

## CHAPTER 5

### “The House I Live In”

On April 22, 1944, a group of Howard University students converged on Thompson's, a moderately priced chain restaurant in downtown Washington, D.C. Like most restaurants in the nation's capital, Thompson's was segregated. Sixty-five students entered the restaurant and, after being refused service, sat down quietly and began to read. Others picketed outside. “Are you for Hitler's Way or the American Way?” their signs read. “We Die Together. Let's Eat Together.”

Six black GIs soon noticed the picketers and joined the students inside. White servicemen were also eating in the restaurant and white military police asked the black soldiers to leave. When they refused, an MP lieutenant asked them to leave as a personal favor: the army did not want to be embarrassed “in case of an incident.” The black GIs kept their seats. Ultimately, the military police were forced to order all servicemen, white and black, out of Thompson's. Four hours later, the management of the restaurant chain directed that the students be served.<sup>1</sup>

As their placards suggested, these Howard University students were attempting to bend the language of wartime unity and consensus to their own ends. Invoking an “American Way” that they clearly contrasted to the racist practices of Hitler, they suggested that any American who did not support integrated dining facilities sympathized with Nazis. In this instance, their strategy worked, perhaps in part because the army was eager to avoid a racial incident. In many other cases, however, those pushing for more egalitarian treatment were dismissed as troublemakers, traitors to an “American Way” that often put civility and social harmony above all else.

If calls for national unity—and appeals to a consensus defined by a common enemy—shaped debates over the nation's political economy during the war years, they also had a profound effect on discussions of ethnicity, religion, and race. Federal agencies, political commentators, Hollywood, the news media, and an array of civic organizations celebrated America's "democratic diversity" in speeches, movies, radio shows, educational pamphlets, and a variety of other venues. Such paeans to cultural pluralism were designed both to bolster the morale of the nation's heterogeneous population and to distinguish the U.S. from its fascist (or totalitarian) enemies. At the same time, federal officials and many civic leaders worried about the potential for social unrest—or even violence—as Americans of widely differing backgrounds were flung together in military training camps and overcrowded war production centers. Thus, even as they hailed America's diverse demographic strands, they appealed for "tolerance" in the name of national defense.

This formulation made pluralism a corollary of consensus. It promoted a more inclusive vision of U.S. society by recognizing the contributions that ethnic, religious, and racial "outsiders" had made to American life. It also provided a powerful rhetorical tool with which to condemn bigots and bullies of all stripes. At the same time, this vision of unity and difference emphasized teamwork and assumed that all groups in American society were working toward the same ends. Distinct ethnic, religious, racial, regional, or class interests were legitimate only to the degree that they could be aligned with or subsumed within the values and interests of the nation as a whole. The implications of this linkage of pluralism to consensus had markedly different implications in the arenas of ethnicity, religion, and race.

### **"Our Enemies Within"**

Even before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, some groups promoting cultural pluralism and intergroup harmony in the U.S. hoped to link their cause to the issue of national security. In early 1941, for instance, staffers at the American Jewish Committee (AJC) argued that the Nazi blitzkrieg of the previous year gave the organization "a unique opportunity to discredit anti-Semitism not merely in terms of Americanism, decency and fair play, as in the past, but also in terms of American defense and national survival."<sup>2</sup> Many Americans believed that only a fifth column could explain Germany's string of military successes, and particularly France's speedy collapse in June of 1940.

Playing off of Nazi racialism, both the AJC and its ally, the National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCCJ), argued that bigots formed just such a fifth column. Anti-Semitism, the NCCJ's Everett Clinchy argued, was a "Nazi trick" that Hitler had used to divide and undermine Western democracies.<sup>3</sup>

In the months leading up to Pearl Harbor—and particularly after the U.S. entry into the war—a host of liberal organizations joined the AJC and the NCCJ in preaching tolerance in the name of national unity and defense. Schools and civic groups across the country showed the NCCJ filmstrip *The World We Want to Live In* and listened to conference speakers decry religious conflict as "a trick to weaken and destroy us." The Council Against Intolerance spread the theme through annual Independence Day celebrations in several cities, which were broadcast over national network radio. It also distributed to schools materials urging tolerance, including the aptly named magazine *American Unity*. A group called Citizens for Educational Service Inc. issued a pamphlet entitled *Footprints of the Trojan Horse*, which depicted anti-Semitism as a device being used to destroy democracy one minority at a time. These examples could be multiplied many times over.<sup>4</sup>

Some of this material used rhetoric every bit as hysterical as that used by nativists during World War I or by red-baiters in the postwar years. For instance, the Chicago chapter of the NCCJ issued a brochure entitled *No Ocean Separates Us from Our Enemies Within*. The document opened to a collage of Nazi storm troopers, bombed-out buildings, and stricken women and children refugees. "Enemies Within Hastened the Fall of Democratic, Liberty Loving Nations Abroad—National Defense Demands National Unity," the brochure intoned. Only then did the brochure make clear that these internal enemies were those who "propagat[ed] lies, suspicion, misunderstanding and intolerance among American citizens of every creed and race."<sup>5</sup>

With the U.S. entry into World War II, this plea for tolerance in the name of national unity became a staple of the federal government's domestic propaganda campaign. The war triggered the greatest internal migration of Americans since pioneers poured over the Appalachians more than a century earlier; by the end of the war, one in every five Americans had left their homes, many for military service or for urban centers of defense production in the North and East.<sup>6</sup> As Americans with different accents, eating habits, religions, political beliefs, and skin colors encountered one another for the first time, both the opportunities and the dangers loomed large. The federal government stepped in to help shape the outcome. Less than a month after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt warned employers against discharging or refusing to hire workers "simply because they were born abroad or

because they have ‘foreign-sounding’ names.” “Remember the Nazi technique,” the president continued. “Pit race against race, religion against religion, prejudice against prejudice. Divide and conquer!”<sup>7</sup> An OWI manual distributed to the producers of radio shows declared simply, “Men and women who foster racial prejudices are fighting for the enemy.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1944, the American Jewish Committee privately took credit for “making the phrase ‘divide and conquer’ a household phrase in American life.”<sup>9</sup> This is an overstatement, but it contains a germ of truth. The AJC and groups such as the NCCJ with which it worked closely were among the first to cast arguments for tolerance explicitly in terms of national unity and defense; in fact, the AJC helped fund many of the private groups that decried the divisive results of prejudice both before and during the war. Moreover, the Office of Facts and Figures contacted both the AJC and the NCCJ shortly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor for help in crafting an anti-Nazi message.<sup>10</sup>

In any case, the AJC, the NCCJ, and the various organizations with which they were allied greatly amplified the government’s message. For instance, they may well have been responsible for a series of advertisements decrying various forms of domestic intolerance that appeared in labor newspapers toward the end of the war. In the fall of 1944, four such ads appeared in the *ITU News*, a bimonthly magazine published in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, by organizers of the Independent Textile Union. Although the ads included a line at the bottom urging Americans to buy war bonds, the bulk of each ad was devoted to a warning about America’s “enemies within.” “America has its snipers, too!” screamed one ad, under a picture of a darkened street haunted by a sniper and his victim. “They don’t stalk through the streets with guns in hand. They don’t shoot down children who are out after curfew. But they talk carelessly, unwisely and intolerantly.” These American snipers, the ad continued, were “playing Hitler’s game by sniping at ‘those Catholics,’ ‘those Jews’ or ‘those Protestants.’” According to the ad, Hitler also sought to turn “Negro and White, each against the other” and to set “native-born against naturalized citizen[s].” It concluded with an admonition to “Be big... be liberal... be tolerant... Be American!”<sup>11</sup>

The other ads in the series carried similar messages. “Is Hitler Winning a ‘Secret’ Victory?” asked one. “The Hitler plan of setting class against class, of stirring up racial and religious hatred, is making insidious headway right here in this country—even though our fighting men are giving up their lives to wipe out these prejudices forever.” A third ad offered Americans an “Invitation to Committee Suicide” under a picture of a revolver and an engraved



card reading, “Hate the Protestants...Hate the Catholics...Hate the Jews.” [Figure 5.1] The fourth ad pictured the mother of two American servicemen. The woman knitted sweaters for her soldier sons, sent them chocolate cakes, and urged her husband to purchase more war bonds. But despite such



**Figure 5.1.** This image graced the 14 August 1944 cover of *The Union*, a publication put out by the CIO-affiliated International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. A similar image appeared in the *ITU News*, published in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, by organizers of the Independent Textile Union. The ITU version, however, dropped the line about Negroes and added text at the bottom that equated tensions between classes to racial and religious hatred (courtesy of the United Steelworkers; reproduced by the Wisconsin Historical Society).

patriotic acts, the ad charged, this woman was an enemy agent. Through her “thoughtless remarks” about neighbors of different religions, skin colors, and ethnicities, she spread “hatred and distrust” among groups of Americans. “As surely as though you landed on these shores in the dark of night from a submarine, bent on blowing up factories and burning bridges,” the ad warned the woman, “in spite of your charming manner and your all-out war record, lady, you are a *saboteur*.”<sup>12</sup>

As Gary Gerstle has noted, the message of cultural pluralism and tolerance contained in these ads appealed to the French Canadian workers who made up the bulk of the Independent Textile Union. French Canadians had faced fierce anti-Catholic prejudice in America, and “the nation’s decision to attach so much importance to the fight against religious discrimination appeared to them an unprecedented opportunity to integrate themselves into American life.” Moreover, the language of loyalty and betrayal that suffused the ads undoubtedly resonated with workers who were being pressured by the government to give their full support to the war effort. In the later years of the war, ITU leaders themselves increasingly adopted the language and sentiments contained in the ads. In doing so, they embraced a version of cultural pluralism that emphasized the rights of ethnic individuals rather than of ethnic communities. (As the “Sniper” ad declared, “We’re *all* Americans if we believe in the American ideal of ‘inalienable rights,’ of ‘equality of opportunity’...of ‘freedom of the individual!’”) This, writes Gerstle, “threatened to undermine...the ethnic enclave’s communalist orientation,” an orientation that provided one of the sources of its labor radicalism.<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, these ads—like other private and governmental appeals for tolerance during the war—often equated tensions between classes to racial and religious hatred. Some versions of the “Suicide” ad, for instance, suggested that “Capital is profiteering” was as much an example of treasonous bigotry as “The Negro is rebelling” or “Attack the Jews.” (This cast in a more colorful vein the OWI statement that economic groups—like religious, racial, or social ones—were illegitimate targets for “prejudice, animosity or hostility.”) Such propaganda for tolerance challenged “the notion that the relations between capital and labor formed the central political and moral question of modern American life,” Gerstle observes. At the same time, it obscured “the fundamental inequality in capital-labor relations.”<sup>14</sup> Both these ideas had been central to the vision of Americanism offered by the industrial labor movement and its left-liberal allies before the war. During the war, however, these assumptions were undermined, not only by the conscious campaigns of America’s business community, but also by the federal government and

many of the private organizations who sought to instill the values of cultural pluralism and intergroup harmony in the American people.

### **"Steam from the Melting Pot"**

The notion that bigots were "enemies within" was not the only method used to promote tolerance and cultural pluralism during the war. One of the most common formulas for portraying—and thus furthering—America's pluralistic unity was that used in more than a dozen World War II combat films. During and after the war, Hollywood turned out numerous combat films featuring platoons, bomber crews, or other small combat units comprised of men of widely varying backgrounds: a WASP from New England, a Kansas farm boy with a German surname, an Irish Catholic, a Jew or Italian from Brooklyn, a southerner, a Polish American from the Midwest, and so on. These films showed diverse Americans—Americans divided by region, ethnicity, religion, class, rank, service, and sometimes race—uniting to battle the Nazi or Japanese enemy, sacrificing when necessary for the common cause. The same formula was widely employed in radio shows, books, cartoons, and other formats.

Scholarly discussions of these films and similar cultural artifacts have focused particular attention on their "roster[s] of exotic ethnic surnames."<sup>15</sup> One historian has argued that "ethnicity and region of origin" were the "key differences" reflected in these movies, precisely because many liberals assumed that such attributes among whites were "of no real consequence."<sup>16</sup> Other scholars have invoked the "sprinkling of Italians, Poles, Irish, and Scandinavians" in such films as evidence of the wartime "celebration of the ethnic diversity of the American people."<sup>17</sup> To still others, they offer evidence of the ultimate triumph of the "nation of nations" approach espoused by Louis Adamic.<sup>18</sup>

There is no question that the "Americans All" approach to national unity during World War II diverged sharply from the "100 percent Americanism" that dominated public discourse during World War I. Nevertheless, the scholarly emphasis on wartime celebrations of ethnicity has tended to mask lingering concerns on the part of both private groups and many federal officials about the loyalties and predilections of America's foreign nationality groups. In the late 1930s and early 1940s, left liberals such as Louis Adamic and his colleagues at the Common Council for American Unity worried nearly as much about tensions *among* America's ethnic groups as about prejudices aimed at

them by the native born. Both the AJC and the NCCJ cast intolerance as an alien rather than a homegrown philosophy and defined bigotry, particularly anti-Semitism, as an Old World disease. Thus, they saw recent immigrants—those who had not yet been fully Americanized—as particularly susceptible to prejudice.<sup>19</sup> Such fears were not limited to cosmopolitan leftists and inter-group liberals, and they did not abate when the U.S. entered World War II. In a September 1942 article entitled “Steam from the Melting Pot,” *Fortune* warned that ethnic Americans might form a fifth column. The nation’s foreign-language groups, the magazine declared, comprised “a replica of explosive Europe on U.S. ground.”<sup>20</sup>

Federal officials too worried about loyalties and prejudices imported from the Old World. While some in the government saw ethnic groups as an asset—a powerful weapon able “to influence opinion and events in their native countries abroad”—others feared that the loyalties of foreign-nationality groups to overseas homelands could pose an internal security risk, disrupt domestic unity, and ultimately undermine the war effort. Such concerns prompted the Roosevelt administration to create several wartime agencies devoted specifically to monitoring and influencing the political actions of America’s ethnic communities. These included the Foreign Nationalities Branch of the Office of Strategic Services and the Foreign Language Division of the Office of War Information. Older agencies—the State Department, the FBI, and the Department of Justice—also played a role in these efforts.<sup>21</sup>

Government officials focused some of their concerns on American citizens and residents with ties to the Axis powers, but their anxieties were not limited to these ethnic groups. They also worried that simmering tensions within and among immigrant groups—the strains between various Slavic nationalities, for instance—might erupt, hindering the war effort.<sup>22</sup> Similarly, they feared that Old World hatreds—such as the Polish hatred of the Russians—would hurt America’s ability to cooperate with her allies. Such concerns were exacerbated by evidence that overseas interests and governments were trying to manipulate America’s foreign-language groups.

Philleo Nash served as special assistant for Domestic Operations in the OWI from 1942 to 1945 and as a special consultant to the Secretary of War in 1943. In both positions, he was responsible for observing, reporting on, and helping craft policy toward America’s foreign-language and racial minority groups.<sup>23</sup> In a memo dated June 3, 1943, he warned that American Slovaks, Italians, Magyars (Hungarians), Croatians, and Germans “have been subjected, during the past decade or longer, to foreign propaganda influences

hostile to the American way of life, anti-democratic in spirit, working to utilize this country's foreign language populations for political and economic purposes connected with the European, not the American, scene." The Slovaks, for example, "have been subjected to tremendous pressure by both Germany and Hungary seeking to weaken the Czechoslovak Republic by turning Slovaks against it." The Germans sought to destroy the Republic, while the Hungarians merely wanted additional territory, "but the result of their combined activities has been to create such widespread confusion in the minds of Slovak-Americans as to blind them to the real issues of the war." "It is no exaggeration to state," Nash continued, "that an alarming proportion of Slovak-Americans to this day are fearful of the effect an Allied victory in the war will have on the so-called 'Slovak state' and Slovak 'independence.'"<sup>24</sup>

The catalyst for Nash's 1943 memo was the wildcat strike by members of John Lewis's United Mine Workers' union. "Of the 500,000-odd coal miners now out on strike, thus jeopardizing the entire American war effort, approximately 400,000 are men of foreign birth or the sons of immigrants," Nash wrote. Most of the striking miners belonged to one of the foreign-language groups that he had cited as subject to foreign pressure, with the Slovaks being the largest group. "It is a striking fact that the overwhelming majority of the strikers belong to those foreign-language groups which have been least able to assimilate and which have been subject to the heaviest pressure of foreign interests," Nash declared. "The great majority of the coal miners now on strike are ignorant of the broad issues at stake and see no reason why they should place the interest of the United States as a whole before their own interests."<sup>25</sup>

Nash was a liberal Democrat and New Dealer whose family had long been involved in the struggle for racial equality. He himself was a staunch advocate for civil rights within both the Roosevelt and Truman administrations.<sup>26</sup> Yet during the war, Nash clearly put the need for unity behind the war effort above all else. He saw strikes as illegitimate and believed that the willingness of immigrants and their children to walk off the job provided evidence that they had not yet been fully Americanized. This example suggests the moderating impact that the drive for national unity during the war had on many in the liberal community.

One possible solution to the perceived problem of "dangerous" ethnic loyalties was to convert those loyalties into assets by transforming ethnic Americans into U.S. ambassadors. This approach was advocated by voices as divergent as Louis Adamic's and those of the editors of *Fortune*. In his 1941 book *Two-Way Passage*—and in subsequent meetings with the president, Eleanor Roosevelt, and other administration officials—Adamic urged

U.S. policymakers to use American ethnics to “ignite” an “American revolution in Europe.” He proposed that U.S. immigrants and their children, organized into national advisory groups, be allowed to develop postwar plans for their ancestral homes, then return temporarily to administer liberated countries after the war. These ethnic Americans would bring peace to Europe, not by “policing” the Continent or imposing democracy from without, but by “cut[ting] loose the vicious tentacles of hate, narrow nationalism, oppression and frustration” that kept the “*inherent democracy*” in the hearts of Europeans from flowering. Only the U.S. could accomplish this task: Europeans would know that the Americans came not as “strangers; not [as] conquerors or invaders, or intruders—but [as] visitors. We are their nephews and second cousins.”<sup>27</sup> This “Passage Back” idea, Adamic suggested, would also help ease America’s ethnic tensions, “straighten[ing] out the kinks and quirks in our American innards which come from the ‘old country,’ from the fact that we’re ex-Europeans, escaped Poles and Croatians and Czechs and Scandinavians and Englishmen.” Rather than being torn apart by European conflicts, American ethnics would unite around the notion of bringing freedom and democracy to their respective homelands, Adamic predicted. Helping establish a “United States of Europe” would allow ethnics like himself to be “just plain Americans while we’re citizens of the world.”<sup>28</sup>

*Fortune*, too, called for mobilizing immigrants in a foreign crusade. Given that millions of first- and second-generation Americans “cannot yet get Europe out of their system,” the magazine declared in its September 1942 article, the “only sensible attitude... is to transform our foreign stock into the world’s greatest task force of political warfare.” Such a move would overcome Old World allegiances and animosities by rallying immigrants to America’s cause. “There is dynamite on our shores,” *Fortune* warned, “and we should explode it in the right direction.”<sup>29</sup>

During the war, the OWI made limited use of this approach. It used antifascist émigrés and high-profile ethnic Americans in its *Voice of America* broadcasts, but such radio programs were designed to shape views abroad, not at home. The federal agency that did the most to mobilize entire immigrant communities—and to channel ethnic loyalties into national allegiance—was the Treasury Department. During war bond drives, Treasury officials and their liaisons in the War Advertising Council worked closely with foreign-language radio stations and with ethnic organizations. They urged ethnic Americans to hold bond drives in traditional costumes and to sell ethnic food at bond rallies. Many immigrant groups clearly understood the message they were being

given: buying war bonds was a way to retain their ethnic identity, while demonstrating their loyalty to the nation.<sup>30</sup>

Such campaigns called on first-and second-generation Americans to subsume their ethnic loyalties within their loyalty to the nation. But how was that national loyalty to be defined? Alan Cranston, the liberal New Dealer who headed the OWI's Foreign Language Division, complained in a 1942 speech that many German-language newspapers in the U.S. ran articles on war bonds, rationing, and civilian defense but refused to publish "a single word" condemning Nazism. "If they fail to separate themselves and their people from the Nazis," he asked rhetorically, "how can they possibly expect the rest of the world to make any distinction between the Germans who worship Hitlerism and the Germans who hate Hitlerism? How can they expect Americans in the midst of a death struggle with the Nazis to continue to treat German immigrants as loyal, full-fledged Americans?"<sup>31</sup> This comment suggests that Cranston—like many other left liberals in the OWI—equated American loyalty with staunch antifascism. Many Treasury Department officials clearly disagreed. They equated American loyalty with a willingness to participate wholeheartedly in the war effort, and they worked closely with groups and individuals in immigrant communities whom some in the OWI believed to be profascist.

Similar disagreements divided former allies outside of the federal government. In 1944, Louis Adamic broke abruptly with the Common Council for American Unity (CCAU) and his one-time friend and backer Read Lewis. During the course of the war, the Slovenian Adamic had become deeply involved with the politics of his Yugoslavian homeland and had emerged as a strong supporter of the communist resistance leader Josef Broz Tito. The CCAU, meanwhile, worked with *Amerikanski Srbobran*, a Pittsburgh-based newspaper published by the Serb National Federation, which both Cranston and Adamic believed to be profascist and antidemocratic. In a lengthy memo accompanying his resignation, Adamic suggested that the CCAU's unquestioning embrace of pluralism led it to defend "divisive and dangerous foreign language papers under the slogan of American Unity." He further accused the CCAU of changing an OWI press release on the Nazi persecution of Jews into a statement about the "unconquered men and women of Europe," before translating the press release for use by foreign-language papers. The CCAU, Adamic charged, had "a policy of 'avoiding controversial issues' in such a way as to obstruct, rather than promote, the cause of democracy in the United States."<sup>32</sup> This general criticism seems misplaced, since the CCAU's magazine *Common Ground* attacked both racial segregation and the internment of Japanese



Americans during the war.<sup>33</sup> Still, it points to a critical issue about which even liberals during the war disagreed: what common values united the nation, and how far should tolerance and pluralism extend?

### **"Believing Americans"**

If one solution to the "foreign nationalities problem" was to transform ethnicity into a weapon of war, another solution was to recast American pluralism in religious terms. Tolerance of diversity was widely seen as a primary marker of democracy—a key feature that distinguished the unity of the U.S. from the uniformity of fascist or totalitarian states—but that diversity could take many forms. By speaking of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews rather than of Scandinavians, Slovaks, and Jews, federal officials and other opinion molders could emphasize America's cultural diversity without reinforcing potentially problematic loyalties to foreign homelands.

In the context of World War II, this approach had an additional advantage: it transformed difference into sameness, allowing a single parameter to serve as a symbol of both pluralism and consensus. America had a long and bitter history of anti-Catholicism. Anti-Semitism, too, had surged since the turn of the century and had taken a particularly virulent turn during the 1930s. Still, the idea of religious freedom had long been central to America's national identity. FDR reinforced this connection in January 1941 when he listed religious freedom as one of the "four essential human freedoms" that his policies were designed to secure. During the war, the president and other federal officials repeatedly argued that freedom of religion was "one of the principles for which we are fighting this war."<sup>34</sup>

This vision of the U.S. contrasted sharply with American portrayals of the Axis powers. Today, most Americans think of the Nazis as primarily anti-Semitic, but that is not the way they were portrayed before and during World War II. In a speech in late October 1941, for instance, Roosevelt argued that Hitler's plan was "to abolish all existing religions—Protestant, Catholic, Mohammedan, Hindu, Buddhist and Jewish alike." "The property of all churches will be seized by the Reich and its puppets," the president declared.

The cross and all other symbols of religion are to be forbidden. The clergy are to be forever silenced under penalty of the concentration camps, where even now so many fearless men are being tortured because they have placed God above Hitler.



In the place of the churches of our civilization, there is to be set up an International Nazi Church—a church which will be served by orators sent out by the Nazi Government.<sup>35</sup>

These sentiments were extended to the other Axis powers as well. An OWI publication, *Enemy Japan*, declared that “the official propagandists have taken the simple religious practices of the [Japanese] home and by channeling them through the official machinery of the State have developed the separate national cult, State Shinto.” Through the practice of State Shinto, the document continued, “Japanese children are taught the supremacy of the State over the individual, just as in Nazi and Fascist countries.”<sup>36</sup>

The notion that the U.S. was fighting an irreligious enemy—an enemy hostile to *all* faiths other than that of the state—allowed religion to play two different, but complementary, ideological roles. “Freedom of religion” could mean both the freedom to adhere to one’s own particular faith *and* the freedom to be religious. This approach, which cast religion as a source of unity as well as diversity, had been promulgated by the NCCJ and allied groups since the early 1930s. FDR himself presaged many of the themes the government and others would strike during the war when he delivered a radio address on behalf of the NCCJ’s “Brotherhood Day” in February 1936. The day had been set aside, Roosevelt noted, so that “we can meet, not primarily as Protestants or Catholics or Jews but as believing Americans.”

We who have faith cannot afford to fall out among ourselves. The very state of the world is a summons to us to stand together. For as I see it, the chief religious issue is not between our various beliefs. It is between belief and unbelief. It is not your specific faith or mine that is being called into question—but all faith.

It was because of that threat, the president concluded, “that you and I must reach across the lines between our creeds, clasp hands, and make common cause.”<sup>37</sup>

During the war, this vision of America as religiously diverse, yet spiritually united, appeared in numerous venues: presidential speeches, OWI pamphlets, Hollywood films, the *Why We Fight* series, and numerous cartoons, textbooks, brochures, radio shows, and other materials produced by an array of private groups. Not surprising, the groups that did the most to promote this vision of the U.S. included the NCCJ, the AJC, the B’nai B’rith Anti-Defamation League, and the religious social welfare agencies that came together to form the United Service Organizations (USO). During the war, these groups worked closely

with military officials and federal agencies—as well as with Hollywood producers and others—to promote a vision of intergroup tolerance and national unity pictured above all in religious terms. The role of such private organizations only increased after Congress cut off funding to the domestic branch of the OWI in June 1943.<sup>38</sup>

With federal approval, the NCCJ carried its version of the “American Way” into hundreds of U.S. army camps. The army incorporated NCCJ materials into GI orientation courses, and “tolerance trios” visited military installations from Norfolk to Nome. These traveling emissaries conducted “trialogues” before assembled troops, in which they argued that religion was a foundation of democracy and religious intolerance thus a danger to America’s very foundation. The NCCJ estimated that, in just the first year of the program, more than two million soldiers and sailors attended interfaith meetings or saw the NCCJ film *The World We Want to Live In*. The NCCJ also distributed millions of tri-faith prayer cards, as well as pamphlets with such titles as *United in Service* and *American Brotherhood*. In 1943, the NCCJ’s Clinchy lectured on interfaith tolerance to every graduating class of both the Army and Navy Chaplains’ Schools.<sup>39</sup>

The NCCJ’s message of interfaith tolerance and national consensus was reinforced by the “practical ecumenicity” of the military: nondenominational chapels, an ecumenical Army and Navy Service Book, and a distinctive “Chaplains’ Scarf.”<sup>40</sup> It was also buttressed by the activities of the USO, which provided recreational opportunities to service personnel and defense workers. Under the organization’s umbrella, six national religious agencies—the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA), the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA), the Jewish Welfare Board, the Salvation Army, the National Catholic Community Services, and the National Traveler’s Aid Association—operated canteens, dance halls, clubs, and recreation centers at more than eighteen hundred locations across the country.<sup>41</sup> A board of directors, which included many prominent businessmen, raised funds for the organization, but it also received federal funding.<sup>42</sup> Through brochures, books, and other materials made available at its centers, the USO promoted a vision of the nation that emphasized both religious tolerance and an ecumenical national consensus. The USO, commented one USO-YMCA leader, was “a demonstration not only of national unity but even more of our basic unity through faith in religion.”<sup>43</sup>

NCCJ officials clearly saw their military camp program as an opportunity, not only to shape life in the armed forces, but to head off postwar tensions of the sort that followed WWI. When former Texas governor James Allred

addressed sailors assembled at Camp Wallace near Galveston on behalf of the NCCJ, he noted that many veterans would be “leaders in their home communities” after the war. Allred described his own encounter with the Ku Klux Klan after World War I and suggested that it was his friendship with a Catholic and a Jewish shipmate that had kept him from joining the cloaked raiders. He warned his audience that “when this war is over there will be another set of organizers of hate movements” who “will want veterans to join to make their hateful plans seem patriotic.” “We congratulate you on your new-found unity,” Allred told the sailors, and “we ask that you see to it that hate movements do not get going in the places you live.” The NCCJ reprinted Allred’s remarks and distributed them widely toward the end of the war.<sup>44</sup>

Although the NCCJ focused significant attention on the military, it did not neglect civilian society. NCCJ staffers, for instance, argued in 1942 that the NCCJ should work more closely with organized labor because “this group includes a large percentage of foreign-born who have brought false beliefs into this nation.”<sup>45</sup> (Similar reasoning prompted the American Jewish Committee to launch a National Labor Service in 1945 to “sluice” comic strips, posters, and editorial copy to the nation’s unions and labor press.<sup>46</sup>) Cities across the country celebrated the NCCJ’s Brotherhood Week during the war, while schools and newspapers used pamphlets, comic books, press items, and other materials distributed by the conference. One such comic book told the story of “three pals”—George Foster, Blaine Kehoe, and Gershon Ross—who had played together on their high school football team. Little distinguished the three friends except for their religions, which were glimpsed through their names and their culinary habits: Gershon’s mother cooked gefülte fish, while Blaine could not eat meat on Fridays. After Pearl Harbor, all three enlisted in the war against the “Japs,” each with a different service. Each man was killed in action while urging his buddies to “carry on.” The final scene in the book depicted the three buddies, arm-in-arm, walking above the clouds. “The three pals will never meet on earth again, but they have done their job gallantly and well; and their spirits mingle as in days of old,” the caption read. “Catholic, Protestant, Jew.... They died, as they lived... in true brotherhood.... Americans All!”<sup>47</sup>

The “three pals”—like the characters in Hollywood’s combat films—were fictitious, but a real-life episode in early 1943 followed a similar script and gave the interfaith movement an enduring symbol. On February 3, the U.S. troopship *Dorchester* was torpedoed off Greenland and quickly sank, killing hundreds of servicemen and four army chaplains—two Protestants, a Catholic, and a Jew. As the story was pieced together by the Jewish Welfare Bureau

and others, the four chaplains gave up their life vests so that others could survive. The story was widely retold in newspapers and other forums, and posters showing the four chaplains holding hands and praying together on the deck of the sinking ship were distributed nationally. Reproduced on postage stamps, in stained glass windows at West Point and the Pentagon, and in many other artifacts and locations around the country, this image of interfaith and American consensus and unity became one of the most familiar to emerge from the war<sup>48</sup> (figure 5.2).

Groups such as the NCCJ and the USO were at the forefront of efforts to recast American pluralism and consensus in religious terms, but the tri-faith vision of the nation also found support in the business community. The NCCJ had long attracted support from prominent industrialists, in part because it promoted social harmony and emphasized the “dignity of the individual” as a central feature of the American Way. When NAM staffers encouraged businessmen to hold local and regional meetings with clergy during the war, they noted that participants “should include a church group selected and invited by the leaders of the three principal denominational groups (Protestant, Catholic,



**Figure 5.2.** This postage stamp depicts the four chaplains who gave their lives during the sinking of the troopship *U.S.S. Dorchester* in 1943 and became wartime symbols of American diversity and consensus. The original stamp design included the words “Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish” in addition to the reference to interfaith unity; those words were omitted from the stamp issued in 1948. This may reflect the increasing emphasis in the public arena during the cold war on Americans’ shared faith rather than their diverse religious affiliations.

and Jewish).” Conference organizers followed these recommendations; and in cities such as Brooklyn, Chicago, and Los Angeles, the number of Catholic and Jewish religious leaders attending NAM-inspired meetings between 1941 and 1943 actually exceeded the number of Protestant ministers attending.<sup>49</sup>

The combined efforts of the federal government, the NCCJ, the USO, and many other private groups propelled the interfaith movement to new heights during the war. Religious prejudice by no means disappeared—anti-Semitism actually peaked in 1945—but the “interfaith idea” emerged as a powerful symbol of both American pluralism and American consensus.<sup>50</sup> During the war, the notion that the U.S. was a nation of diverse but “believing” Americans—a nation, in particular, of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews—rivalled portrayals of the U.S. as a “nation of nations.” In the postwar period, as American enmity shifted from fascism to “atheist communism,” religion would increasingly supplant national origin in discussions of both prejudice and diversity in American life.

### **“More ‘American’ Than the White Majority”**

In the fall of 1945, the NCCJ sponsored a nationwide essay contest for high school students with the theme “The Best Example of Teamwork I Know.” Essays were supposed to illustrate “how Americans of diverse backgrounds work together for the good of their school or community, or the nation.” The winning composition, dramatized by Hollywood film stars, was to be featured on a national radio program during American Brotherhood Week in February 1946.<sup>51</sup>

Nobukazu (“Noble”) Oyanagi, a Japanese American student living in St. Paul, won the contest. Noble wrote about the day that his family was taken from their home in Tacoma, Washington, to the Pinedale Assembly Center near Fresno, California.<sup>52</sup> “As we worked in our home until the train time preparing to leave, in popped one of our dearest friends—Callahan by name, an Irishman if there ever was one,” wrote Noble. Callahan took time off from work to drive the Oyanagi family to the train station, where Noble found all of his “buddies” waiting. Joe Mineth, an Italian, and Gus Martigopolus, a Greek, carried the Oyanagis’s luggage to the train concourse. Another friend gave Noble a comic book. As the train started to pull away, Noble saw “chums of every nationality” who had come to see him off—“Eric Liljas, a blond Swede; Bobby Feldman, a Jewish pal; the entire Wing family, who, although their homeland was ravished by the Japanese, had no harsh feelings toward us.”<sup>53</sup>

Here was a picture of pluralistic America helping to “ease the burden of evacuation” for the Oyanagi family.<sup>54</sup> But there was much that the story left out. Shortly after Pearl Harbor, three FBI agents had come to the family’s home, searched the residence, and—without explanation—taken Noble’s stepfather with them. Told they would soon have to evacuate, the rest of the Oyanagi family quickly sold off the inventory of the family grocery store and stored their household furnishings in a church building. Taking only what they could carry, Noble, his mother, and his two older brothers boarded a train and “traveled with shades down and accompanied by military carrying side arms and rifles.”<sup>55</sup> Three months after arriving at Pinedale, the family was transferred to the Tule Lake internment camp in northern California. Noble himself spent a year and half at Tule Lake, before joining an older brother who had been allowed to leave the camp to attend college in St. Paul. When Noble’s high school English teacher handed him the essay assignment, his parents were still in the camp.<sup>56</sup>

Perhaps because of the uncertainty of his family’s situation, Noble mentioned none of this in his winning essay. Instead, the teenager wrote, “It was truly teamwork in action that I witnessed that day.” But teamwork for what? Neither Noble nor his friends challenged the legitimacy of the evacuation, although the youth did note that for him it was a “gloomy, dismal day.” Rather, the essay—and certainly the accompanying press materials—implied that internment was simply the sacrifice Japanese Americans had to make for their country, just as other Americans had to invest in war bonds, donate blood, or forego strikes. By celebrating the pluralistic unity of the friends who accompanied the Oyanagis to the train station, the essay and attendant publicity deflected attention from the justice of the internment policy itself.

Noble’s essay, although written some weeks after V-J day, provides a striking example of the potentially conservative implications of linking tolerance to national unity during the war. Wartime celebrations of American pluralism highlighted the contributions of diverse cultural groups to U.S. society but rarely addressed the terms of their inclusion in the nation. Meanwhile, appeals for tolerance in the name of national unity stressed comity and social harmony above all else. Such appeals could be used to condemn bigots and bullies, but they could also be used to critique those who protested too vigorously. Thus, they provided at best a weak tool with which to critique national policy, contest existing power structures, or protest the economic and legal status quo.

As this suggests, the promise of the wartime discourse on pluralism and consensus was limited when it came to the nation’s racial minorities—particularly

Japanese Americans and blacks. U.S. propaganda of all sorts stressed the racism of the Nazis, just as it stressed their hostility to all forms of legitimate faith. This gave activists an opening. Some linked appeals for American “brotherhood” to demands for civil rights and civil liberties or portrayed segregation and institutionalized discrimination as a Nazi tactic to “divide and conquer.” Racial prejudice, however, was embedded far more deeply in American law and social custom than were ethnic and religious prejudices. Thus, challenges to racial prejudice—and particularly efforts to secure *equality* rather than mere civility—were far more likely to trigger social unrest. Federal policymakers and many in the intergroup movement hoped to dampen racial hostility and to bolster the morale of black Americans; at the same time, they worried about antagonizing whites. When it came to issues of race, the federal government and many private groups trod cautiously—preaching tolerance and working to defuse racial violence, while balking at the concrete steps needed to end discrimination and dismantle Jim Crow.

Federal officials had plenty of reason to be concerned about the challenge to national unity posed by issues of race. Even after the attack on Pearl Harbor, some black Americans felt a measure of sympathy for Japan, which claimed to be fighting white European colonialism in Asia. This argument seemed all the more convincing to some in the black community since America’s staunchest ally, Great Britain, oversaw a large empire comprised primarily of brown and black people. Black Americans did not support Hitler, but many likened British imperialism and American racism to the Nazi’s treatment of Jews, Gypsies, and other “undesirables.” Their anger at the U.S. was not limited to the American South. Major defense employers regularly discriminated against blacks, in many cases encouraged by unions. During the war, the army and navy assigned black recruits to segregated units and trained them almost exclusively for noncombatant roles as cooks, dishwashers, stewards, stevedores, and hard laborers. The Marine Corps and Army Air Corps accepted no blacks in the early months of the war. Adding insult to injury, the military segregated blood plasma, although the plasma of blacks and whites was identical.

Wartime conditions only heightened the opportunities for festering racial hatreds or resentments to explode into violent clashes. During the war, some seven hundred thousand black civilians—as well as hundreds of thousands of whites—left the South mostly for overcrowded war production centers in the West and North.<sup>57</sup> The influx of black workers triggered scores of “hate strikes” by whites, who resented the sight of “former janitors or cafeteria workers running a drill press or lathe.”<sup>58</sup> Competition for scarce housing triggered bloody confrontations—usually instigated by whites—in Detroit; Chicago;



Beaumont, Texas; and other cities. Meanwhile, northern blacks who joined the military often found themselves shipped to training camps in the South, where they were subjected to the humiliations of segregation for the first time. Many of the worst racial clashes broke out in such training centers, as well as in army and navy encampments in such far-flung locations as Lancashire, England, and Guam.<sup>59</sup>

Most black leaders went to great lengths during the war to stress the loyalty of their people to the American cause. In a 1942 article in the *American Mercury*, the author J. Saunders Redding recounted the mental process through which he came to realize that “I believe in this war.” Although there was much about the war he did not like, ultimately “this is a war to keep men free,” Redding wrote. “We Negroes here in America know a lot about freedom and love it more than a great many people who have long had it.” Black Americans needed to continue to struggle “to enlarge freedom here in America,” but “our first duty is to keep the road of freedom open,” Redding concluded.<sup>60</sup> Asked to address the question “Should the Negro Care Who Wins the War?” the influential black educator Horace Mann Bond argued that the “Negro in the U.S.” was in fact the “quintessential American.” He elaborated, playing on lingering concerns about the loyalty of immigrants and their children: “By ancestry, by birth, and by the tradition of his history, the Negro is, indeed, more ‘American’ than the white majority,” Bond wrote. “The very fact of [the Negro’s] separation from any past or present national existence—German, English, Welsh, Scotch, Irish, Swedish, Italian, Polish, Finnish, Hungarian, or what have you—guarantees the purity of his national allegiance to the American ideal, and his relative freedom from the bastardizing influences of the ‘mother-country consciousness’ which has so corrupted America in recent years.”<sup>61</sup>

Despite such assurances, concerns about black loyalty and morale both immediately before and during the war gave civil rights activists a limited political lever. The first to grasp this possibility was A. Philip Randolph, the powerful head of the all-black Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. In the summer of 1941, Randolph threatened to lead one hundred thousand blacks on a march on Washington to protest segregation in the armed forces and racial discrimination in defense industry hiring. As Carey McWilliams later observed, the march was called “during the period of national emergency proclaimed after the fall of France,” a period when American leaders were particularly alert to the dangers of internal disunity. FDR tried to convince Randolph to call off the march, but the union leader would not budge. The president found he could only prevent the march by issuing an executive order banning racial discrimination in the defense industry. The Fair Employment Practices



Commission, set up as a result of the president's order, had limited enforcement powers. Still, as McWilliams noted, it marked a historic reversal of the federal government's "laissez-faire policy based on the assumption that there was nothing the federal government could do to protect the civil rights of citizens of the United States."<sup>62</sup> That policy had been in place since the end of Reconstruction. The establishment of the FEPC thus marked a key turning point on the road to the postwar civil rights movement.<sup>63</sup>

Randolph's success in the summer of 1941 emboldened other civil rights advocates. The nation's largest-circulation black newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, had earlier dismissed Randolph's strategy as "a crackpot proposal." Now it called for a "Double V" campaign—"victory over our enemies at home and victory over our enemies on the battlefields abroad." The CIO, at its November 1941 convention, condemned discrimination in hiring as a "direct attack against our nation's policy to build democracy in our fight against Hitlerism"; a year later it founded a permanent Committee to Abolish Racial Discrimination (CARD).<sup>64</sup> In 1942, the Council Against Intolerance made national headlines when it called for an integrated army division.<sup>65</sup> That same year, students at the University of Chicago, inspired in part by Randolph's example, organized the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE). CORE cells quickly sprouted in other cities and began holding interracial demonstrations to integrate theatres, restaurants, bus lines, skating rinks, and other facilities.<sup>66</sup> The Howard University students who sat in at Thompson's in April 1944 drew their inspiration from both Randolph and CORE.

Such efforts often met resistance, and many organizations that advocated racial "tolerance" as an essential feature of the American Way stopped short of promoting equality. In March 1942, for instance, NCCJ staffers recommended that the organization take on race more directly and shift from "publicizing the ideal of tolerance" to attacking actual instances of intolerance through direct action. The organization's president and board of trustees rejected the proposal. When the Conference's "tolerance trios" visited army camps, they spoke to troops rigidly segregated by race.<sup>67</sup> A comic book entitled *They Got the Blame: The Story of Scapegoats in History* was distributed by the YMCA and other groups promoting religious, ethnic, and racial harmony. The comic denounced the "torture" and "terrorizing" perpetrated by the Ku Klux Klan in the past but suggested that "the Negro race is today approaching the political, economic and social position which the American Way of Life guarantees to all."<sup>68</sup> (The comic also discussed Irish immigrants, Catholics, and Jews, but no other group required a similarly reassuring statement.) Even the CIO's Committee to Abolish Racial Discrimination (CARD) adopted a relatively

cautious approach. During the war, CARD sponsored conferences designed to further racial understanding, mobilized support for the FEPC, pushed for nondiscriminatory public housing, and encouraged unions to push for contract clauses that prohibited discrimination in hiring. Nevertheless, as Robert Zieger has argued, “Its statements stressed good citizenship, reasoned appeals, and moderation.” CARD “discouraged racial militancy,” and its publications largely avoided the issues that most often caused racial tensions in the workplace, including disputes over job assignments and the promotion of black workers.<sup>69</sup>

Operating within this constraining environment, black Americans made what progress they could. In the fall of 1942, Frank Capra hired the black scriptwriter Carlton Moss to work on an army orientation film entitled *The Negro Soldier*. The army hoped the film would help bolster the morale of black GIs and defuse racial tensions in the military by teaching “comradely regard across racial lines.” Moss decided to “ignore what’s wrong with the army and tell what’s right with my people.” He hoped that by doing so he would prompt whites to ask, “What right have we to hold back a people of that caliber?” The resulting film contrasted Nazi racism to the “American Way,” hailed the contributions of black Americans to past wars and iconic moments in American history, and followed a light-skinned black soldier through Officer Candidate School. The film managed to avoid any reference to slavery, Jim Crow, or racial segregation in the army, but it was filled with images of well-dressed, responsible, church-going, and patriotic black Americans.<sup>70</sup>

The army originally intended to show the film only to black recruits; but when it was finished in early 1944, black activists and social scientists in the army urged that it be shown to white soldiers as well. Army brass and top officials in the War Department personally screened the film and required a series of specific changes designed to avoid antagonizing whites. For instance, they demanded that a sequence showing a white nurse massaging the back of a black soldier be cut, even though the army used white medical staff to treat black GIs. After a series of test screenings before both black and white audiences, the army made *The Negro Soldier* mandatory viewing for soldiers of all races at U.S. replacement centers. It also released the film to civilians.

Despite the film’s failure to confront racial inequalities directly, the NAACP and other civil rights groups worked overtime in the final years of the war to promote the film both to commercial theatres and to schools and civic organizations. In an era when most Hollywood films used blacks as comic relief, *The Negro Soldier* marked the beginning of a turning point. Alfred Hitchcock’s film *Lifeboat*, released the same month as *The Negro Soldier*, also included a

black American in its diverse and “democratic” crew, and it was this man who ultimately disarmed the Nazi submarine captain. The black, however, was a steward, and, when given the chance, he refused to vote on who should captain the lifeboat.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, he was the only member of the crew who did not join the frenzied mob that beat the Nazi to death toward the end of the film. The image of a black man killing a white—even an avowed enemy—was still far too controversial in wartime America.

Both *Lifeboat* and *The Negro Soldier* appeared just months after race riots erupted in cities across the country, threatening to turn American unity into a shambles. The trouble began in Mobile, Alabama, in late May when white shipyard workers rioted over the promotion of black welders. In early June, gangs of white soldiers and sailors—destined for the bloody war in the Pacific—prowled the Mexican American districts of Los Angeles, beating up youths wearing zoot suits and anyone else who got in their way. In mid-June, a race riot shook Beaumont, Texas, and in late June, Detroit exploded. By the time federal troops were called in to quell the violence, twenty-five blacks and nine whites lay dead, while nearly a thousand were injured. In August, a race riot in Harlem claimed six black lives and sent hundreds more to the hospital.

The race riots of 1943 shocked Americans, focusing a spotlight on racial tensions across the country and launching what quickly became known as the “Civic Unity Movement.” In the months that followed, hundreds of cities, states, religious groups, and community organizations set up committees designed to investigate and defuse tensions among ethnic, religious, and particularly racial groups. Racial liberals and civil rights advocates generally applauded this move. Robert Weaver, the New Dealer who would eventually become America’s first black cabinet secretary, wrote in *Phylon* in 1944, “The most outstanding feature of this development has been the official recognition of the race problem in the North.”<sup>72</sup> In 1951, Carey McWilliams argued that the civic unity movement had brought the struggle for racial justice to the attention of community leaders across the nation and helped to “organiz[e], for the first time, a public opinion on the subject.”<sup>73</sup> Some historians have suggested that this network of organizations “shaped the incipient civil rights movement in the years before protests against racial discrimination gained widespread national attention.”<sup>74</sup>

If these committees focused attention on the “race problem,” however, they also shaped the way it was understood in many quarters. Thus, their actions underscore the ambivalent legacy of America’s wartime discussion of pluralism and consensus for issues of race. Some groups did take steps to promote civic unity by addressing underlying issues of racial inequality. In 1945, for

instance, the mayor's Civic Unity Committee in Seattle worked with the local transit company, the bus drivers' union, and the Urban League to reverse a long-standing ban on hiring black drivers.<sup>75</sup> In 1949, the Toledo Board of Community Relations took credit for convincing local hospitals to hire black nurses and for persuading Toledo hotels to open their doors to all customers.<sup>76</sup> Such achievements generally resulted from behind-the-scenes blandishment. Most civic unity committees shunned litigation and direct action—tactics that, after all, would increase racial tensions by antagonizing discriminators.

Ultimately, as its name suggests, the civic unity movement was most concerned with promoting social harmony. The Seattle Mayor's Committee persuaded local newspapers not to print stories about confrontations between whites and blacks on the city transit system and to play down the return of Japanese Americans to the West Coast. It worried that coverage of both issues would inflame racial tensions and perhaps even incite further violence.<sup>77</sup> In Chicago, tensions over housing, particularly black efforts to move into neighborhoods claimed by whites, led to "chronic urban guerilla warfare" between 1944 and the end of the decade. Yet hundreds of racial "incidents"—ranging from vandalism to arson bombings to full-scale riots involving thousands—were barely covered by the city's major metropolitan dailies. The Mayor's Committee on Race Relations and its successor, the Chicago Commission on Human Relations, convinced the city's white-owned papers that covering such episodes would only fan the flames of racial unrest.<sup>78</sup> Such steps helped sustain an image of racial harmony and consensus well into the postwar period that was often at odds with events on the ground.

### **"The House I Live In"**

In the waning months of World War II, the black folk singer Josh White performed a patriotic ballad entitled "The House I Live In" in venues around New York City. At roughly the same time, Frank Sinatra made a ten-minute film short built around, and titled after, the same song (figure 5.3). Both Josh White's and Frank Sinatra's version of the song opened with the same stanza, a stanza that began and ended with a simple question: "What is America to me?" The two versions of the song, however, answered that question in strikingly different ways. A comparison of these two cultural productions suggests both the ways in which a progressive, antifascist vision of America was tamed during the war and the way that issues of pluralism and tolerance were increasingly cast in religious terms.



**Figure 5.3.** In the Oscar-winning film short *The House I Live In* (1945), from which this publicity shot is taken, Frank Sinatra chastises a gang of bullies for beating up on a Jewish schoolmate. Although the film has been hailed for promoting racial tolerance, its appeal to brotherhood and American unity is cast largely in religious terms (Photofest).

“The House I Live In” had been penned in the fall of 1942 by the Popular Front songwriting duo of Earl Robinson and Lewis Allen. That October, the New York-based Youth Theatre included it in a “left-patriot revue” entitled *Let Freedom Sing*, and the following spring it received a rousing reception at a May Day rally in Union Square.<sup>79</sup> White’s rendition of the song was in keeping with this Popular Front tradition. He answered the opening question with phrases that boldly captured the left-liberal, antifascist vision of the nation. America was not comprised solely of the white, native born and middle class. Rather, it included “the folks beyond the railroad,” “my neighbors white and black,” and “the people who just came here, or from generations back.” Both versions equated America with democracy, but only White’s explicitly cast that vision in economic terms: “A land of wealth and beauty, with enough for all to share.” Finally, while White’s rendition clearly celebrated America’s political freedoms—invoking the town hall and the soapbox, as well as Lincoln,

Jefferson, and Paine—it also emphasized “the tasks that still remain.” In fact, White ended the song on this note of hope as yet unfulfilled: “With its promise for tomorrow / That’s America to me.”<sup>80</sup>

The film version of the song contains few of these politically charged references. Instead, Sinatra answers the opening question with a string of sentimental—and largely innocuous—images of America and its people. America is a plot of earth, a street, the local grocer, “the howdy and the handshake,” the corner newsstand, and the churchyard. Sinatra sings of “the worker at my side,” but more pointed references to class division are excised. America’s cultural diversity is alluded to in only one abstract line: “All races and religions, that’s America to me.” In fact, when Lewis Allan, the song’s lyricist, realized that his line about “my neighbors white and black” had been cut, he became so angry that he had to be removed from the theater.<sup>81</sup> Allan, who had earlier penned the powerful antilynching ballad “Strange Fruit,” considered this explicit reference to racial harmony central to the song’s meaning. He also used the phrase “The House I Live In” as the title of a brief poem that began with the line “bigot-tree” and ended with the word “lynched.”<sup>82</sup>

Journalists at the time and scholars after have praised the film short for promoting racial tolerance.<sup>83</sup> Yet the film’s overall appeal for tolerance, brotherhood, and American unity is cast largely in religious terms. The film opens with Sinatra, playing himself, crooning a melody during a recording session. Leaving the studio for a cigarette break, he encounters a gang of boys beating up on a schoolmate. When Sinatra asks what the problem is, the leader of the bullies cries, “We don’t like his religion!” The boy, apparently, is Jewish. After several more exchanges—during which Sinatra suggests the gang members are Nazis rather than Americans—the singer gives the youth his lecture: “Religion makes no difference—except maybe to a Nazi or someone who’s stupid,” Sinatra declares. “Why people all over the world worship God in many ways. God created everyone. He didn’t create one people better than another.”<sup>84</sup>

National origin as a parameter of diversity is mentioned, but de-emphasized in the film. Sinatra notes that his father came from Italy, although he himself is an American. “But should I hate your Dad because he came from Ireland or France or Russia?” he asks the boys. Sinatra then returns to religion, retelling a true story that was widely invoked by the interfaith movement. A few days after Pearl Harbor, he tells the boys, as footage of ships and bombers fill the screen, a U.S. bomber located and successfully attacked a “Jap” battleship. “The pilot of that aircraft was named Colin Kelly, an American and a Presbyterian,” Sinatra declares. “Do you know who dropped the bombs? Meyer Levin, an

American and a Jew. Do you think maybe they should have called that off because they had different religions?" he asks rhetorically.

If national origin gets limited attention in the film short, class divisions and the color line are entirely ignored. None of the boys pictured are black; and in the film, as in the song, Sinatra makes no explicit references to color. Even an issue of central concern to black Americans during the war—the military's segregation of black and white blood plasma—is played out in the film in religious terms. Sinatra learns that the chief bully's father was an army sergeant who received several blood plasma transfusions after being wounded. The Jewish boy's parents both donated blood. "I betcha maybe your pop's blood helped save his Dad's life," Sinatra tells the Jewish boy. Then turning to the bully, he asks, "Do you think, if he'd known about it in time, your father would rather have died than to take blood from a man of a different religion?" Of course, during the war, this was hardly an issue: Jewish and Christian blood plasma, unlike black and white, was mixed.

Such omissions and adaptations are particularly surprising given the collection of men who came together to make the film. Screenwriter Albert Maltz was a member of the Communist Party and was ultimately jailed as one of the Hollywood Ten. Mervyn LeRoy directed and coproduced the short; thirteen years earlier he had directed the gritty and explosive film *I Am a Fugitive on a Chain Gang*. Sinatra, who had been called a "dirty guinea" while growing up in Hoboken, New Jersey, had been giving impromptu talks on racial, religious, and ethnic tolerance at high schools around the country; a few weeks before the release of the film, he spoke to an audience of five thousand in Gary, Indiana, after a high school's acceptance of black students prompted a walkout by whites.<sup>85</sup> All of these men, together with producer Frank Ross and the RKO studio, donated their time and resources, while Allan and Robinson waived their song royalties.<sup>86</sup> Proceeds from the film short were donated to ten charities. Among those who benefited were such leaders in the battles for organized labor and civil rights as the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, the Fellowship House in Philadelphia, and the California Labor School in Los Angeles.<sup>87</sup>

It is unclear why these men made the film they did. Perhaps they feared that a film that explicitly confronted racial and economic injustice would be kept out of theaters or would not attract an audience. Certainly, in the context of wartime discourse, couching arguments for tolerance in religious terms was a far safer bet. *The House I Live In* was distributed to theaters free of charge by RKO in the fall of 1945. Hailed by critics and applauded by intergroup activists and the media, it won a special Academy Award in 1946 for its promotion

of “tolerance and brotherhood.”<sup>88</sup> In its central concerns and formulations, the film looked backward, but it also foreshadowed the direction that discussions of American unity and consensus would take in the postwar years. There would be one central difference: Soviets and their Communist allies would soon replace Nazis and “Japs” as the enemies threatening to divide and conquer Americans.



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