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Paul Robeson Under Attack

Paul Robeson was the son of a former slave, born and raised during a period of segregation, lynching, and open racism. He earned a four-year scholarship to Rutgers University, making him the third African American to attend the school. There he was a member of the prestigious Cap and Skull Honor Society, played four varsity sports (baseball, football, basketball, and track), won speech and debate tournaments, and graduated valedictorian of his class. After graduation, Robeson applied his athletic abilities to a short career in professional football. Aside from his prowess on the gridiron, he earned a law degree and changed the direction of his career. His legal career was cut short, however, after a secretary refused to take dictation from him solely because of the color of his skin. He left law and turned to his childhood love of acting and singing. Robeson starred in Shakespeare's *Othello*, the musical *Showboat*, and films such as *Jericho* and *Proud Valley*. He was one of the top performers of his time, earning more money than many white entertainers. His concert career spanned the globe: Vienna, Prague, Budapest, Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, London, Moscow, New York, and Nairobi.

Robeson's travels opened his awareness to the universality of human suffering and oppression. He began to use his rich bass voice to speak out for independence, freedom, and equality for all people. "The artist must elect to fight for freedom or slavery. I have made my choice," he said. It was in the Soviet Union where he felt that people were treated equally. He could eat in any restaurant and walk through the front doors of hotels, but in his own country he faced discrimination and racism everywhere he went.

While Robeson's activist role increased abroad, he met dissent and intimidation in the United States. Rioters at his concert at Peekskill, New York in 1949 smashed the stage, torched chairs, attacked concertgoers, and threatened Robeson's life. His outspokenness about human rights and his pro-Soviet stance made Robeson a prime target of militant anticommunists. In 1950 the State Department revoked his passport, thereby denying his right to travel and, ultimately, to earn income abroad. Robeson fought this injustice for years vigorously but with no success. He repeatedly applied for reinstatement of his passport but was turned down. He filed a lawsuit against the State Department and faced discouraging delays, adverse decisions, and rejected appeals.

Yet Robeson stuck to his principles and refused to swear an affidavit that he was not a Communist. "Whether I am or not a Communist is irrelevant," he told the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1956. "The question is whether American citizens, regardless of their political beliefs or sympathies, may enjoy their constitutional rights." He went on to say, "I would say in Russia I felt for the first time like a full human being, and no colored prejudice like in Washington and it was the first time I felt like a human being, where I did not feel the pressure of color as I feel in this committee today."

Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration