

## Contributions in Black Studies

### A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies

---

Volume 9 *Special Double Issue: African American  
Double Consciousness*

Article 16

---

1992

# Walter White and the British: A Lost Opportunity

Marika Sherwood  
*University of Virginia*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Sherwood, Marika (1992) "Walter White and the British: A Lost Opportunity," *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 9 , Article 16.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol9/iss1/16>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Afro-American Studies at ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contributions in Black Studies by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst. For more information, please contact [scholarworks@library.umass.edu](mailto:scholarworks@library.umass.edu).

*Marika Sherwood*

## WALTER WHITE AND THE BRITISH: A LOST OPPORTUNITY

**I**N HIS ARTICLE, *Walter White and the American Negro Soldier in World War II*, Thomas Hachey<sup>1</sup> concluded that there was “no real way to determine the measure of influence, if any, that Walter White had upon the plight of colored peoples in other lands during the Second World War.” While I would agree with this statement, black American soldiers were not the only “colored people” involved in WWII: as White himself wrote, “WWII has given the Negro a sense of kinship with other colored peoples of the world; he senses that the struggle of the Negro in the U.S. is part and parcel of the struggle against imperialism and exploitation in India, China, Burma, Africa, the Philippines Malaya, the West Indies and South America.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, when we examine White’s correspondence with the British government regarding British racism and his visit to the U.K. in 1944, his sense of kinship with the plight of other blacks appears to be as nonexistent as was his inability or unwillingness to use the power and influence of the NAACP on their behalf. These episodes also demonstrate the duplicity, mendacity, and racism of the British as well as the ease with which they handled the NAACP’s Secretary, who turned out to be a paper tiger, despite British apprehensions.

### EPISODE 1: BRITISH RECRUITMENT IN THE U.S.A.

In 1940 the British government began to appeal for aid and volunteers to help the British war effort. One of the first pleas was for 1000 medical officers and for blood. The military attaché in Washington immediately sought clarification from the War Office (WO) in London regarding the acceptability of “Negro” doctors. The British and U.S. Red Cross had advised against blacks, but, the Attaché warned, we cannot say this publicly, so we shall have to say they are acceptable, “even though eventually we take none.” That this ploy was acceptable to the WO is signified by the comment on the file “need take no action.”<sup>3</sup>

In June 1940 the Marquess of Lothian, British Ambassador in Washington, was informed of the immediate requirements of the British armed forces: the Royal Air Force (RAF) needed pilots, wireless operators and skilled tradesmen. Nine months later the requirements were quantified: skilled tradesmen were in urgent need, 3,850 for the army, 12,650 for the RAF, and 4,620 for the Royal Navy (RN). Evidently in reply to a query from the Embassy, the Foreign Office (FO) clarified that the RN only accepted British-born sons of British born parents (i.e., those of European descent) while the RAF and the army made no such racial stipulations.<sup>4</sup>

This apparent absence of what the British called the “colour bar” did not, however,

mean that the RAF and the army were prepared to accept men not of pure European descent, at least at this stage of the war. There had been a color bar in all the armed services, but at the instigation of the Colonial Office (CO), which had the task of keeping Britain's "colored" colonial subjects loyal during the hostilities, the military chiefs agreed to accept those of not "pure European descent." A grand announcement to this effect was made in both houses of Parliament on October 19, 1939. The announcement was pure propaganda: the FO advised its consular officers, and the CO its colonial governors that only "white volunteers should be accepted." No explicit instructions on how to deal with this contradiction were given; "how to handle this we leave to your discretion," the FO advised its officers abroad.<sup>5</sup> Unaware of British hypocrisy and racism, U.S. blacks responded to Britain's call for help. When they found their services refused, they protested—some directly to the British and others to the NAACP.

### **CASES OF DISCRIMINATION**

Dr. Walter King of New York volunteered his services to the U.S. Red Cross and was refused. When he pressed for an explanation, he was told that "it is true that only white citizens are eligible for the Doctors for Britain Project . . . The American Red Cross is acting upon instructions and cannot deviate from them." Dr. King contacted Judge Hastie who advised him to go to the NAACP. The Red Cross also refused to accept "Negro blood" for British victims of Nazi bombs, again claiming that they were "acting on instructions."<sup>6</sup>

Charles M. Ashe, a pilot with 2,400 flying hours experience, applied to join the Royal Air Ferry Command, which delivered airplanes from Canada to the U.K. When he was turned down, Ashe asked Claude Barnett of the Associated Negro Press for advice; Barnett suggested that he should demand an explanation from the British Air Ministry. He did and in response received from J. D. Mugford, Captain of the Ferry Command, a copy of the RAF's specifications, which clearly stated that "all applicants must be of the white race."

Moreover, the NAACP had learned that all blacks who had applied for employment at the U.K. Purchasing Commission in Washington had been turned down, even for menial jobs. Col. J. D. Arthur of the U.S. Corps of Engineers informed his superiors that he had been "informally advised that the British government probably would not visa a passport issued to an American Negro. No actual refusal has so far occurred because no Negroes have been selected." Edward Lawson, an official of the U.S. War Office Production Board, who had discussed with British officials the issue of sending black Americans to work on the bases, had been told that there were no objections. Yet when he questioned the construction contractors working on the islands he discovered that there was a clause in the contracts which they interpreted as meaning "that they should not bring Negro workers from the States at the 'white man's rate of pay', which is considerably higher than the native rate of pay." Despite this, on checking it was found that ten blacks had in fact been sent, but only to Bermuda, and that "none of these was of West Indian descent."<sup>7</sup>

**THE NAACP'S LETTER OF PROTEST**

Unfortunately I have been unable to discover any materials relating to the investigation of these complaints by the NAACP. Whatever the process (if any), the NAACP sent a detailed letter to Prime Minister Winston Churchill with copies to President Roosevelt, the U.S. Red Cross, the Fight for Freedom Committee, the British War Relief Society, and the British Military Attaché. The letter, dated September 26, 1941, points out that the Negro's "numerical position is of sufficient importance to have a material effect upon the defense efforts of the United States." After outlining the complaints, White accused the British of being "no less guilty of racial arrogance than is Nazi Germany unless the leaders of the British Government summarily order the abolition of such discrimination . . . [T]he same freedom from prejudice must be manifested at the Peace Conference."<sup>8</sup> White indicated that he intended making his letter public. Colonel Benson, the Military Attaché, summoned all his powers of persuasion to achieve White's agreement not to publish until Churchill had received the letter. White agreed to delay till October 15.

**THE PHELPS STOKES FUND JOINS THE FRAY**

It appears that Walter White sent Anson Phelps Stokes a copy of his letter to Churchill, and received an admonishment in reply. Not satisfied with this, Phelps Stokes wrote to the new Ambassador, Lord Halifax, enclosing a copy of his letter to White, and regretting the sending of the "in some ways unfortunate letter to the Prime Minister." White, he reassured the Ambassador, "is disposed to listen to reason when all the facts are presented to him." Reminding Halifax that they had met at a dinner party recently, Phelps Stokes respectfully suggested that the Embassy might consider having "some qualified person to whom it could turn for information or advice in dealing with the Negro American." Halifax replied on October 29 that he was waiting for a reply from London and would share whatever response he was authorized to make. He was sure "that your letter (to the NAACP) will have done much good." Regarding the suggestion for an adviser on Negro affairs, the Embassy staff was already too large, but he would "not fail to take advantage of your kind suggestion that we might consult your Foundation in regard to questions of this nature."

Although White's letters to Phelps Stokes have not been preserved we do have a second letter from Phelps Stokes, dated November 3, accusing White of exaggeration in comparing the position of U.S. Negroes to Jews under the Nazis. Though agreeing that the alleged discriminations all "deserved serious consideration," Phelps Stokes defended British rule in the colonies as "determined to help the Negroes of Africa as soon as possible to acquire the capacity and right of self-government."<sup>9</sup>

Anson Phelps Stokes had met many religious, missionary and political groups during his visits to the U.K. in the 1920s and '30s. He and the Foundation's secretary, Thomas Jesse Jones, maintained a correspondence with British organizations such as the Anti-Slavery Society, the Royal African Society and the League of Coloured People, and with such luminaries as Lord and Lady Simon (he, the Lord Chancellor; she, a leading philanthropist) and Arthur Creech Jones, who became Colonial Secretary in the post-war Labour government. Thus it is not surprising to find that in a letter to Dr. Oldham of the *Christian Newsletter* in Oxford, Phelps Stokes urges that the "British government should

go as far as it can to assure the darker people of the world who are part of the Empire . . . that [it] is definitely committed to the principle of helping backward people to attain as rapidly as possible the position where they will be fitted to have the major say in determining their own destiny.” Clearly Phelps Stokes was no respecter of confidentiality: he enclosed copies of his letters to White, the Ambassador and the NAACP’s October press release.<sup>10</sup>

### CONSTERNATION IN THE BRITISH CAMP

The NAACP’s letter led to a flurry of activity. Downing St. sent the letter to the FO, together with another letter of protest from a Mrs. Louis Jones of New York. (Other protests had been sent directly to the U.S. State Department and the FO.) Following the Prime Minister’s request to deal with the matter, the FO immediately sent copies to the Colonial Office and the ministries of Air and Health; it requested the Prime Minister to acknowledge receipt, and sent information (not preserved in the files) to the Embassy in Washington to help with responding to any queries subsequent to the NAACP’s press release. (There were further queries when Representative Arthur Mitchell read into the *Congressional Record* the Philadelphia Civic League’s protest regarding a statement by the U.S. Civil Service that the government of Trinidad had refused to accept U.S. Negroes would not be accepted on that British island.)<sup>11</sup>

Lord Halifax sent further details and suggestions: Charles Ashe had been told he didn’t have the right kind of experience; though a Negro doctor would not be suitable for service in London might it be advisable to accept one or two for service elsewhere? The publicity being considered by the NAACP probably would not lead to an adverse reaction in the U.S., but “our coloured colonial problems should be borne in mind.” The Embassy also wrote, denying discrimination among blood donors and stating that the U.S. was responsible for the selection of workers for the bases in the Caribbean. Another Negro doctor had applied for the Royal Army Medical Corps, but, thank goodness, could be refused as being over the age limit.<sup>12</sup>

Letters flew back and forth between the ministries and the Embassy in the attempt to draft an acceptable reply to the NAACP:

1. The Ministry of Health categorically denied any discrimination in the blood used by its transfusion services. On the question of Negro doctors, the Ministry was evasive: “patients have no choice of hospitals or staff . . . We must take into account the susceptibilities of the patients and provide a service similar to that which they would normally be accustomed.” This reply caused some concern among FO officials: “we shall have to skate over the question of coloured doctors when replying to the NAACP,” one noted, while another felt this would be the most difficult point to answer. Both the Ministry of Health and the CO knew and pointed out to the FO that there were numbers of Negro doctors in the U.K.<sup>13</sup> However, the CO officials acquiesced to a new, emotive, paternalist and racist clause in the draft reply: “a coloured doctor might make children feel uneasy as they do not know the traditional kindness shown by coloured people to children.”<sup>14</sup>

2. It was found that the Ferry Command requirements did prescribe that recruits should be "of the white race," but Ashe had not been "turned down solely on account of his racial extraction." The Foreign Secretary pointed out that the color bar was a "dangerous source of irritation"; surely as its removal was hardly likely to lead to an "embarrassing number of applicants from Negroes for employment at the Ferry Service," the Air Council could consider deleting the racial prescription? The Council graciously complied.<sup>15</sup> The Colonial Office felt that to refuse American Negroes was "contrary to the spirit" of the agreement by British armed forces and civil defence to accept Blacks. However, as the Negro in question was not a British subject, the problem was not theirs.

3. The Embassy investigated the employment of Negroes at its premises and reported on February 17, 1942 that it did not discriminate on the basis of race, creed or color, and employed 66 "coloured" men and 44 "coloured" women. Five days later another telegram arrived in London: the Embassy had miscounted: "previous telegram incorrect . . . employ 5 coloured messengers and 10 coloured char women."<sup>16</sup>

The British Purchasing Commission issued a press release on October 3 stating that no British mission discriminated on religious grounds; but, as the work involved "confidential war information . . . special precautions in selecting employees" had to be exercised. This applied "with equal force to applicants who are coloured; no discrimination has been, or will be exercised on account of colour."<sup>17</sup> However, the Commission's letter to the War Office which was duly forwarded to the FO, told a different story. "We don't discriminate on religious grounds," they wrote; as the work is confidential, "we usually prefer Americans with American-born parents." This direct emulation of the standard British formula (British-born sons of British-born parents) for excluding Blacks, would hardly have achieved the same result in the U.S.A. However, it was not remarked upon by FO officials, whose only comment was that it would be best not to specify to the NAACP what jobs Negroes held in British employment in Washington as such revelation "would further inflame the sensitive race consciousness of the NAACP." That most agreed on the exclusion of Negroes is demonstrated by the slightly more enlightened remark by J. V. Perowne in the FO files: there is "no justification," he wrote, "for the assumption that coloured people per se are open to question and white people are per se reliable from the security standpoint."<sup>18</sup>

4. The Colonial Office assured the FO that the West Indian immigration laws were free of colour discrimination; however, the administration of these laws was left to the governors, who were not obliged to give reasons for refusals. There were colour bar laws in some islands, the CO admitted: for example, in some schools and hotels in Bermuda and the Bahamas. Ask the NAACP for proof of their allegations, the CO advised. One FO official noted that this last remark was a "good idea," while another warned "they might find one!" The CO appears not to have passed on to the FO the information received from Bermuda which admitted that U.S. Negro workers were excluded.<sup>19</sup>

Numerous drafts of the reply to the NAACP were hurriedly passed around the ministries. "Not very easy to get the answer to complaint number two just right," the CO wailed on March 25. "I'm afraid this point will be the most difficult to meet," minuted Mr. Evans of the FO.<sup>20</sup>

The NAACP had agreed to delay publishing its charges against the British until October 15. No.10 Downing Street sent a reply on that day: "your letter is receiving immediate attention," the Prime Minister's Secretary wrote. A month later, after the news release, the NAACP telegraphed Churchill asking for a reply; the Ambassador responded reassuringly that "your letter is still receiving careful consideration." In February of the following year, Halifax was promising a reply "shortly"; by March 24, 1942 he had to admit that the reply had been delayed.<sup>21</sup>

It took six months for the ministries to agree a response to the NAACP's protest. The delay was due to the investigations into their allegations, wrote Anthony Bevir, Churchill's secretary, on March 27, 1942 to the NAACP. It had been found that Mr. Ashe's technical qualifications had been insufficient; however, the racial qualification, which *had* existed, has been withdrawn. British children might be uneasy with coloured doctors, "and emergencies are no time for such complications; there was no implication of professional incompetence; all blood and blood plasma was accepted by Britain if donors were free from communicable diseases." As the U.S. government had already denied receiving any requests from the British government not to send "Negroes" to U.S. bases on the islands, all that remained to be dealt with was "American Negroes" wishing to enter the islands as immigrants; immigration laws were free of racial prejudice and Mr. Churchill knew of no "instances in which a visa has been refused to a coloured alien on the ground of his colour. The British Purchasing Commission has informed us that it does not discriminate on the basis of race, creed or color; that it employs 66 coloured men and 44 coloured women."<sup>22</sup>

On April 23rd the Purchasing Commission in a telegram to the NAACP sent details of the Negroes in their employ: they were electricians, porters, charwomen, firemen and elevator operators. (Why did the Commission send this information? Had it not been apprised of the FO's view that it would "inflame" the NAACP?)

Neither the NAACP's nor the British archives contain any further correspondence. Did Walter White accept the Prime Minister's specious letter? Was it beyond White to be suspicious of the British, the overlords of an empire of some 62 million "coloured" people? An examination of his relationship with the British Ambassador has some bearing on this issue.

## WALTER WHITE AND LORD HALIFAX

White reported to the NAACP that he had had an interview with the Ambassador on April 24th—a week or so after Churchill's letter would have been delivered. He was careful to note that the interview lasted fifty minutes, "despite reminders from time to time by Lord Halifax's Secretary of appointments"; and that the interview opened with Halifax saying he had been wanting to meet White for some time and had therefore asked Mr. Willkie to arrange this meeting. The Ambassador questioned White about the reported low morale among Negroes and asked for details of discrimination in education,

segregation in the armed forces, etc. He recounted to White the astonishment of visiting Americans when he had conducted Indian women to formal dinner occasions while he was Viceroy of India. White responded by suggesting a U.S. Commission, consisting of Wendell Willkie, Justice Frankfurter, and a “distinguished American Negro” to visit India and assure Indians that the U.S. “would stand as guarantee that the pledges of independence made to India by Great Britain would be lived up to not only after but during the war.” Lord Halifax recommended that White make this proposal to President Roosevelt. White emphasized that “the presence of a distinguished Negro on the commission would do more good than many words, even though the race problem itself might not be mentioned at all.” The meeting concluded with Halifax asking White to send him “factual material and to come to see him at the Embassy in Washington.”<sup>23</sup>

This conversation is remarkable for the omission of any reference to the correspondence with Churchill; of how flattered White obviously was at the length of the interview; for his naivete regarding foreign affairs; for his ignorance of India, the caste system, racial attitudes and the protocols of vice-royalty, and for confounding independence with “the race problem.” Halifax, a veteran of the appeasement of Hitler as well as an ex-ruler of India, clearly out-maneuvered White who was obviously susceptible to flattery by members of the British upper class.

## **EPISODE 2: WHITE’S FORAY TO THE U.K., 1944**

As far as the archives reveal, White did not see Lord Halifax again until November 15, 1943, when they met to discuss White’s impending trip abroad. After ascertaining that White was not going as an official representative of the War Department, all Halifax promised to do to aid White was to send a telegram to inform the Foreign Secretary in London of White’s imminent arrival in the U.K. White was advised to turn to U.S. Ambassador John Winant and the British Ministry of Information once he arrived in London. There he would obtain aid in setting up appointments with the people that White wished to meet, including the Prime Minister as well as King George VI. As for going to India and visiting the jailed nationalist leaders, that decision would be made by the government of India.<sup>24</sup>

White was planning to go to the European Theater of Operations to “adjust difficulties between black and white troops, to bolster black troops’ morale,” to write articles on these for *Life*, *Time*, and the *New York Post*, as well as “to write a short, objective factual picture of the global problem of relations between white and non-white peoples,” as he informed Eleanor Roosevelt. Four weeks later White had to tell Mrs. Roosevelt that the War Department had written that “unfavourable replies from the Theater Commanders prevent your accreditation as a war correspondent.”<sup>25</sup> With Mrs. Roosevelt’s help, White was eventually allowed to proceed to Britain.

## **BLACK TROOPS IN BRITAIN**

White arrived, unannounced (or so the FO complained), on January 3, 1944. In fact, the Embassy had not only notified the FO on 11/21/1943, but had warned that “White was critical of our policy . . . worth while to take some trouble with him.”<sup>26</sup> His arrival



at the Ministry of Information, which looked after journalists, led to as much of a flurry as had the NAACP's letter two years previously. The presence of black troops in the U.K. and pressure from the U.S. Southern Base Command for the British to acquiesce to the U.S.'s traditional segregation had led to the British army drafting instructions to this effect. Women in the Auxiliary Territorial Service had already been warned off associating with blacks. The government was so concerned about the potential volatility of the situation that in August 1942 it pressed President Roosevelt to reduce the proposed allocation of 10% African-American troops. The FO was also uneasy about the presence of these troops; there was reportedly "serious alarm at the promiscuity between U.S. troops and British girls." However, by 1943 the FO accepted that "there may be a military reason for the presence of coloured troops in this country, but one important American motive for sending them was certainly political. We need not begrudge the Administration much needed Negro votes."<sup>27</sup>

### CONSTERNATION (AGAIN) IN THE BRITISH CAMP

The consternation caused by White's arrival has been documented by Thomas Hachey, as already mentioned. What shall we do?, the FO cabled Halifax in Washington. Refuse him a visa to India, the Ambassador replied; or tell him we're prepared to let him go wherever the U.S. War Department accredits him as a correspondent. The Ministry of Information felt it had "the key to solving the White problem. . . he is an imaginative and impressionable character and if our people can show him stirring and remarkable things when he goes about . . ." It was discovered that the *Time* bureau chief had not been notified of White either, and thought his visit "a mistake"; *Life* cabled that White was not their representative, but they would consider anything he wrote; in fact, White was only accredited to the *New York Post*, and only for the European Theater of Operations.<sup>28</sup> The British ministries decided that it was up to the U.S. Ambassador to arrange the interviews White requested. The Ambassador did not make the requests; the FO sighed with relief and happily notified the Embassy in Washington that White was disgruntled with the Ambassador, not with the British! White toured Britain, Europe and North Africa. In Britain, the highest ranking official he met was the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for India, Lord Munster, who was adamant that White, should he be allowed U.S. War Department accreditation to go to India, would not be permitted to see the imprisoned nationalists. The FO suggested to the Indian government that should the U.S. accredit him, White should be treated as an important visitor.<sup>29</sup>

### WHITE IN BRITAIN

In his autobiography White noted that he had been besieged by reporters on his arrival and that he was closely watched wherever he went. The U.S. military gave him a guide, a staff car and a chauffeur. Regarding the British, he only notes that he had succeeded in placing the Confidential Notes (to British officers to advise their troops not to associate with Negroes) before the Joint Anglo-American Military/Civilian Board, chaired by Ambassador Winant. He also reported that the British Home Office had issued a circular to Chief Constables reminding them that British policy was not to segregate and ordering the police not to enforce any segregation rulings made by U.S.

authorities. He also found that some British resented American attempts to dictate with whom they should have social relations. Other than noting in *A Rising Wind* that there were Blacks in the British seaports and large cities and also West Indian and African students and “distinguished Negro artists” living in the U.K., White made no mention of Britain’s Black population.<sup>30</sup>

Why was White so silent about his unofficial contacts in Britain? We know from his U.K. notebooks that he met at least some of the activists and revolutionaries. His notes mention George Padmore and Nancy Cunard and the West African Students’ Union, which he visited. Among those present at this meeting were George Padmore and H.O. Davies, one of the founder members of the Lagos Youth Movement, a nationalist organization. It appears that White did not visit the League of Coloured People, who mentioned his arrival in their monthly Newsletter and that they were “hoping to see him,” but did not allude to him again. (In November, 1941 the *Newsletter* had printed excerpts from the NAACP news release. Unfortunately no League archives have been preserved and there is nothing in the NAACP’s file on the League regarding either the Churchill correspondence or White’s visit. This is a most curious as the League was a highly respectable campaigning organization, very similar to the NAACP.) White wrote to Padmore from New York on April 26 to thank him for making “my stay so pleasant and interesting”; from which I deduce that Padmore had introduced him at least to some of the anti-imperialist intelligentsia in London.<sup>31</sup>

## THE SITUATION OF BLACKS IN BRITAIN

Having met at least Cunard and Padmore as well as the members and guests of the West African Students Union, it is impossible for White not to have been made aware of the struggles in Britain on behalf of Blacks resident in Britain, Blacks temporarily in the U.K. such as the West Indian workers and Negro troops, and colonial issues.

The issues regarding Black peoples in Britain included instances of discrimination in housing and employment, in Civil Defence, in air-raid shelters, in dance halls, restaurants and hotels; against racist films and the continuing colour bar in some sections of the armed forces.

Issues regarding the colonies were multitudinous: sedition ordinances, suppression of the press, the imprisonment of nationalist and labour leaders, the flogging of African troops, compulsory labour service, land alienation, the price paid for colonial agricultural produce, cocoa marketing, export/import quotas, improving the health, social and educational service, discrimination in employment and discriminatory wages paid to “natives” in the colonial civil service and armed forces; and of course, self-government or outright independence.

The West Indian workers imported to aid the war effort were supported in their struggle for better (and equal) labour conditions, housing and promotion prospects; the trade unions were challenged for excluding the West Indians. They, and black troops, were offered entertainment by both the Students Union and the League of Coloured People. Both organizations arranged for questions to be asked in Parliament on incidents of discrimination against West Indian workers and black troops. When the League heard of the army’s confidential advice to officers to follow the U.S. tradition of segregation,

Dr. Harold Moody, the president, questioned the government and discussed the issue with the Colonial Office, the Conference of British Missionary Societies and Colonel Blakely, one of the U.S. army's senior chaplains. Moody also investigated allegations of segregation at the American Red Cross in London (he found none, though I have seen complaints of it elsewhere). Various Black British organizations combined to mount a major protest against the imposition of the death sentence, based on very flimsy evidence, on a black GI accused of raping a white woman; they won his reprieve.<sup>32</sup>

### WALTER WHITE'S LOST OPPORTUNITY

White must have been informed of at least some of the issues listed above. Why did he say nothing, do nothing? If he really had been besieged by reporters on his arrival in London, he could have called a press conference, perhaps together with the League or the Students Union. Was he so mindful of diplomatic protocol that he did not wish to interfere in British affairs? He had shown no awareness of such niceties when he made his proposal to Lord Halifax for American guarantees of Indian independence! He could have written about British struggles when he returned to the U.S.A., but as far as I have been able to find, he did not.

Was White so impressed by the effusive treatment he received in Britain at the hands of the Ministry of Information and by the undoubtedly anti-segregationist attitude and behaviour of much of the British public, that he could not countenance taking up issues of British discrimination and colonial exploitation?

Did White even believe in British exploitation of the colonies? He certainly seems not to have considered the possible outcome on the West Indies of the introduction of U.S.-style segregationist practices during the building and the occupation of the U.S. bases in the islands. Nor did he ever, as far as I have been able to ascertain, raise the issue of equal wages for islanders eventually employed on the bases. In his *A Rising Wind* White appears to see the issue of colonies only as a support to the struggle in the U.S.A.: "The Negro soldier is convinced that as time proceeds that identification of interests will spread even among some brown and yellow peoples who today refuse to see the connection between their exploitation by white nations and discrimination against the Negro in the U.S." (144) How could White issue this veiled call for peoples oppressed in the colonies to support the struggle of the Negro when he did nothing to support the cause of colonial freedom?

And, harking back to the correspondence with Churchill, why did the NAACP not reply to Churchill? It could not have been so difficult to see through the evasiveness of the reply, nor to perceive the underlying racism. Nor could it have been difficult to follow up on the reply, investigate a little further, ask questions of the many West Indian organizations in New York, or the League of Coloured People in London, or of some of the contacts White had made on a previous visit to England, such as the Anti-Slavery Society.

But, having made the gesture, White did nothing. Perhaps the "natives" in the colonies, or the Black working man in Britain did not merit his interest; he had been, after all, taken in by Halifax's flattery. There is an indication of White's class attitudes in his report to the NAACP on his travels: in the list of his accomplishments he notes that he had arranged for "an intelligent Negro sergeant" to be put on the staff of *Stars & Stripes* and *Yank*.<sup>33</sup> Though he clearly felt personally insulted by the treatment he received at the

hands of Ambassador Winant, he appears not to have been aware of British racism or to have paid any attention to what he learned from his contacts while in Britain. Whatever the answer to these questions, White certainly missed the two opportunities he had to seriously challenge British racism.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Hachey, "Walter White and the American Negro Soldier in World War II: A Diplomatic Dilemma for Britain," *Phylon*, 39:3 (September 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Walter White, *A Rising Wind*, (Doubleday, 1945); I have used the reprint by Negro University Press, 1971; the quote is from p. 144.

<sup>3</sup> Military Attaché to the War Office, PRO:FO371/26225 A5081/538/45. The figure of 1,000 physicians required comes from a letter by Edgar Hess to the *New Statesman & Nation*, 8/11/48.

<sup>4</sup> Telegram to Ambassador Lord Lothian, 6/20/1940, in PRO:FO371/24Z56 A3216/3216/45; telegram to the Air Attaché, Washington, 3/28/1941 in PRO:FO371/26202 A2244/257/45; information to the consulates 4/24/1941 in PRO:FO371/26203 A3728/257/45.

<sup>5</sup> Churchill to MacDonald 10/16/1939 in PRO:CO323/1673; FO telegram to Consular Officials 11/10/1939, CO telegram to colonial governors 12/24/1939, in the same file; memorandum from the CO to the War Cabinet 1/6/1940 in PRO:CAB 68/4 WP(R)(40)6. See also my, *Many Struggles*, Karia Press (London) 1985.

<sup>6</sup> NAACP letter to Churchill 9/26/1941 in PRO:FO371/26205, f. 140; there is another copy in the NAACP papers, Group II, Box 181. All the "cases" are taken from this letter. Mr. Ashe's letter to Claude Barnett, dated 10/1/41, is in the Associated Negro Press papers, Box 199.

<sup>7</sup> Florence Ellis, secretary to E. Lawson, War Office Production Board, to Walter White 4/23/1942, in NAACP papers, Group II, Box 181.

<sup>8</sup> White to Churchill 9/26/1941, loc cit.

<sup>9</sup> The Phelps Stokes Fund papers, deposited at the Schomburg Center, were unsorted when I was granted the privilege of access to them. Hence it is possible that when indexed further relevant material will come to light. The November 3 letter to White is in the NAACP papers, Group II, Box A3.

<sup>10</sup> The Phelps Stokes Foundation was disliked for its racist paternalism by many of the African students in the U.S. whom it sought to aid. It was active in organising conferences on Africa during war. Post-war it financed a survey of African students in the U.S. and was instrumental in the establishment of the Committee on African Students in North America. This organization, under the auspices of the British consul in New York, was seen by its members as aiding the African student and ensuring that the "right" student went to the U.S. Political activists in Africa such as Namdi Azikiwe refused to co-operate with this organization.

Anson Phelps Stokes to Dr. J. H. Oldham, 11/25/1941, in the Phelps Stokes papers.

<sup>11</sup> Protests and Mitchell's action are in PRO:FO371/26163 and 26164.

<sup>12</sup> Telegram to the Washington Embassy 10/14/1941, in PRO:FO371/26205 A8221/257/45.

<sup>13</sup> Minutes by King 12/1/1941 in PRO:FO371/26206 A9625/257/45.

It has not been possible to ascertain the numbers of physicians of African and West Indian origins practising in Britain; their numbers included Dr. Hastings Banda, who became Malawi's first president. There were also many doctors of Indian origins. It seems that most physicians had a multiracial clientele which included both middle and working class Britons. The admissions are in PRO:FO371/30665 A1855/278/45.

<sup>14</sup> Minutes by J. L. Keith 1/6/1942 and J. Paskin 1/9/1942, in PRO:CO859/80/5. To his, credit, another official, J. Calder, was against the clause. Ministry of Health reply Z/20/1942, in PRO:FO371/30665 A1774/278/45.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Air to the FO 1/22/42, in PRO:FO371/30665 A906/278/45; CO to FO 7/2/1941, in PRO:FO371/2&164 A7080.

<sup>16</sup> Telegrams from the Embassy to the Foreign Office, 2/17/1942 and 2/22/1942, in PRO:FO371/30665 A1638/278/45 and A1774/278/45.

<sup>17</sup> The press release from the British Purchasing Commission is quoted in the draft reply to the NAACP by the FO dated 2/13/42, in PRO:CO859/80/5.

<sup>18</sup> Minutes by Evans 2/28/1942, in PRO:FO/371/30665 A1774/278/45; minutes by J. V. Perowne 12/20/1941, in PRO:FO/371/26206 A10036/257/45.

<sup>19</sup> Notes without signatures in the margins in PRO:FO/371/26205 A8221/257/45; minute by J. Paskin 2/23/1942, in PRO:CO859/80/5.

<sup>20</sup> CO to FO 3/25/1942, in PRO:FO371/30665 A1774/278/45.

<sup>21</sup> The correspondence between Halifax and White is in the NAACP papers, Group II, Box 181.

<sup>22</sup> Anthony Bevir, Prime Minister Churchill's secretary, to Walter White, 3/27/1942, in PRO:FO371/30665 f.116. I have not been able to locate the original of the Purchasing Commission letter Bevir quotes. Was it pure invention?

<sup>23</sup> Confidential Office Memorandum on conversation with Lord Halifax by the Secretary, 4/24/1942, in NAACP papers, Group II, Box A204.

<sup>24</sup> Confidential Office Memorandum by White 11.15.1943, in NAACP papers, Group II, Box A204.

<sup>25</sup> White to Eleanor Roosevelt, 11/1/1943 and 11/29/1943, in Correspondence of Eleanor Roosevelt, reel 20.

<sup>26</sup> Ministry of Information to India Office 1/18/1944, in PRO:FO371/38609 A269/159/45.

<sup>27</sup> Regional Commissioners Conference 12/7/1943, in PRO:FO371/34126 A11600/33/45; memorandum by Donnelly, 11/16/1943, in PRO:FO371/34126 A10199/33/45. The plea to Roosevelt to reduce the number of Negro troops in Britain is in PRO:FO371/30680 A11660/G; Hopkins to Marshall 8/19/1942, Hopkins papers Box 136, from Christopher Thome, "Britain and the black GIs: Racial issues and Anglo-American relations in 1942," *New Community*, 3:3 (Summer 1974).

<sup>28</sup> Internal memorandum over an illegible signature 1/12/1955, in PRO:FO371/38609 AN159/159/45.

<sup>29</sup> FO to the India Office 2/22/1944, in PRO:FO371/38609 AN587/159/45.

<sup>30</sup> I have searched the British newspapers for reports of White's presence, but found none; yet White had written of being "besieged" by reporters. Was he not sufficiently newsworthy for papers severely restricted by a shortage of newsprint? Did the ubiquitous war-time censor delete him? Was he exaggerating?

Walter White, *A Man Called White*, (Viking Press 1948), 242-2; see also his *A Rising Wind*, (Doubleday 1945 [Negro University Press reprint 1971]). White's report to the NAACP is in the NAACP papers, Group II, Box A598. For a full treatment of the *Notes on Relations with A Coloured Troops* and the history of Negro troops in Britain during the war, see Graham Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull*, IB Tauris (London) 1987.

<sup>31</sup> White's European notebooks are in the NAACP papers, Group II, Box 603.

<sup>32</sup> There are no adequate—or even inadequate—treatments of Blacks in Britain during World War II. On the experience of the workers imported from the West Indies and the Caribbean Regiment, see my *Many Struggles*, Karia Press (London) 1985. For a general and comprehensive history see Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People In Britain*, (London: Pluto Press, 1984). I am currently working on a study of Black organizations in Britain 1938-48.

<sup>33</sup> The comment on the "intelligent Negro sergeant" is in the 4/24/1944 version of his report to the NAACP that White sent to Eleanor Roosevelt (Eleanor Roosevelt Correspondence, reel 20). A different version has been preserved in the NAACP papers, Group II, Box A598. On the NAACP's relationship with Africa, see "The NAACP and Africa: An Historical Profile," *The Crisis*, April 1977.