”<sup>44</sup>

OWI fears led in January 1944 to a private showing at the Pentagon for nearly two hundred black journalists. Frank Capra, though he had little to do with the film, arrived in Washington to show “his” production. Most of the audience wrote favorable—even glowing—reviews, passing over the omission of slavery and the realities of discrimination. Activist groups such as the NAACP and the National Negro Congress praised the film as “the best ever done” and called for its widespread distribution.<sup>45</sup> In April 1944 the Army officially released the film to civilian audiences.

It was one thing to make the film available to civilians, another to have it seen. From April 1944, the fate of *The Negro Soldier* increasingly turned on the activities of blacks, in particular Carlton Moss and Truman K. Gibson, now Stimson’s Civilian Aide for Negro Affairs. Both proved adept at rallying Hollywood opinion in the film’s favor, and overcoming a mixed critical response. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times* thought the film “questionable” because it “sugar coats” and “discreetly avoids the more realistic race problems.” James Agee, the Southerner who covered cinema for the liberal *Nation*, termed the film “pitifully, painfully mild” although he recognized that blandness made it more saleable. Few white critics shared Agee’s insight into black attitudes toward the film. “Straight and decent as far as it goes,” he wrote, it “means a good deal, I

<sup>43</sup> A good introduction to the OWI is Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942–1945* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978); for Davis’ pre-war radio experience see David Holbrook Culbert, *News for Everyman: Radio and Foreign Affairs in Thirties America* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood, 1976), 125–52.

<sup>44</sup> Paul Horgan to Lyman Munson, Nov. 6, 1943, 062.2 cos, Box 304, RG 319, MMR-NA.

<sup>45</sup> Capra, *Name Above the Title*, 358–62. Mabel R. Staupers, NAACP, to Maj. Gen. A. D. Surles, February 25, 1944; and telegram, National Negro Congress to Surles, February 19, 1944, RG 107, MMR-NA.

gather to most of the Negro soldiers who have seen it." Moss agreed, telling a *Time* reporter that the movie would "mean more to Negroes than most white men could imagine."<sup>46</sup>

Civilian distribution depended on resolving a longstanding debate between the Army and the War Activities Committee (WAC), the group representing commercial distributors in negotiations for circulation of government films.<sup>47</sup> *The Negro Soldier*, at 43 minutes, or roughly half of normal feature length, would remain unpopular with bookers because no matter what its merits, the film required a change in the standard length of programs.<sup>48</sup> To combine an educational film of "excessive" length with OF 51's subject seemingly restricted viewing to black theaters.<sup>49</sup> But Army enthusiasm prevailed over WAC opposition. *The Negro Soldier* was released to those theaters which requested it from a national total of 16,203 "pledged" commercial houses. Accurate attendance records, kept in part to stave off possible government regulation, revealed that in calendar year 1944 the film was a commercial bust. It played in only 1,819 theaters in contrast to most OWI shorts which played in more than 13,000 theaters, or the Air Corps combat film *Memphis Belle* (in Technicolor), seen in over 12,000 theaters the same year.<sup>50</sup> Because of its awkward length, fears of resentment of its special pleading, and the normally low grosses generated by slack summer attendance, OF 51 in its first run seems to have done more poorly than any other film released by the government for commercial distribution.

Leading Hollywood producers, urged on by Moss and Gibson, tried another way of beefing up attendance. Litvak and Heisler re-cut the film to a 20-minute two-reeler, enabling the Army to offer two lengths of

<sup>46</sup> *The New York Times*, Apr. 22, 1944; *Nation*, March 11, 1944, 316; *Time*, March 27, 1944, 94, 96.

<sup>47</sup> For an excellent discussion of how the WAC functioned see mimeographed analysis of theater booking practices prepared for War Manpower Commission, n.d. [July 1944] in Taylor Mills to Francis Harmon, July 22, 1944, Box 1488, entry 269, RG 208; see also Mills to Truman Gibson, May 1, 1944, Box 1484, entry 268, RG 208, both in WNRC-Suitland.

<sup>48</sup> War Activities Committee, *Movies at War 1945* (New York: War Activity Committee, 1945), 42, copy enclosed in Francis Harmon to Culbert, January 26, 1977; information about exact bookings of OF 51 in each of thirty-one exchanges is found in Box 1485, entry 269, RG 208, WNRC-Suitland.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Noble. *The Negro in Films* (New York: Arno Press, 1970), 99–100 lists numbers of black theaters by state.

<sup>50</sup> Telegram, Lehman Katz to Lyman Munson, n.d. [June 19, 1944]; unsigned memorandum, n.d. [June 28, 1944], both in proj. 6024, 062.2 ocsigo, Box 12, A52-248, WNRC-Suitland. The short and long versions were both made available to commercial distributors in July 1944. Publicity release WAC, July 21, 1944, copy in Box 1, Albert Deane MSS, Museum of Modern Art Film Library, New York, N. Y. A print of OF 24 is available from the Army Training Support Center, Tobyhanna, Pa.

the same film to civilians, beginning in July 1944.<sup>51</sup> As OF 24, but with the same title, the film is virtually identical to OF 51, though omitting entirely Mrs. Bronson and her son's experience at Officer Candidates School. At the end a few added shots of black pilots and black construction workers in India helped give a wider visual sense of Negro involvement in the war. Only *The Negro Soldier*, of all films produced by the military during the war, was available in two versions at the same time. Moss estimated that possibly 5,000 theaters eventually showed the shorter version.

Civilian distribution still faced one last hurdle, a lawsuit from a white Jewish filmmaker who had also made a movie about race pride. Jack Goldberg, president of The Negro Marches On, Inc., for years had produced "race movies," a genre of cheaply mounted productions for distribution in Negro neighborhood houses. He sued in federal court to restrain the WAC from booking *The Negro Soldier*, claiming that it competed unfairly with his own film, *We've Come a Long, Long Way*, which dealt with roughly the same subject (see Figure 4). Goldberg's film possessed a certain credibility in black circles owing to its sponsorship by Elder Solomon Lightfoot Michaux, a radio evangelist well-known to Negro listeners.<sup>52</sup>

At this point the NAACP entered the controversy. Roy Wilkins helped Truman Gibson assemble a "confidential" list of white liberals to "assist distribution," including Nelson Rockefeller, Fiorello La Guardia, Cardinal Spellman, and the *New Yorker's* Harold Ross. NAACP special counsel Thurgood Marshall joined Gibson in filing an *amicus curiae* brief, insisting that the WAC provided "the only available medium" for circulating a film that "proceeded on the premise that racial prejudices which divide our population will have their effect minimized by the dissemination of facts." Marshall and Walter White then prodded the liberal Hollywood Writers' Mobilization into endorsing the film as a "real contribution to national unity" and a repudiation of "racist lies."<sup>53</sup> Gibson and Moss arranged for

<sup>51</sup> "Weekly Report on Film Production Activities," Lehman Katz to Paul Horgan, May 3, 1944, 319.1 cos, Box 370, RG 319, MMR-NA. Specific suggestions from the producers are quoted in Gibson to Anatole Litvak, Apr. 14, 1944, proj. 6024, 062.2 ocsigo, Box 12, A52-248, WNRC-Suitland.

<sup>52</sup> The Goldberg film was based on the OWI pamphlet *Negroes and the War*. Jack Goldberg to Francis Harmon, February 28, 1944, Box 1488, entry 269, RG 208.

<sup>53</sup> Wilkins to Gibson, January 3, 14, 15; February 1, 3, 1944; Wilkins to Maj. Homer B. Roberts, February 9, 1944; United States District Court, Southern District of New York, *Negro Marches On*, Plaintiff, v. War Activities Committee, Defendants, copy, n.d.; Gibson, *amicus curiae* brief, 2 pages, n.d.; Thurgood Marshall to Pauline Lauber, executive secretary, Hollywood Writers' Mobilization, May 2, 1944; Robert Rossen to Frank Capra, March 30, 1944, all in Box 277, Records of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C. [hereafter NAACP Records].

TUESDAY MAY 2  
 LAST - THE NEGRO CAN BE PROUD OF!  
**WE'VE COME A LONG, LONG WAY!**  
 THE DRAMATIC EPIC OF THE NEGRO PEOPLE, SHOWING THEIR AMAZING PROGRESS IN THE LAST 75 YEARS - IN SCIENCE, ART, MEDICINE, ETC.  
**A CAST OF FAMOUS NEGRO LEADERS**  
 including  
 BILL ROBESON - PAUL ROBESON  
 MARY McLEOD BETHUNE - JOE LOUIS  
 MARIAN ANDERSON and HUNDREDS MORE  
 Narrated by  
 ELDER LIGHTFOOT SOLOMON MICHAUX  
 with music by the HAPPY AM I choir  
**IN EVERY WALK OF LIFE, THE NEGRO HAS BROKEN THE CHAINS OF SLAVERY!**  
 153 WEST  
**WORLD, 49th ST.** No. 7th AVE. 35¢ TILL NOON  
 CI. 7-5747

Figure 4. *The Negro Soldier* diverted attention away from Jack Goldberg and Elder Lightfoot Soloman Michaux's *We've Come a Long, Long Way*, one of the last "race movies" that seriously challenged Hollywood's version of the Negro. (Advertisement in NAACP Records, Library of Congress.)

gala Hollywood receptions in May and June 1944 to drum up support for both versions of "their" film. Black actress Lena Horne praised the film and major Hollywood producers provided blurbs, most more convincing than that offered by Columbia's Harry Cohn: "the greatest War Department Picture ever made."<sup>54</sup>

The NAACP, which had nothing to do with the making of *OF 51*, now promoted the film as if it were its own. "NAACP Deplores Legal Action Against Film *The Negro Soldier*," declared a press release which claimed that Goldberg's film was "insulting to Negroes," in contrast to *The Negro Soldier's* "enormous potentialities for good in stimulating the morale of American Negroes and in educating white Americans." White also persuaded liberal Jewish groups to repudiate Goldberg, thereby avoid-

<sup>54</sup> Quoted in Gibson to Anatole Litvak, April 14, 1944, proj. 6024, 062.2 ocsigo, Box 12, A52-248, WNRC-Suitland.

ing the appearance of a “Jewish vs. Negro situation.” Goldberg was termed a longtime exploiter of black audiences. In the end Goldberg lost in court and settled for a few days’ “clearance” to allow his film a brief run and give him a chance to get back part of his investment.<sup>55</sup>

The Negro press continued its campaign to gain wider distribution. It urged the National Council of Negro Women “to rally the public and force the special film, *The Negro Soldier*, to be released in full to audiences of both races.” In Los Angeles press support led to a preview under the auspices of the mayor’s Civic Unity Committee at a leading hotel.<sup>56</sup> Educators invoked the arguments of the scientific sample to promote the film. They tested OF 51 as a tool for teaching “inter-cultural education” and “living together,” and ranked it third in effectiveness out of seventeen films studied.<sup>57</sup>

The campaign soon included plans for distributing the film to civilian audiences outside the commercial circuit. The coming of age of 16 millimeter film (at the time still called “substandard” film) proved a major means for spreading government information throughout the country. Indeed World War II marked the apogee of non-commercial distribution of films in the United States.<sup>58</sup> The OWI and the Army’s Public Relations Bureau waged a tedious administrative battle over distribution. In April 1944 the OWI won the right to distribute the long version (OF 51) non-theatrically to a network of film departments in public libraries, schools, and colleges in every state.<sup>59</sup> The Film Library of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which developed educational distribution of “classic” films in the late 1930s, helped promote *The Negro Soldier* by including it

<sup>55</sup> Goldberg to Congressman Andrew J., May, April 1, 1944; Goldberg to White, May 25, 1944; Ralph Cooper to White, June 8, 1944; Julia E. Baxter to Wilkins, November 4, 1943; press release dated April 27, 1944; White to Marshall, May 4, 1944; all in Box 277, NAACP Records.

<sup>56</sup> Clippings from black press; and invitations to Moss from the Civic Unity Committee and Charles U. Shellenberg, Los Angeles YMCA, April 24, 1944, in personal files of Moss, copies sent to Cripps; trade paper clippings in Stuart Heisler MSS, Theater Arts Library, UCLA.

<sup>57</sup> Discussed in Leonard Bloom, *California Eagle*, March 16, 1944; and Esther L. Berg, “Films to Better Human Relations,” reprinted from *High Points* (New York: Brooklyn Jewish Community Council, n.d. [1945]), copies from personal files of Moss sent to Cripps.

<sup>58</sup> RG 208 has the extensive records of OWI’s Non-theatrical Division of the Motion Picture Branch. See also Film Council of America, *Sixty Years of 16mm Film 1923–1983: A Symposium* (Evanston, Ill., 1954), 148–59.

<sup>59</sup> Curtiss Mitchell to Stanton Griffis, April 12, 1944, Box 1484, entry 268; Taylor Mills to Edgar Baker, June 8, 1944, Box 1486, entry 269; methods of distribution are discussed in C. R. Reagan to Congressman Louis Ludlow, June 10, 1944, Box 1581, entry 305; all in RG 208, WNRC-Suitland.

in a special series of Capra-unit films shown in New York to capacity audiences in July 1944.<sup>60</sup>

Black groups throughout the country were soon enthusiastic over "their" film and eagerly booked it for church and civic functions.<sup>61</sup> *The Educational Film Guide for 1945*, a standard guidebook for users of documentary film, praised OF 51's technical quality: "good photographs, a nice variety of scene, some flashes of humor and excellent musical background."<sup>62</sup> The film's superb technical quality made it the hit of the season in nontheatrical distribution. The film bureau of the Cleveland Public Library, for example, indicated frequent requests for the film in its monthly reports to the OWI, listing such groups as the "Woodbridge School & PTA" and the "Zion Methodist Church."<sup>63</sup> Not every report indicates attendance figures—nor are such figures capable of verification—but yearly estimated attendance at OWI films distributed nontheatrically numbered over 7.5 million, and that represents only domestic distribution.<sup>64</sup> The film was also used extensively in Latin America, particularly in Haiti, with its predominantly black population.<sup>65</sup>

With the release of OF 51, Moss lobbied for a second film, eventually called *Teamwork* (OF 14), a more self-conscious advocate for racial integration. The motion picture shows blacks in combat against the Nazis. A sequence shot on a Hollywood back lot has Nazi cannoners shell black troops with a flurry of leaflets reminding them of the "lousiest" jobs and housing awaiting them at the war's end. The blacks toss aside the flyers, as they advance under fire. The narrator grants that "nobody thinks the United States is perfect."<sup>66</sup> Joe Louis is quoted as saying "there's

<sup>60</sup> Iris Barry, Curator, Museum of Modern Art Film Library, to Rudolph Montgelas, Bureau of Public Relations, n.d. [Aug. 1944], War Dept. folder, Central Files, Museum of Modern Art Film Library, New York, N. Y. 3,250 persons saw OF 51 (from July 24-30, 1944).

<sup>61</sup> Not every group had a choice: "Mr. E. J. Welch, D. C. Reformatory, Lorton, Va., is anxious to obtain the film, THE NEGRO SOLDIER, for a showing at the reformatory." Catherine Preston, to Joseph Brechsteen, September 13, 1944, Box 1483, entry 268, RG 208, WNRC-Suitland.

<sup>62</sup> Dorothy E. Cook and Eva Rahbek-Smith, compilers, *Educational Film Guide* (New York, W. W. Wilson, Co., 1945), 152. This annual compilation first appeared in 1936.

<sup>63</sup> "OWI Monthly Report of Government Film Showings for October 1944," Cleveland Public Library, Box 1640, entry 362, RG 208, WNRC-Suitland. Boxes 1624-1647 cover every state with varying degrees of completeness on a monthly basis.

<sup>64</sup> C. R. Reagan stated that he distributed 138 of his 150 16mm prints for 15,600 showings with an estimated total audience of 3,220,000 between June 15, 1944 and January 1, 1945. Reagan to Gibson, January 4, 1945, Box 224, RG 107 (Hastie File), MMR-NA.

<sup>65</sup> In June 1945 OF51 had been shown 69 times to 43,025 persons in Haiti. See monthly "16mm Films-Latin American Program-Summary by Title," Copy in Box 218, central files 3, Records of the Coordinator for Inter-American Affairs, RG 229, WNRC-Suitland.

<sup>66</sup> There is a print in FS-NA. The Script and production records are found in proj. 11, 015, 062.2 ocsigo, Box 19, A52-248, WNRC-Suitland.

nothing wrong with America that Hitler could fix!" A timid, much less elaborate production than *OF 51*, *Teamwork's* modest "message" about integration nevertheless alarmed some in the Army. The film received belated military release only in January 1946, thanks in part to the efforts of the NAACP. Roy Wilkins attended a sneak preview of the film at the Signal Corps Photographic Center on Long Island. Wilkins lobbied for release and the NAACP felt the film could "do much to promote racial unity now and for the future." By the summer of 1946, *Teamwork* also went into civilian distribution.<sup>67</sup>

What in retrospect can be concluded about the direct and indirect impact of *The Negro Soldier* on postwar American race relations? We believe this film represented a watershed in the use of film to promote racial tolerance. *The Negro Soldier's* influence can be seen in three areas: promotion, production, and the demise of "race films."

1) Promotion. Black pressure groups learned that film was a tool for social change. The Army did not recognize how much the technical quality of the film suggested to viewers a military commitment to equality of opportunity. The existence of such a film indicated change within the Army—why not also in the civilian world? Carlton Moss, handsome and eloquent, was the educated preacher who moved his listeners with facts and force of logic. Mrs. Bronson, in her suit and fur, seemed to prove that a black mother was the same as other middle-class women, save for a slightly darker skin color. Moreover, the Army considered Mrs. Bronson's son a valuable asset and trained him thoroughly. His hard work paid off in an officer's commission. Was not this visual evidence of equality of opportunity? How about Private Parks, First Class—wasn't she attractive and competent no matter what her racial background? And that fine church and all those well-dressed people who took their civic responsibilities seriously—all America could see these were valuable citizens. Such images provided visual proof of why racial equality was not just morally but logically justified. Why not everywhere? As Moss put it, he set out to "ignore what's wrong with the army and tell what's right with my

<sup>67</sup> Wilkins to Surles, August 22, 1945; White to Marshall, Harrington and Wilkins, April 17, 1946; White to Arthur Mayer, May 21, 1946; White to Robert Patterson, May 9, 1946; Jeannette E. Samuelson, public relations director, Arthur Mayer and Joseph Burstyn Theatres, to "Friend," mimeographed, July 11, 1946; Ida Long, 20th-Century Fox to Fred S. Hall, December 27, 1944; Hall to White, December 29, 1944; Wilkins to Maj. Homer B. Roberts, January 2, 1945, all in Box 277; White to Wilkins, Marshall and Harrington, April 24, 1946; Wilkins to Julia E. Baxter and Harrington, October 21, 1946; White to Patterson, April 24, May 9, 1946, all in Box 274; all in NAACP Records. Samuelson to W. W. Lindsay, Army Pictorial Service, June 12, 1946, proj. 11, 015, ocsigo, Box 19, A52-248, WNRC-Suitland.



Figure 5. Goaded by NAACP pressure in support of wartime calls for “unity,” “tolerance,” and “brotherhood,” Hollywood movies sometimes included blacks in the ranks of the peoples fighting against fascism, as here in the case of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Lifeboat* (1944), featuring Canada Lee. (Copyright, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation.)

people,” which, he hoped, would cause whites to ask “what right have we to hold back a people of that calibre?”<sup>68</sup>

The NAACP now understood how potent indirect messages in films could be. It produced a brochure promoting “audio-visual aids” for “teaching democracy.” It formed a new national committee to deal with matters of film propaganda and encouraged film distributors to circulate inventories of films urging “tolerance” and “brotherhood” such as *Teamwork* and *Americans All*, produced by *The March of Time*. The National Conference of Christians and Jews joined what promised to be a new movement, discussed in journals with titles like the *16mm Reporter*.<sup>69</sup> Getting films off of shelves and before commercial and non-commercial audiences was a specific goal capable of fulfillment by any number of black pressure groups. The NAACP could echo the sentiment of an earlier enthusiast for social experimentation: “I have seen the future and it works.”

<sup>68</sup> Moss clipping file, March 1944, in personal files of Moss, copies sent to Cripps.

<sup>69</sup> Press clippings in Box 274, NAACP Records.





Figure 6. The trend of wartime liberalism exemplified by *The Negro Soldier* persisted into the era of the so-called “message movie” such as Elia Kazan’s *Pinky* (1949), a story of “passing” from black to white, starring Ethel Waters and Jeanne Crain. (Copyright, Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corporation.)

2) Production of “message films.” A black journal’s headline at the time of *OF 51*’s release makes the point: “Army Shows Hollywood the Way.”<sup>70</sup> The postwar era of feature films with “messages” about racial liberalism can be traced directly to the humane, natural realism of *The Negro Soldier*, though it would be simplistic to insist that a single film was the sole cause of every “message” motion picture produced after 1945. A number of examples demonstrate the connection.<sup>71</sup> Jester Hairston arranged the choral parts for *The Negro Soldier*. After 1945, Dimitri Tiomkin, who wrote *OF 51*’s score, used Hairston for entire films, a startling change from “before the war [when] the studios only called us when they had ‘Negro music’ to be sung.”<sup>72</sup> Stuart Heisler, director of *The Negro Soldier*, went on to make *Storm Warning* (1950), a harsh indictment of the Ku Klux Klan. Ben Maddow came from a background in wartime documen-

<sup>70</sup> *Negro*, II (Sept., 1944), 94, Johnson MSS.

<sup>71</sup> The tendency is described in Samuel Goldwyn, “How I Became Interested in Social Justice,” *Opportunity*, 26 (Summer 1948), 100–01.

<sup>72</sup> “Movie Choir,” *Ebony*, 4 (Oct. 1949), 25–27.

tary film to write the screenplay for Faulkner's *Intruder in the Dust* (1949), an urgent plea for mutual respect across racial lines in the South. Carl Foreman, who began the war by writing the Dead End Kids' *Spooks Run Wild*, worked for Frank Capra's film unit. Afterwards he wrote *Home of the Brave* (1949), in which the black hero was named "Mossy" as a tribute to a wartime friendship with Carleton Moss. Stanley Kramer, the producer of *Home of the Brave*, had worked at the Signal Corps Photographic Unit on Long Island during the war. His entire postwar career was devoted to "message" films, including *The Defiant Ones* (1958) and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* (1967), both vehicles for Sidney Poitier and racial liberalism (see Figure 6).<sup>73</sup>

3) The demise of "race movies." The failure of Jack Goldberg's suit signalled an end for the "race movie." When feature films began to depict blacks as human beings, there was no longer a need for third-rate films designed especially for Negro audiences. After 1945 it was soon hard for anyone, black or white, to remember when as a matter of course separate-but-unequal "race movies" were a staple of the American scene. The humanity of *The Negro Soldier* had done its work well.

The historian is always interested in cause and effect, but perhaps a sense of irony is essential in understanding the impact of *The Negro Soldier*. Who would have thought that the Army, officially committed to segregation, would end up with a film which symbolically promoted the logic of integration? Who would have predicted that a documentary-style film about black history and opportunities for military advancement would spawn a generation of feature films calling for racial tolerance? Who would have thought that a military orientation film would make black civilians glow with pride? Minority pressure groups cannot help appreciating such ironies. Merely to show a film is no guarantee of anything, but screening a "message" film for a variety of audiences clearly can achieve results not originally conceived of. This is arguably the symbiotic potential of all mass media, a potential realized in the midst of total war, when the Army used film to show not just Hollywood but all America that civil rights was not only a moral but also a logical necessity. Such conclusions led Walter Fisher, one of a handful of black officers assigned to I&E, to remember this pioneering film a third of a century later. Although "we knew . . . the day of jubilee had not arrived," he considers *The Negro Soldier* "one of the finest things that ever happened to America."<sup>74</sup>\*

<sup>73</sup> Cripps telephone interview with Carlton Moss, July 8, 1977; Cripps telephone interview with Stanley Kramer, July 11, 1977; Cripps telephone interview with Carl Foreman, July 12, 1977.

<sup>74</sup> Culbert and Cripps interview with Walter Fisher, Washington, D. C., July 12, 1977.

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