THE BLACK PRESS—MORE NEEDED THAN EVER
Herb Boyd

The Black press and slavery are inextricably linked in our nation’s tumultuous history. Past is prologue, and the press is one of the ways we “got ovah” slavery.

When John Russwurm and Samuel Cornish conceived and published Freedom’s Journal, the first African American newspaper in America, in 1827, the masthead declared its mission unequivocally: “We wish to plead our own cause. Too long have others spoken for us. Too long has the public been deceived by misrepresentations, in things which concern us dearly.”

Nothing concerned the editors more dearly than slavery on that spring day of March 16, 1827, when the first issue of the paper was published. While the editors promised to address a myriad of injustices, they let their readers know that “we would not be unmindful of our brethren who are still in the iron fetters of bondage.”

Four months after Freedom’s Journal was launched, enslaved adult men and women were emancipated in New York, where the Journal was founded. If the celebration was muted, it may have been because
of the proviso that the children of the enslaved were bound to serve a twenty-five- to-twenty-seven-year indentured term to their former masters. This condition did not go without outrage from the paper.

Nor was it unspiring of the Black bondage beyond New York. During its two years of existence, the paper was relentless in its opposition to slavery, lynching, and other civil and human rights restrictions imposed on African American citizens. *Freedom's Journal* would spur the rise of a number of Black newspapers, broadsides, and articles by abolitionists, few more fervent and passionate than David Walker. His *Appeal*, published a year after the demise of the *Journal* — a paper that ran one of his most famous declarations — was in several ways a conduit to the succeeding publications, though Walker would side with Cornish after he and Russwurm differed over the role of the colonization movement.

"I adopt the language of the Rev. S. E. Cornish," Walker espoused, supporting the minister's publication *The Rights of All*. "Any coloured man of common intelligence, who gives his countenance and influence to that colony, further than its missionary object and interest extend, should be considered as a traitor to his brethren, and discarded by every respectable man of colour."

The split between Cornish and Russwurm, while they both remained unwavering antislavery advocates, anticipated the parting of company between Frederick Douglass and Martin Delany. Their relationship began in 1848, when Delany joined Douglass's *North Star* as a co-editor after the failure of his own abolitionist paper, the *Mystery*. This formidable duo worked together for only a year or so, until Delany resigned. A philosophical divergence between Delany and Douglass had become untenable. Moreover, Douglass was against the colonization movement — the idea that the best future for Black Americans was to emigrate — a position Delany favored.

For the most part, this was Delany's last venture into journalism, though he became a fairly productive author of books. Meanwhile, Douglass continued to publish antislavery newspapers, including *Frederick Douglass's Paper* (1851–60), *Douglass' Monthly* (1860–63),

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and the *New National Era* (1870–74). Of these, none were more important than *Frederick Douglass’s Paper*, since it began shortly after the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed, making the lives of Blacks, in bondage or not, all the more harrowing and perilous.

Drawing on his inspiration from William Lloyd Garrison, the publisher of the *Liberator* and a believer in the tactic of moral suasion, Douglass kept to his motto of abolishing slavery and improving the condition of “free colored people in the North.” It was a unique abolitionist paper that often featured proslavery stories, if only to counter them with one in opposition to the story. Douglass was by no means of that ilk of radical abolitionists, best represented by John Brown, but he never cowered in speaking out against what many called the “peculiar institution.”

A famed statesman and author of three autobiographies, Douglass didn’t shrink from assailing other significant institutions. “In respect to the Church and the government, we especially wish to make ourselves fully and clearly understood,” he wrote in the pages of his paper. “With the religion of the one, and the politics of the other, our soul shall have no communion. These we regard as central pillars in the horrid temple of slavery. They are both pro-slavery; and on that score, our controversy with them is based.”

Douglass was not alone in his clarion call against slavery. We can’t say precisely whether Philip A. Bell worked at Garrison’s *Liberator* when Douglass was a stringer there, but he absorbed similar training and insight during his brief tenure at the paper. In fact, ten years after *Freedom’s Journal* arrived on the scene, Bell started *The Weekly Advocate*, which Samuel Cornish edited. Later the paper was renamed the *Colored American* and was co-owned by Charles Bennett Ray, a highly respected abolitionist. At the same time Douglass was keeping readers informed in the eastern part of the country about the fight against slavery, Bell took up the struggle west of the Mississippi as the co-editor of *The Pacific Appeal*. During Reconstruction, he had his own paper, *The San Francisco Elevator*.

Any discussion of the Black press out West is incomplete without...
citing the conviction and courage of Charlotta Bass, who sold subscriptions at the *Eagle* before she became the owner of the paper, renaming it the *California Eagle*. She was best known for championing unpopular causes, especially as they resonated around union activity and in alliance with such leftist political figures as Paul Robeson. An unadulterated crusader, Bass was a staunch Republican and was the first African American woman to be nominated for vice president.

Often overlooked but never unappreciated was the *Christian Recorder*, which was first published in 1854. Under the editorship of Rev. J. P. Campbell, the paper, or church bulletin, was unflinching in its service to slaves who had been separated from their families and in its commitment to keeping African American soldiers abreast of the news during in the Civil War. These notices appeared on the paper’s Information Wanted page. It gained its widest circulation and following when Benjamin Tanner was the editor in 1867. Tanner was the patriarch of an illustrious family, which included his son, Henry Ossawa Tanner, the great painter, and his daughter, Hallie, one of the nation’s first Black female doctors. After increasing the circulation of the *Christian Recorder*, putatively the largest African American periodical in the country, Tanner, in 1884, became the editorial director of the *AME Church Review*, a resourceful publication for Black self-determination. By this time, he was Bishop Tanner.

The advent of the Civil War brought no surcease from Douglass, and by 1861, through the pages of *Douglass’s Monthly*, he was just as vigorous and outspoken as ever, only now his plea to end bondage took on a religious aspect, most notably in the masthead of his paper emblazoned with Proverbs 31: “Open thy mouth, judge righteously, and plead the cause of the poor and needy.” Mainly, the paper vented Douglass’s central concerns, while at the same time fixing on the flow of events spilling from the war. According to one Douglass biographer, the paper “functioned like a photographic album, freezing some moments while invoking through the arrangement of stories the onward rush of the war.” Even so, the *Monthly* often bristled
with Douglass’s critique of the state of the Union and the social and political conditions as they pertained to the “contrabands of war.”

After the war, Douglass was again on the ramparts, but nevertheless continued to plead his case through the New National Era. “When the slave was a slave I demanded his emancipation, and when he was free, I demanded his perfect freedom—all the safeguards of freedom.”

Many of those safeguards were impotent during the Reconstruction era, and the abolitionist press now had a new postbellum menace to challenge and defeat. The backlash was most terrifying in the hooded members of the Ku Klux Klan and other night riders. By the end of Reconstruction, which, other than some advances in higher education, left few benefits for Blacks who had to endure another form of slavery via peonage, the convict lease system, and outright sharecropping. A surge of lynching further endangered Black lives, particularly in the South. When three of Ida B. Wells’s friends were lynched, the indomitable journalist stepped up her campaign to combat the increased attacks.

As the editor of the Memphis Free Speech, Wells was a fearless foe of lynching, often traveling unaccompanied to spread the word and to encourage others to take a stand. After her office was attacked by a mob, she relocated to Chicago, where her fervor against lynching found a new platform at the New York Age. Although she acquired some prominence from her articles in the Age she believed they were not reaching a wide enough audience. To expand her readership and her horizons, Wells toured Europe in 1893, lecturing on the evils of lynching. Upon her return to the states, she began working for Conservator, which was owned and edited by the attorney Ferdinand Barnett, whom she later married. Wells was once more in the spotlight when she and Frederick Douglass compiled a booklet to protest the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, which barred Blacks from participating. They distributed some ten thousand copies during the fair. But it was her publication of A Red Record, which recounted three
years of lynching, that commanded the greatest attention. Most of the data she obtained came from the *Chicago Tribune*, a white-owned newspaper, thereby protecting her from charges of bias.

The *New York Age* was founded in 1881 as the *New York Globe*, and after T. Thomas Fortune took over as editor it was even more militant in regard to the mistreatment of freedmen and women. No matter what the paper was called in its successive iterations, so long as Fortune was at the helm it was an adamant adversary of Jim Crow. The *Age* was also forthright in its support of other Black papers in the South, providing coverage of the circumstances they faced in their quest for total freedom and independence.

Other northern Black-owned papers—the *Detroit Plaindealer*, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, and the *New York Amsterdam News*—lent their voices and their resources in the battle against racism and white supremacy. Almost contemporaneously with the establishment of these pioneering northern urban papers was the *Chicago Defender*, under the leadership and guidance of Robert Sengstacke Abbott. From the paper’s inception, it was ready to speak truth to power with never a moment of retreat as it waged a war against racial injustice.

Into the second decade of the 20th century, the Black press increased exponentially, and this was of special importance for the migrants from the South who traveled north looking for greater opportunities. Of course, all was not as rosy as advertised in the press; in fact, many of the hardships the new arrivals experienced in the South were evident in cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, and New York. Here again the Black press came to the rescue, assisting the newcomers in their adjustment to the new environment, dispensing the valuable news they needed to survive. In the same manner they had been a beacon during the terrible days of slavery, the press was there for the "blues people" who needed all the information they could get as they navigated the so-called Promised Land north of the cotton curtain.

"Between World War I and World War II, African American newspapers guided their readers through a rigidly segregated world,"

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said narrator Joe Morton in Stanley Nelson's documentary *The Black Press: Soldiers without Swords*. “The papers provided information that was mundane but critical for African Americans' survival. Display ads suggested where they could shop without risking humiliation. Classified ads told them which employers did not discriminate. Sports and society pages lauded the athletes and professionals who the mainstream press ignored. Black newspapers showed the full spectrum of life in Black communities. In return, African American readers treated newspaper men and women with respect and adulation. In the mainstream press, Black journalists were denied the opportunity to practice their craft and earn a living, but in their world they were stars.”

Those stars are strung like milestones of American history: from Russwurm to Douglass to Ida B. Wells to Sengstacke Abbott, each of them indispensable in the pursuit of liberty and justice in this nation. Even when slavery had another name, the Black press was a reliable sentinel, an alternative to the negativity that was pervasive in the white press. And now, in these times when many Americans think we are living in a post-racial society, the Black press is here to set the record straight, and more than eager to continue to “plead our own cause.”

History shows the extent to which the Black press has fought ceaselessly to beat back the racism that nowadays takes on a more venomous form of incipient fascism. In this digital age, with the advent of social media and the scourge of fake news and misinformation, the Black press is needed more than ever. And when the president of the United States can declare that journalists are the “enemies of the people,” you know our predicament is worse. Actress Stacey Dash had the audacity to declare that Black History Month is no longer necessary. What she failed to understand were the conditions that made it necessary in the first place—and none of those iniquitous demons have vanished.

Similarly, the Black press is needed to combat the propaganda of right-wing or alt-right publications and media outlets that abound,
packed with vicious lies and erroneous conclusions about the state of Black America. It's particularly distressing to learn that so many Americans have bought into these misconceptions, accept them without investigation and then spread them as gospel truth.

Well, we need gospel truth, not knee-jerk reactions. We need the spirit of Ida B. Wells, T. Thomas Fortune, Ethel Payne, Frederick Douglass, Hoyt Fuller, John Johnson, James Hicks, and Lerone Bennett, as well as the fearless photographers who risked their lives to capture precious moments. It was the Black press that kept us informed of the atrocities that occurred daily in our communities, tragedies that went unnoticed in the mainstream press. Our stories still need to be told, there are still far too many children suffering from contaminated water, too many incidents of domestic violence that cry out for coverage, and the law enforcement agencies from California to Maine appear to be afflicted with common rage against young Black men.

As the old-line publications disappear—or more fortunately evolve into online iterations—there is a ray of hope that they will carry on the fight for justice, carry the faith of activist journalism into the next generation.

Exemplary of this resolve is the communication from such online entities as Black Agenda Report, The Root, The Grio, Black Press USA, Richard Prince’s Journal-isms, and the tireless work of bloggers with their columns and tweets. Several of those activist journalists have been summoned to the pages of this anthology. Yes, past is prologue, and it's time we rewind the clock to those yesteryears when the Black press was empowered, had the advertisers, the subscriptions, the intrepid reporters, visionary editors and publishers, and the moxie to plead our cause without reservations. That's the past that will give us a renewed sense of purpose, a renewed sense of possibility, and a fresh prologue of hope and promise.

For all our successes in the past, the burden of post-slavery remains, but Black people and our press are used to heavy lifting, used to rolling that Sisyphean rock off us and up the hill.

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