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Farewell Chief

It was the fall of 1936 and FDR's reelection campaign was in high gear, but Robert Abbott remained loyal to the Republican Party, authoring a series in *The Defender* that enumerated the president's misdeeds when it came to African Americans. Abbott railed against discrimination in New Deal programs and the exclusion of skilled black workers from the administration's large public works projects. The Social Security program specifically left out domestic workers and farmers, reportedly at the request of southern white congressmen, while the southern administrators of farm programs had deliberately worsened already desperate conditions for millions of sharecroppers. Abbott also took on the administration's failure to advance antilynching legislation, describing Roosevelt as "silent as a sphinx" on the matter.

Perhaps the Republicans had failed as well, Abbott conceded, but Roosevelt had not fulfilled his vaunted promise to lead the Democrats in a new direction. "I have not in this article portrayed the Republican Party as a patron saint," he wrote in the concluding article. "It has made its mistakes. Its punishment was defeat. What I maintain is that the present Democratic regime with the greatest opportunity to do good and with more power than any other administration has failed to meet the issues fairly and squarely and should be relegated to the scrap-heap just like the Old Guard in the Republican Party."[1]

Abbott's passionate advocacy notwithstanding, FDR won reelection by a landslide, carrying Democratic candidates with him at the federal, state, and local level, all the way from Illinois's governor's mansion to the First Congressional District, where the incumbent

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U.S. Representative Arthur Mitchell won a rematch with Oscar De Priest by a margin even wider than in their previous contest. Mitchell had wisely hitched his campaign to the New Deal, while De Priest, for his part, announced that he had expected defeat and complained that his old cronies in the Second Ward refused to support him this time around. "I'm a good loser," he told *The Defender*.[2]

At the end of November 1936, Flaurience Sengstacke Collins, John Sengstacke's oldest sister, returned from another trip overseas with disturbing news about how the family's branch in Germany was faring under the ascendant Nazi regime. Flaurience had stopped briefly in Bremen during the first leg of a four-month round-the-world voyage. Five years had passed since she was last in Germany, and the atmosphere had changed from one of warmth and openness to oppression and paranoia. The oldest of these cousins was just one-quarter African, but under the Nuremberg Laws of racial purity passed the previous year, even that ancestry had become a dangerous liability. All of the Sengstackes' relatives had been labeled "non-Aryans," a status under which government officials removed the younger family members from school, fired the adults from their jobs, cut their food rations, and even blocked them from mundane activities like wearing a brown shirt, part of the uniform of the Nazi paramilitary units.

The family members explained to Flaurience that they had not written to "Uncle Robert" previously about their situation because they feared the Gestapo was reading their mail and would have punished them for relating any information portraying the Third Reich in a negative light. Their worries were only magnified when one great-grandson of the first John H. H. Sengstacke and Tama, a young man named Heinz Boedeker, somehow circumvented the Nazis' strict rules for "racial purity" and joined the party himself.

Each night during Flaurience's visit, the family nervously locked their doors and drew their curtains. Inside the homes, she noticed that a photograph of Robert Abbott that had hung proudly in their parlor during her last visit had been put away, as well as all the photos of their maternal ancestor, Elizabeth Sengstacke Boedeker, because of her distinctly African complexion. Finally, they asked Flaurience before she left to bring a message back to Chicago to please stop

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sending them copies of *The Defender,* "because the Germans don't like unfavorable comments about their people."[3]

Pessimistic as Robert Abbott was in his assessment of President Roosevelt's first term, there was one member of the administration with whom he maintained a warm personal and professional friendship, the incomparable Mary McLeod Bethune, who, as FDR entered his second term at the beginning of 1937, became the most powerful African American in the federal government. Bethune was sixty-two that year and served as director of the Negro Affairs Division of the National Youth Administration, a job with a sizable budget and payroll, but her real strength was in the personal relationships she enjoyed with President Roosevelt and the two most important women in his life, his wife, Eleanor, and his mother, Sara.[4]

Tall and heavy, with a dark complexion, the daughter of sharecroppers in Florida, Bethune was the only one of her siblings to receive an advanced education, a degree from the Moody Bible College in Chicago, before she went on to found a school for the vocational training of black girls in her native Daytona in 1904. Even creating a school of this type was considered a radical act in those days in the South, and Bethune had to endure harassment from the local branch of the Ku Klux Klan. Nevertheless, through relentless fundraising and promotion, she grew her school into a full-fledged coeducational academic institution called Bethune-Cookman College and, in the process, caught the attention of Sara and Eleanor Roosevelt, who frequently invited her to their home in New York.[5]

Bethune, who had supported FDR enthusiastically in his first run for president, had been appointed to the board of the NYA early in the term. But even she found herself often frustrated in trying to make the New Deal programs serve African Americans. In July 1935, Bethune visited Chicago, where she stayed with Robert and Edna Abbott in the South Parkway mansion, toured *The Defender*'s plant on South Indiana Avenue, and gave an interview to the newspaper's women's page editor. "Work in the South moves under handicaps," she admitted frankly. "Only courage, faith and fight keep us going."[6]

She was no less blunt when she met with FDR in April 1936, departing from her prepared report to demand that the administration do more for the enormous number of black families in need. "We

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have been eating the feet and the head of the chicken long enough," she told the president. "The time has come when we want some white meat."

Instead of taking Bethune's challenge as an insult, the way President Wilson had taken Monroe Trotter's comments, FDR was moved by her words and shortly thereafter appointed her director for the newly created Negro Affairs Department in the NYA. Bethune "has her feet on the ground," FDR told an aide when he made the appointment, "not only on the ground, but deep down in the ploughed soil."[7]

Bethune was able to get several additional private meetings with FDR, at which she was equally passionate and direct. For his part, FDR met all of Bethune's requests, demands, and observations with his characteristic equanimity, often saving or restoring funds for programs she indicated were essential, while demurring on those items, such as antilynching legislation, that he deemed politically unfeasible. At least as important as Bethune's irregular conversations with the president, however, was her constant communication with Eleanor, who included Bethune's agenda items on her own "to-do" list for her husband, and appeared at many events of importance to Bethune.

Bethune's influence extended into the various agencies of the federal government through the "black cabinet," an unofficial group of ranking African Americans at work in various federal agencies in the nation's capital. Composed of young men like the Harvard-educated Dr. Robert Weaver, an advisor to Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, the black cabinet was an elite group that held regular meetings and informal gatherings and card games, often coordinating their efforts across the various federal agencies in which they were ensconced, as well as with outside entities, including the black press. Bethune was their benevolent dictator, calling them to assemble and organize around her agenda whenever she needed them, wielding her singular access to the White House as a scepter to command or club, as need be.[8]

In the days before the second inauguration, Bethune brought many of the members of the black cabinet together with prominent clergy and advocates for a national conference addressing "The Problems of the Negro and the Negro Youth." FDR sent a message to be read aloud, and Eleanor attended as the keynote speaker, calling for an expansion of federal housing programs and better education for young mothers.[9]

The First Lady's appearance at the conference confirmed Bethune's indispensability and prompted the attendees to shower her with praise. A *Defender* editorial entitled "Dr. Bethune Leads On" added to the accolades:

"Thirty years ago, if one of our men — or women — within the space of a few weeks had been heralded throughout the nation in honored and dignified pictures with the mother of a president of the United States, wife of a president, likewise members of the president's cabinet and other dignitaries, it would have been a national news sensation — an eternal inspiration in American ideals.

"Today, such is accepted with trite comment — all a part of a day's work — and the world moves on."[10]

On the evening of Tuesday, June 22, 1937, millions of people around the world focused their attention on Chicago's Comiskey Park, where Joe Louis, the "Brown Bomber," was trying to wrest the heavyweight championship of the world from James J. Braddock, known as "Cinderella Man." It was the first time an African American boxer had vied for the title since Jack Johnson more than a quarter century earlier, and the fight was being held amid continuing repression in the South as well as a rising tide of Nazism, fascism, and other forms of white supremacy in Europe. Just as Johnson had been a symbol of defiance in his time, Louis was a hero to all of those who hoped to prove that a black man was as good as any "Aryan."

The Defender sent a team of reporters and photographers into Comiskey, which was conveniently located at the western end of Bronzeville just a few blocks along Thirty-Fifth Street from the newspaper's headquarters. Billiken editor Dave Kellum and sports editor Al Monroe sat ringside in the official press box among some four hundred other journalists from newspapers, wire services, and radio networks across the globe, while additional *Defender* scribes and photographers roamed among the fifty thousand spectators who filled the stadium. The ringside seats not reserved for journalists were filled with a multiracial A list of wealthy individuals and celebrities, including Hollywood stars Clark Gable, Kay Francis, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. But the seats in the grandstands were affordable — even if they required opera glasses to see the action — and

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thousands of African American fans came into the city from locations around the country, including many women and children.

There was definite racial tension both in the area around Comiskey, which abutted the white working-class Bridgeport neighborhood, and in the stands, where there were sizable contingents of men looking for trouble. But order was maintained by thousands of Chicago policemen marching in and around the stadium brandishing their "polished night sticks, head crackers or 'persuaders,'" as they were described by one *Defender* columnist grateful for their presence.[11]

The Defender had covered Louis extensively since he emerged from Detroit to win the Golden Gloves amateur competition in 1934 at the age of nineteen, noting his unique style of maintaining a "poker face" while he delivered devastating blows with his right. The sports reporters had tracked Louis as he racked up victory after victory, often by knockout, shrugging off all challengers who crossed his path. Many qualified black fighters had simply been ignored during the decades since Jack Johnson's downfall, but Louis's African American managers carefully nurtured his image as a pugilistic wunderkind, a clean-living professional athlete on a meteoric rise. Where Johnson had secured the public's attention by being as provocative as possible, Louis, reflecting the mores of this new era of heightened expectations and opportunities, wouldn't even allow himself to be photographed with any woman other than his wife.[12]

Louis maintained a disciplined routine in the days leading up to the fight, sleeping at his country villa in Kenosha, Wisconsin, the night before, eating a modest breakfast, and then boarding a special train to Chicago with a smoke-free car. At just a few minutes past 8:00 p.m., Louis's convoy of cars arrived at Comiskey Park led by two police motorcycles; Braddock arrived ten minutes later.

As soon as the fight got underway, it became clear that both combatants were ready and motivated. In the first round, Braddock hit Louis with his right and knocked the challenger off his feet momentarily, while in the third and sixth rounds, it seemed that Braddock had Louis on the defense. But by the eighth round, with both men battered and bleeding, Louis continued to hammer away until finally he landed a decisive blow on Braddock's jaw, causing the champion's

knees to soften and his body to sink onto the canvas. Braddock lay there unconscious well past the ten-second count while the crowd in the stands roared, sending an audible wave of enthusiasm through the park and out into Bronzeville beyond, where hundreds of thousands of radios were tuned in to the live broadcast of the fight.[13]

Unlike Jack Johnson's victory over Jim Jeffries in 1910, Louis's win did not provoke violence from whites around the country. Even in his hometown deep in the South, Lafayette, Alabama, the Associated Press reported, the one thousand African Americans who staged a public party were not met with a lynch mob.[14]

As for Louis himself, the new champion took no part in any festivities, giving a short interview to reporters in which he praised Braddock as "tougher than iron or steel or hickory or whatever else there is that's tough" before changing into a gray suit and leaving for the countryside to get a good night's sleep.[15]

Louis already had his next fight on his mind — a rematch with Max Schmeling, a German-born boxer who had knocked out Louis the previous year, the only time he had ever lost a fight due to a knockout. Louis repeatedly told the public that he would not consider himself the true champion until he had beaten Schmeling, but because of the highly charged political context, what would have been a mere grudge fight had assumed epic proportions. Although Schmeling did not support the Nazis, his German nationality made him their standard-bearer, while Louis was automatically the representative of multicultural democracy, regardless of the failings of American society itself toward black people.

"Bring on Schmeling," Louis said that night as he left for his rural refuge.[16]

"It is time to call attention to this menace in a voice that can be heard," *The Defender* editorialized in the summer of 1937. "This message should reach both our own people and those of the other race who yet desire that America should remain the land of the free."[17]

The newspaper was sounding the alarm against restrictive covenants, a legal clause included in many mortgages and leases that specified homes and apartments could not be sold or rented to African Americans. Used since the 1920s, restrictive covenants had been upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1929, but their effect had

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been limited by the economics of neighborhood change; since African Americans were generally willing to pay higher rents for smaller spaces and would buy homes at a premium as well, white owners had ample incentive to violate any such covenants. Thus, while restrictive covenants covered nearly every home in some areas, the territory available to African Americans had nevertheless steadily increased throughout the years of the Great Migration.

There was one part of the South Side, however, where the covenants held, a one-mile-square of homes on the south end of Washington Park that, even as the neighborhoods south and west became all black, had remained all-white. In the summer of 1937, several well-off African Americans led by businessman Carl Hansberry convinced several white owners to sell their homes, even though over 95 percent of the properties in the "little island of whites," as it was called by *The Defender,* were covered by the covenants. After moving into their home, Hansberry and his family were immediately subjected to violent attacks as well as legal assaults seeking to remove them. Were the covenants upheld by the courts, *The Defender* feared, African Americans would be forced into tiny ghettos all over the country. "If one covenant in any city is legal," the editorial continued, "every covenant may become legal and a whole city, a whole county, or even a whole state may become so restricted that our Race may be forbidden to live anywhere within its borders."[18]

The Defender added special appeals to the Jews as well as the Poles who lived in the "island," noting that the covenants were similar to legal mechanisms just then being used by the Nazis to oppress races they saw as inferior. But the editorial page was especially disappointed in the University of Chicago, which dominated the Hyde Park neighborhood just east of Washington Park and was acting behind the scenes to maintain it as a hedge against an influx of African Americans. The newspaper traced the activities of neighborhood organizations like the Woodlawn Property Owners League, which were defending the covenants in court, back to the university's business manager, who was not only funding these groups but also coordinating their legal activities. *The Defender* had frequently praised the university's liberal policies on admitting black students, as well as its prominent role as an advocate for civil rights, the editorial page argued, but these public efforts were inconsistent with a sub-rosa

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campaign to stop African Americans from becoming neighbors to professors, staff members, and students.

"What is new, and shockingly new to us," the editorial explained, "is the bizarre spectacle of an academic institution going out of its way to deny our people certain fundamental rights."[19]

Hansberry pressed his case with the backing of lawyers from the NAACP, as well as a wide array of community leaders, who met with elected officials, including Illinois's newly elected governor. By the end of October, the NAACP had won an initial legal round allowing the Hansberrys to remain in their home while the case proceeded up the hierarchy of appeals. It was prepared to take the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

The Defender celebrated these tentative victories in its coverage of the legal proceedings, excited by the prospect of the justices striking down these covenants. But the editorial page knew that it was entirely possible the Supreme Court might affirm this kind of discrimination again and that the consequences of that ruling would be made painfully real in the streets of Bronzeville. "If the Hansberrys lose," concluded an article about the case, "the boundary line of the so-called 'Black Belt' will become tighter and rents will begin to increase because of a lack of space to accommodate the growing Race population."[20]

On December 30, 1937, Marjorie Stewart Joyner, businesswoman, beautician, political activist, and columnist for *The Defender,* bought a ticket for a private compartment aboard the Texas Rocket train from Houston, where she was attending the national "boule" of her sorority, Zeta Phi Beta, to Tulsa, Oklahoma, where she was slated to speak to yet another group of cosmetology students. As the vice president of the C. J. Walker Company, Joyner was a perpetual traveler, overseeing a chain of schools of "beauty culture" and establishing supply lines of cosmetics and other products all around the country. As such, she was accustomed to decent treatment on the trains, even in the South. On this fateful trip, however, the train's staff escorted her not to a private compartment but to the luggage car, where they pointed to a corner designated as her space.

Joyner, understandably upset, said she preferred to get off, but as the train was already in motion, her protests were met only with ver-

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bal abuse from the conductor. With no other choice, she did her best to endure the trip, settling in among the bags as best as possible, but the task was made all the more difficult when the train stopped and a casket was loaded into the baggage car; Joyner found herself for a time riding next to a corpse.[21]

Personally trained by Madam C. J. Walker herself, Joyner became one of the principals in the company after Walker died in 1919, carrying on her mentor's legacy by recruiting and managing fifteen thousand "Walker Agents" who sold hair straighteners and other cosmetics. Joyner never accumulated Walker's wealth, but with a network of thousands of influential women across the country, she was able to organize beauticians into a powerful political force, forging strong relationships with Mary McLeod Bethune, Chicago's Mayor Ed Kelly, and other political leaders.

When the federal government began a consideration of licensing for beauticians, Joyner went to Washington, D.C., to meet with the appropriate officials at the U.S. Department of Labor and convince them to consider the particular issues of black women in the industry. On a lobbying mission to the state capital in downstate Springfield, Joyner led one hundred perfectly coiffed cosmetologists and testified before state legislators that white cosmetologists had excluded their black counterparts from the crafting of the proposed new rules.

For *The Defender,* Joyner's column, "Irresistible Charm," covered topics ranging from the use of shampoo to the proper treatment of scars, but she was also heavily involved in the newspaper's charitable activities. She had worked closely with Robert Abbott on the first Billiken parades, personally doing the hair and makeup for dozens of girls involved in the event, and in the summer of 1937, when floods struck towns all along the Mississippi River, Joyner led *The Defender*'s relief committee efforts and wrote regular reports to the newspaper. She also served in the cabinet of the mayor of Bronzeville, handling the Children's Welfare portfolio in this mock government that was taking on ever-more tangible responsibilities.

Having spent decades working to build up the African American beauty industry and organize the legion of women entrepreneurs who made up its workforce, Joyner was not one to easily accept the indignities she suffered aboard the Texas Rocket. And so, back in

Chicago, she secured an attorney and filed suit against the railroad company. African Americans were enduring humiliations aboard the segregated trains daily, of course, but Joyner's stature and reputation were such that the company offered her a substantial settlement, *The Defender* reported.[22]

At the end of June 1938, Joe Louis finally got his rematch with Max Schmeling at Yankee Stadium in New York City. For *The Defender* and many others, Louis represented "Modesty, Confidence, Clean Living, Reverence and Balanced Intelligence," whereas Schmeling, regardless of his own anti-Nazi stance, was being used by Hitler's propagandists to carry the banner of German superiority. This would be more than a boxing match — it was a crucible of ideologies.

"Let us hope and pray that Joe Louis gives a good beating to Mr. Schmeling," wrote an "American citizen of German-Irish descent" in a letter to the editor in *The Defender,* "not because he is a white man, no, because he belongs to the nation that preaches race and religious hatred."[23]

On the day of the fight, Wednesday, June 22, there were intermittent showers in New York City as the print journalists and radio crews gathered at Madison Square Garden for the weighing-in ceremony. Schmeling was on time but Louis was uncharacteristically late, too late, in fact, for the scheduled broadcasts. "Unlike in previous years," observed *The Defender*'s Al Monroe, "Louis was not cool, calm and collected. He showed signs of extreme nervousness while Schmeling was every bit smiles."[24]

That afternoon, despite the rain, thousands of people arrived at Yankee Stadium hours early and patiently took their seats, wearing raincoats and carrying umbrellas. But the showers subsided toward evening, as the stadium filled to capacity with more than eighty-three thousand boxing fans from across the city's diverse communities. The *Tribune*'s chief sportswriter, Arch Ward, found the crowd tense with expectation, counting at least a thousand fans from Germany who had come to cheer on Schmeling. An extra three thousand New York City policemen had stationed themselves between Harlem and the stadium to keep order.

The fight began with Louis charging out of his corner, throwing blows from multiple angles, feinting, jabbing, hooking, and punch-

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ing, landing his powerful right on Schmeling's jaw multiple times in the first seconds of the first round. Schmeling succeeded in grazing Louis's jaw but once, which only provoked the most furious response yet from Louis, who now left Schmeling hanging onto the ropes. When Schmeling disentangled himself, Louis pounced with a left and a right to the head that sent him to the mat for the first time. Schmeling got up after four seconds only to be knocked down again by Louis shortly after; he got up a second time, but Louis immediately launched his hard right fist into Schmeling's chin with a loud crack, knocking him over. This time, when the count reached four, Schmeling's team threw a towel into the ring. The whole battle had taken exactly two minutes and four seconds.[25]

Throughout the brief fight, the streets of Bronzeville, Harlem, and every other African American community were silent save for the crackling of the national radio broadcasts. But after Louis's victory, spontaneous celebrations erupted everywhere. "Chicago's South Side resembled New Year's Eve," *The Defender* wrote. "Along forty-seventh, fifty-first, forty-third, fifty-fifth, fifty-eighth and thirty-fifth, there was snake dancing. There was a happy crowd that stopped, shook hands and exchanged greetings with each other. On the lips of all these persons was 'I knew he could do it.'"[26]

Dave Kellum had hoped to convince Louis to appear at the 1938 Bud Billiken Parade just a few months after his victory over Max Schmeling. But Louis retreated from public view after the fight, canceling an upcoming bout with another challenger and spending most of his time at his manager's home in rural Michigan with only occasional trips to Detroit, where he was supervising the construction of a new house for his mother.[27]

It took Kellum an entire year of lobbying but finally Louis agreed to come to the Billiken Parade scheduled for August 1939. He arrived dressed in a green summer tweed suit and sat on the folded top of a sleek black Lincoln convertible touring car, waving to the multitudes and stopping frequently to pose for photographs and shake hands with those who slipped through the barricades and swarmed around his car the whole way.

"Saturday, Joe belonged to the people," *The Defender*'s reporter wrote of this largest-ever Billiken Parade. "Not all his own peo-

ple — but the people — because there were all races, creeds and colors in that colorful crowd of 250,000. Women screamed, men waved and yelled as Louis' car passed slowly behind the massed flags of the boy scouts. People were on the porches and on the tops of houses, perched in windows — all to get a glimpse of the hero who rode nonchalantly, smiling, bowing, turning and waving."

For once, the calculating, aloof champ interacted freely with his fans, seeming even to enjoy the journey along South Parkway. Larger crowds yet were waiting in Washington Park, so many that even a phalanx of police officers was unable to hold them back. "Where did you get all these people?" Louis exclaimed to *The Defender*'s reporter, adding that he "didn't know there were so many children of my own race in Chicago."[28]

It was the largest single gathering ever on the South Side, a showcase for the cultural and economic power of Bronzeville, with dozens of marching bands as well as floats from local businesses, labor unions, and the policy kings. Robert Abbott was not at the parade — his health had deteriorated to the point that he was unable even to make an appearance on his balcony — but his presence was nonetheless tangible. Among other measures, he had overruled the vociferous objections of both Dave Kellum and John Sengstacke in allowing the Young Communist League to march in the parade. Abbott was a patriotic capitalist in ideology but he had noticed that the Communist Party not only spoke out against racism but fully included African American members in their organization. "If there's a Bud Billiken parade," he told Kellum and Sengstacke, "these young people will march."[29]

Abbott's failing health put the future of *The Defender* foremost on his mind, and that same year, he took steps he thought would both ensure the newspaper's future and provide for all his loved ones, creating a trust that named John Sengstacke, his second wife, Edna, and a prominent African American attorney named James B. Cashin as the executors of his estate. Legally, Sengstacke held almost all of the shares of stock in the Robert S. Abbott Publishing Company, but the trust would contain all of Abbott's assets, including the newspaper, until 1956. The agreement was structured to make sure that Edna would have support for her and her children while Sengstacke con-

tinued to control the newspaper, relying on Cashin to act as the guarantor of the arrangement. A former captain in the Eighth Regiment who had fought in France during World War I, Cashin had established himself as one of Bronzeville's most prominent attorneys and seemed an honorable, upright character who had the competence to manage this complex arrangement.[30]

Certainly John Sengstacke had demonstrated that he was committed to meeting the challenge. Reporter Enoch Waters recalled that by 1939, the staff looked to Sengstacke, rather than Abbott, and understood that he was trying to modernize the newspaper. As his friend, however, Waters was also privy to how John's new role affected his personal life, especially with his new wife, Myrtle Elizabeth Picou, a beautiful socialite who had been born in New Orleans and reared in Los Angeles. "So thoroughly had Abbott instilled in Sengstacke's mind that he was to dedicate himself to *The Defender*," Waters recalled in his memoir, "that he told his bride Myrtle, in my presence, that she would always have to play a secondary role to the paper."[31]

Nevertheless, running *The Defender* was a nearly impossible job and Sengstacke was just twenty-seven, so Abbott still harbored doubts, which he voiced in early 1940 during one of his last conversations with Mary McLeod Bethune.

"John is my nephew. I am depending on him, Mamie," Abbott said frankly during this final bedside chat. "I am committing my unfinished task to him. Mamie, do you think he can do it?"

Bethune patted him on the shoulder and reassured him. "Rest Abbott, my big brother, he can do it. He will do it. He will carry on."[32]

John Sengstacke spent the first weeks of 1940 trying to organize a conference of African American publishers in Chicago. It was a difficult task, since *The Defender, The Pittsburgh Courier,* the *Afro-American* chain of newspapers, and the various smaller members of the black press were direct competitors whose owners had long histories of insults both perceived and actual. Nevertheless, Sengstacke pressed on in trying to realize what had long been a dream of Robert Abbott's, assembling all of the nation's great African American journalists in one place. Flattering and pleading with his competitors, he assured them the conference would be geared toward "harmonizing our energies in a common purpose for the benefit of Negro journal-

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ism," exploring common solutions to their shared problems, especially when it came to advertising.

On the morning of February 29, 1940, after weeks of such diplomacy, Sengstacke proudly opened the first conference of the Negro Newspaper Publishers Association. Held at the Wabash Avenue YMCA, the conference hosted a group of twenty-six men and two women representing twenty-one different black newspapers from cities and towns "from New York to Nebraska," as *The Defender* trumpeted in its coverage of the gathering. Sengstacke had not been able to completely smooth over the discord between owners; Robert Vann of *The Pittsburgh Courier* had refused to attend, sending only a reporter to cover the meeting. Still, this was a real start and Sengstacke, for one, was in excellent spirits.

No sooner had he finished his welcoming remarks, however, than the assembly received word that Robert Abbott had died in his sleep that morning. The publishers, editors, advertising managers, and other journalists there — many of whom had known Abbott well — decided to adjourn for several hours. When they reconvened that afternoon, D. Arnett Murphy, son of the founder of the *Baltimore Afro-American,* paid warm tribute to Abbott and wished Sengstacke success while a committee was formed to write the proper condolences for the "Dean of Negro Journalism."

They got back to work now, these putative adversaries, with a new solidarity that would have thrilled Abbott, moving with a sense that the black press was well positioned to take advantage of its unique access to its readers, a fast-growing market of fifteen million people who turned over $2 billion annually. The publishers agreed to collaborate on surveys of their readers and other projects, and by the end of the three-day agenda, the whole group had adopted an organization plan declaring that they represented "independent, secular newspapers sold to the general reading public," and agreed to meet again in Chicago the following year. Sengstacke was acclaimed as president of the NNPA with Murphy as eastern vice president.[33]

The NNPA conference ended on Saturday, by which time Abbott's body was already lying in state at the South Parkway mansion. Letters and telegrams poured in from all over the world, from top-ranking Republicans as well as Democrats, from judges, lawyers, teachers,

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and musicians, from Pullman porters and chauffeurs, from the Urban League and the YMCA, from the president of Abbott's beloved alma mater, Hampton, and the leaders of Fisk and Tuskegee, from clergy of all denominations and from dozens of fraternal organizations and lodges. Colonel Robert McCormick, the irascible owner of the *Chicago Tribune,* registered his grief, as did the performer Josephine Baker. Walter White of the NAACP sent a message, as did blues musician W. C. Handy. Tributes were published in countless newspaper articles, and the black vocal group the Southernaires broadcast a musical paean on their hit radio show over the National Broadcasting Service.[34]

Many of those who felt compelled to send a message of condolence knew Abbott personally, but many others were simply inspired by him: Boy Scout Troop No. 32 from the backwoods town of Potts Camp, Mississippi, for instance. Organized in 1927 with donations from Estelle Williams, a Chicago social worker, who sent copies of *The Defender* along with her financial contributions through the years, the African American troop named their unit in honor of the publisher, and they were grief-stricken when they found out about Abbott's death. "We have never met Mr. Abbott but Mrs. Williams kept us informed of his activities," they wrote. "Even when the paper was forbidden to be sold here, Mrs. Williams forwarded our copy. We deeply feel the loss of Mr. Abbott."[35]

On Monday morning, *The Defender* building at Thirty-Fifth Street and Indiana Avenue was draped in black and the flags at City Hall and other municipal buildings flown at half-staff while the body was taken down the street to Metropolitan Community Church for Abbott's funeral. Placed in an open casket surrounded by flowers, Abbott was viewed by "a sea of human faces ranging from the purest black to the purest white," as *The Defender* described it, while outside the church thousands of others gathered to listen to the proceedings inside over loudspeakers that had been set up. Just after 11:00 a.m., a fifty-person choir dressed in white robes sang "Lead, Kindly Light," followed by a series of tributes from notables including Mayor Ed Kelly before a eulogy from the Rev. Archibald J. Carey, the son of one of those young activists who had planned resistance to the South in the cafés of Chicago in the years just after the 1893 World's Fair.

As the funeral cortege left the church, it was led by a police mo-

torcycle escort and a formation of dozens of African American firemen and police officers in dress uniform who marched along for four blocks and then formed an honor guard to salute Abbott's body as it passed by. The caravan to the funeral now drove south along the street that had become the route of the parade Abbott loved so well. "Along South Parkway," *The Defender*'s reporter recounted, "thousands who had on numerous occasions cheered *The Chicago Defender* editor when he rode at the head of the Bud Billiken parades bowed their heads in sorrow Monday."

More than 250 cars accompanied Abbott's body to Lincoln Cemetery, south of the city, where the honorary pallbearers included a pantheon from Abbott's past: the former alderman Louis Anderson; Major Walter Loving, the former military intelligence officer who had attempted to coerce the editors of the black press during World War I; Emmett Scott, the respected scholar and government official; A. Philip Randolph, still doggedly leading the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters; and Henry "Teenan" Jones, now eighty years old, retired and living comfortably in Watseka, Illinois. As a show of thanks for Abbott's role in promoting the field of aviation, the final honor of the funeral was performed by two pilots, one man and one woman from the largely African American National Airmen Association, who swooped in low to drop, with perfect precision, six American Beauty roses down over the great man's grave.[36]

"Robert S. Abbott was a man of one idea," wrote Lucius Harper in his front-page column that week, "which is all that the brain of any man of action can hold. He was not an idle philosopher, and therefore believed he had a mission in this world, and that he must early get at his work, and never rest day or night until that work should be done.

"When he sought to raise the black man to the level of the white man, he was branded a radical. The radical of today is the conservative of tomorrow and other martyrs take up the work through other nights and the dumb and stupid world plants its weary feet upon the slippery sand soaked by the sweat of their brow and moves on.

"Farewell Chief, You have pointed to a star. May it give light to our weary feet along the pathway to hope as it did to you in your yesteryears of hardships."[37]

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Just a few weeks after Abbott's death, his widow and attorney James Cashin endorsed the plan to have John Sengstacke take over *The Defender* as publisher, issuing public statements of support on the front page of the newspaper. "Every effort will be made to continue this newspaper as a lasting testimonial to my husband," Edna Abbott said. "I am happy that John Sengstacke has consented to continue in the active direction of the Robert S. Abbott Publishing Company."

Sengstacke himself attempted to project both confidence and continuity: "Mr. Abbott was and is my ideal — during the years that I was associated with him he has continually stimulated my heart and my brain for the forward surge of *The Defender.*"[38]

Sengstacke continued to rely on the veterans at the newspaper who had been nearest to Abbott, especially Lucius Harper and Metz Lochard. That summer, he began an editorial-page column under his own byline entitled "Today and Tomorrow," which hewed to topics that echoed the interests and perspectives of the departed editor, especially lynching, the ill effects of segregation, and the economic opportunities available to African Americans. Here, as throughout the paper, Lochard added his own distinct internationalist outlook, with Harper editing the copy to make it flow.[39]

At first, Sengstacke emulated Abbott's independent political course, criticizing President Franklin D. Roosevelt at the end of June for speaking on the segregated campus of the University of Virginia and calling on the president to push for an end to legal segregation as well as for federal legislation against lynching and poll taxes. Skeptical about Roosevelt's posture toward American involvement in the new conflagration in Europe, Sengstacke warned that the government would use the opportunity to crack down on all political dissent, including African Americans' efforts to secure civil rights. Nor was Sengstacke keen on taking sides among the great European powers as they battled over their colonial possessions: though it had strongly opposed the efforts of Italy's fascist leader Benito Mussolini to conquer independent Ethiopia, *The Defender* regarded the rule of other European nations over Africans as equally distasteful. "Will jim crowism and lynching," he asked in one column, "be answered best by dropping bombs and shells on battlefields abroad?"[40]

Nevertheless, as it became increasingly obvious that Nazism was a

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threat to the entire world, rather than just Europe, Sengstacke made his first major break with Abbott's previous policy by edging toward full support of FDR. In early October 1940, with Roosevelt running for an unprecedented third term in the White House, *The Defender* printed a front-page editorial signed by Sengstacke that now endorsed the president's foreign policy of sending munitions and other supplies to Great Britain. The nation needed Roosevelt's deft touch and experience, the newspaper argued, and at this crucial moment couldn't take a chance on shifting policy. "Certainly Nazism or Fascism is detrimental to the vested interest of the black man," Sengstacke concluded in the editorial.[41]

In a subsequent column, Sengstacke cited a report from a human rights organization which had discovered that the Ku Klux Klan and other homegrown white supremacists were receiving the active support and funding of German agents and that the Nazis had recruited high-ranking military officers as well as executives at the Ford Motor Company and the Hearst newspaper chain, among other corporations. "These groups are not only anti-Negro," Sengstacke wrote, "they are anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic and definite fifth columnists. They are definitely against our democratic form of government."[42]

The Defender continued to criticize Roosevelt whenever it felt necessary, as when the administration announced just a few weeks before the election that the military would restrict African American soldiers to segregated units rather than mix them with white troops. Even though Roosevelt promised training for black officers and pilots, Sengstacke derided the idea of "jim crow army units" in his column. But the criticism only went so far: An accompanying editorial registered similar disappointment and then reminded its readers that the Roosevelt administration had hired unprecedented numbers of African Americans and empowered the "black cabinet."

And then there was Eleanor Roosevelt, who had recently resigned from the Daughters of the American Revolution when that organization refused to allow the great vocalist Marian Anderson to sing in their hall. The First Lady then arranged for Anderson to sing at the Lincoln Memorial on the Washington Mall. "It is difficult for us to believe," the editorial explained, "the wife of the President of the United States would be going from place to place making statements that are in direct contradiction to the views held by her husband. We

believe that President Roosevelt is singularly free of the deep-rooted racial bias which has characterized nearly all of his predecessors."[43]

The weekend before Election Day, *The Defender* announced what it had been building up to all fall — an enthusiastic endorsement for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. The editorial page expressed general satisfaction with FDR's promises, if not his progress, on race issues, and credited the New Deal with creating social programs that fed people and put them back to work, however unevenly distributed the benefits. Although Roosevelt's Republican opponent Wendell Willkie himself happened to be progressive on race issues, the newspaper argued that he was simply an agent of "Big Business, of public utilities and trusts with their gargantuan thirst for power and money." Besides, looming behind all of the domestic issues was the war raging across Europe, and Roosevelt was the only American leader who was capable of standing on an equal footing with Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and Churchill.[44]

The same issue of *The Defender* endorsing FDR carried news of the death from cancer of Robert Vann of *The Pittsburgh Courier.* The rivalry between *The Defender* and *The Courier* had been hard fought at times, but Sengstacke made sure to appear at Vann's funeral to show respect for a man who, like his uncle, had come out of the rural South to build a newspaper as a powerful weapon in the struggle to liberate African Americans.[45]

Vann, an early supporter of President Roosevelt, had lately swung back to the Republicans and given his endorsement to Willkie, making *The Defender*'s support all the more significant to the Democrats. FDR's bid for a third term was controversial, and campaign staff were counting on black votes in northern cities to help deliver a number of key states, including New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, and Illinois.

FDR indeed defeated Willkie, though by a smaller margin than he had his previous opponents. Still, he had gained among African Americans, especially in Chicago. In the Second, Third, Fourth, and Fifth Wards, where no Democrat had ever won a majority, FDR had captured no less than 52 percent of the black vote, a shift for which *The Defender* endorsement had certainly been responsible. Writing in a postelection column, Sengstacke argued that the African American voters had finally realized that their political debt to the GOP had been paid and that in the future both political parties would have

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to compete for black support. Black America, he warned, had become "politically conscious and is demanding performance and not promise," such that the results of this election should be interpreted as support for FDR, not necessarily for the Democrats. "Therefore, then, first and last," Sengstacke's column concluded, "it was the man and not the party."[46]

By the beginning of 1941, John Sengstacke felt secure at the helm of *The Defender* and excited by the agenda of the newly reelected Roosevelt administration. He had, after all, been running the newspaper for close to six years now. On the personal front, his wife was expecting their first child, a son who would be named John H. H. Sengstacke III.[47]

Sengstacke was thus insouciant at the end of January when he attended the first meeting of stockholders in the Robert S. Abbott Publishing Company after Abbott's death. Previously, the three members of the board had been Sengstacke, Robert Abbott, and Abbott's wife, Edna, and Sengstacke was expecting a mere formality that would see him and Mrs. Abbott reelected to the board and attorney James Cashin elected to replace Abbott. But Edna Abbott and Cashin had conspired behind his back to dethrone Sengstacke. After getting his approval for their spots on the newspaper's board of directors, Edna and Cashin combined their votes to remove Sengstacke, replacing him with George Dennison, Edna's oldest son from her marriage to Franklin Denison. Sengstacke couldn't be fired outright because he remained the major stockholder, but Edna and Cashin demoted him to vice president, relieved him of all publisher's duties, and slashed his salary from $75 to $35 a week, all moves calibrated to pressure Sengstacke to surrender his stake in the newspaper.[48]

Sengstacke nevertheless continued to come to work every day in his reduced capacity, with little to do other than plot his return to power. Less than a month after this coup, the NNPA had its second annual meeting in Chicago, where John had to appear under his diminished title, his ability to organize and operate severely hampered. This convention was smaller than the last, with only twenty-two attendees, but Sengstacke did score a significant victory when he convinced Robert Vann's widow, Jesse, who had taken over as publisher of *The Pittsburgh Courier,* to serve as the NNPA's treasurer. Seng-

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stacke's own term as president of the group having expired, he was succeeded by William Walker, the publisher of the *Cleveland Call & Post.*[49]

At the end of March, Robert Abbott's eldest sister, Rebecca, filed a suit in probate court which used a novel argument to try to remove his widow from control over his assets, claiming that Edna Abbott was actually white. Although Edna presented herself as black, she had a creamy complexion, blue-gray eyes, and straight, chestnut-colored hair, and was said to have come originally from Winnipeg, Canada. If she *was* proved to be white, her marriage would be invalidated, since it had taken place in Indiana, where interracial unions were prohibited. And if that happened, Abbott's assets would be inherited by his closest relatives, rather than his putative spouse.

It was an odd syllogism for Abbott's family to make, given their own multiracial heritage, and it was soon to be revealed in court to be a flimsy argument. The bizarre court hearing in which Edna tried to prove that she had African ancestry was covered by *The Defender,* now under the direction of a crony she had installed as general manager, in a front-page article that characterized the legal maneuver as a "spite suit." The article went on to blame John Sengstacke for instigating the suit in the first place, and alleged that he had threatened her with legal action unless she kept him at the newspaper's helm. Her key witness was attorney Edward H. Morris, one of Abbott's oldest friends from his first days in Chicago, who had also known Edna since childhood and testified that her parents "were definitely of the Negro race."[50]

The suit alleging Edna was white was dismissed, but the legal maneuvers over Robert Abbott's will continued, attracting widespread coverage in the black press and from *Time* magazine, which focused on the complexion of Robert and his wives: "The late Robert S. Abbott, publisher of the once-powerful Negro *Chicago Defender,* was soot-black. His two wives were white as snow," *Time* wrote in its media column. Opining that *The Defender* had long since passed its prime, *Time* calculated that Nathan McGill's embezzlement as well as the publisher's divorce had drained Abbott's fortune, leaving the callow John Sengstacke unable to handle the sinking ship. "*The Defender* went from bad to worse," *Time*'s column summarized.[51]

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With the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, *The Defender* was faced yet again with the question of how hard to push for civil rights during wartime and threatened, once again, with suppression by elements within the federal government led by FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. Later that month, *The Defender* attempted to clarify its position in an editorial that appeared shortly after the United States declared war:

"The Negro press will not blemish its magnificent record of sound patriotism by engaging in subversive advocacy to the impairment of the national will. However, unless and until constitutional guarantees are suspended, the Negro press will continue to use its moral force against the mob in its criminal orgy, against such ultra-violences as lynching, burning at the stake and judicial murder.

"We are for national unity. We are for victory. But, no one must conclude that in opposing clear cut discriminations in civilian life or in the army or the navy, that the Negro press is disloyal. In this opposition is the essence of loyalty and devotion to democracy — and a free press."[52]

Although he lacked the authority to represent *The Defender* officially in December 1941, Sengstacke took it upon himself to reach out to the federal government. Attaching a copy of this editorial to a letter he addressed to Hoover, Sengstacke pledged to cooperate with any inquiry and address any concern the agency had: "We will withhold nothing that may give you a full understanding of the facts and motives which provoked the printing of the article."

Hoover wrote back on January 3 that he appreciated the "sprit" of Sengstacke's letter, but that the offer of transparency would be better directed at Byron Price, director of the Office of Censorship. Sengstacke must have understood this as a brushoff, since the Office of Censorship had authority only over those publications mailed overseas and was intended to prevent news of troop movements, tactics, or similar military information from reaching enemy intelligence services. Any prosecution of a black newspaper for sedition would be investigated by the FBI first and then brought to federal court by the Department of Justice.[53]

Meanwhile, Cashin began to grow restless and annoyed that Mrs. Abbott displayed less interest in the day-to-day operations of the paper, complaining to another black newspaper that she was "too

busy getting the brakes fixed on her car or shopping to attend meetings." By the beginning of 1942, the attorney also grew paranoid that the widow might remove him from the board of directors and approached John Sengstacke secretly. Regretfully confessing his prior conniving with Mrs. Abbott, Cashin offered his vote to John at the next stockholders' meeting.

When the fateful day finally came, John arrived with his attorneys as well as his brother Frederick and Metz Lochard. He made sure that everyone else was already in the room before he handed his brother Fred a revolver and ordered him to stand outside the meeting room and not allow anyone else to enter. With Fred, armed and nervous, stationed outside the door, Sengstacke brought Lochard inside and, with Cashin's double cross, reversed the process that had unseated him the previous year. Next, Cashin and Sengstacke removed Mrs. Abbott's son George from the board and replaced him with Lochard.

Immediately proceeding to fire staff Mrs. Abbott had hired, Sengstacke simultaneously summoned police officers to prevent anyone from removing documents from the Indiana Avenue headquarters. The widow attempted to contest all of these actions in court but within a few weeks, a judge had ruled against her and recognized the new board, granting Sengstacke total control over the newspaper's finances.

While Edna Abbott would continue to pursue her case in court, John Sengstacke was back in command at *The Defender,* and this time he used the newspaper to trumpet *his* victory. An article that appeared under the headline "Mrs. Edna R. Abbott Loses Fight to Control *Chicago Defender* Funds" quoted the judge's tribute to the newspaper as "an institution of long and honorable standing, devoted to the interests of the colored citizens of Chicago and the nation, founded upon the sacrifices and struggles of one of Chicago's noble citizens — the late Robert S. Abbott."[54]

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