

# Rhodes College Digital Archives - DLynx

## Victory at Home and Victory Abroad: A Story of Memphis, War Bonds, and Civil Rights

Item Type	Other
Authors	Mattson, Samuel (Sam)
Publisher	Memphis, Tenn. : Rhodes College
Rights	<p>All materials in this collection are copyrighted by Rhodes College and subject to Title 17 of the U.S. Code. This documentation is provided for online research and access purposes only. Permission to use, copy, modify, distribute and present this material, without fee, and without written agreement, is hereby granted for educational, non-commercial purposes only. The Rhodes College Archives reserves the right to decide what constitutes educational and commercial use. In all instances of use, acknowledgement must be given to Rhodes College Archives and Special Collections, Memphis, TN. For information regarding permission to publish this material, please email the Archives at <a href="mailto:archives@rhodes.edu">archives@rhodes.edu</a>.</p>
Download date	2025-05-17 08:47:49
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10267/24072">http://hdl.handle.net/10267/24072</a>

Victory at Home and Victory Abroad:  
A Story of Memphis, War Bonds, and Civil Rights

Sam Mattson

2013 Rhodes Institute for Regional Studies

World War Two was a pivotal moment in the fight for Civil Rights. Although formerly an understudied and underappreciated time in the Civil Rights Movement, historians have begun to understand its significance in this context. One major symbol for African Americans that resulted from the war is the 'Double V' Campaign. This campaign stood for victory at home and victory abroad. Oftentimes the ideas about what victory at home exactly meant gets lost in the national narrative. With national leaders like A. Phillip Randolph, leader of the labor union Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Walter White, head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, calling for an immediate end to segregation, it may seem as though victory solely entailed desegregation. However, demanding immediate desegregation and an end to Jim Crow was not a viable option for a majority of African Americans living in the South. In Memphis, Tennessee, victory at home meant not only accommodation, but also taking advantage of opportunities for advancement. This paper focuses on Memphis's African American's expression of 'victory at home' and their campaign that sold more war bonds during World War Two than any other African American community in the United States. The seven different War Loan Drives gave African Americans a chance to show patriotism on the one hand, but also to create a stable economic environment for the future. In order to make this argument, I have ordered my paper into three different sections.

In the first section, I describe the situation of the nation as a whole and how the war offered African Americans a chance to display patriotism and at the same time to fight for equality. As information from Germany began to arrive in the United States on the Nazis' treatment of Jews, the black press and intellectual community sought to make it impossible for Americans to denounce fascism without discussing Jim Crow segregation and the treatment of African Americans in the South. Once America officially joined in the fighting, new job opportunities opened up for many Americans. African Americans seized this opportunity to demand access to some of these jobs. With the help of A. Phillip Randolph and other African American political leaders, President Roosevelt mandated the desegregation of the defense industry. It was at the beginning of the war that the *Pittsburgh Courier* came up with the 'Double V' Campaign, meaning victory at home and abroad. However, victory at home meant different things all across the United States, and for Memphis, Tennessee victory at home did not mean an immediate end to segregation.

After describing the nation as a whole, I then focus on contextualizing the social climate of Memphis before World War Two. Many African Americans considered Memphis a very progressive southern city. Unlike most southern cities, African Americans in Memphis had the right to vote, as long as that vote went toward E.H. Crump's political machine. This in turn allowed African Americans such as Robert Church Jr. to negotiate with white Memphians on behalf of the African American community. Working with the political machine boss E. H. Crump, Church was able to establish many different segregated hospitals, schools, and parks.

Crump also allowed African Americans to have Beale Street as the main sector for black economic, political, and social life in Memphis. However, in the late 1930's race relations began to deteriorate. Boss Crump forced Robert Church Jr. out of town in 1939, and by 1940 Crump's most useful advisors died and replaced them with flatterers instead of those who might offer constructive criticism. He appointed Joseph Boyle to Public Safety Commissioner and after some African Americans voted against one of Crump's candidates, he led the 'Reign of Terror' in which he intimidated and terrorized the African American community.<sup>1</sup> It was up to George Washington Lee and a couple other local leaders to solve the situation and create a safe environment for African Americans in Memphis.

In the last section of my paper, I characterize George Lee, who was involved in the organization of the campaign in Memphis, and the specifics of the War Loan Drives. George W. Lee was particularly important for Memphis during World War Two. Lee believed that capitalism, black pride, and black business offered African Americans the best means to advance their status in American society. He felt that in a country that respects wealth, earning capital and money would lead to equality and respect from whites. Memphis, Beale Street, and Mr. Crump presented Lee with the environment to prove that his system worked. During the 1920's and 1930's he gained respect as a businessman, politician, and race leader. Unfortunately, as the Republican Party began to shift away from the progressive ideals of the Party of Lincoln and Mayor Crump's political machine began to fall apart, Lee's position as the best leader to advance the goals of the African American community began to

---

<sup>1</sup> Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 38.

falter. However, the start of World War Two and the sale of War Bonds offered him one more opportunity to show white Memphis that African Americans deserved respect as patriotic Americans fighting for victory abroad and that they were financially intelligent members of the community. At the same time, the purchase of War Bonds afforded African Americans the financial stability of investments for the future and allowed them to fight for victory at home. The development of a larger middle class would create individuals with higher aspirations that would continue to push the boundaries of segregation.

Recent historical research has shifted the timeline of the Civil Rights Movement. World War Two is in part so essential because of what happened during and after World War One. At the outset of World War One, W.E.B. Du Bois, in an article in *The Crisis*, asked African Americans to fight in the war but to come home fighting as well. There were many problems in America, such as lynching, disenfranchisement, under-education, and a degrading atmosphere for blacks, but having fought for America, returning veterans would have a unique position to combat these problems.<sup>2</sup> However, the media and community were not prepared for the violent and harsh treatment of black veterans upon their return home. African Americans were little prepared for what was to come as “white men singled out and attacked uniformed black veterans across the nation.”<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “Close Ranks,” July, 1918; “Returning Soldier,” May, 1919, [http://www.udel.edu/History/suisman/206\\_08-Fall/Online-readings/dubois.pdf](http://www.udel.edu/History/suisman/206_08-Fall/Online-readings/dubois.pdf) (accessed July 22, 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 18.

Although not as bad as immediately following World War One, the treatment of African Americans in the South during the Interwar period was still horrendous. Several returning World War One veterans were lynched in uniform, and despite the declining number of lynchings in the late 1920s, the rates began to climb again during the Great Depression.<sup>4</sup> African Americans continued to face many difficulties in the 1930's and 1940's, some of these troubles included:

The fact that unemployment rates for blacks were twice those for whites, that 87 percent of all African Americans in 1939 lived below the poverty line, that the average life expectancy for black males was fifty-two years compared to sixty-two for white males, that the average amount spent on education per year per white pupil was \$38 but only \$13 for blacks, that African Americans could still be lynched with impunity, and that large numbers of African Americans were denied the right to vote.<sup>5</sup>

Before 1940, some intellectuals claimed that the treatment of African Americans in the South was actually worse than the treatment of Jews in Germany. As it turns out, southern governments, Jim Crow laws, and other racist organizations did indeed influence the Nazis. Joseph Goebbels and Adolf Hitler publicly supported and praised the tactics of racial terrorism used by the Ku Klux Klan and the relative lack of any justice demanded by the southern governments. It appears that they actually saw the KKK as a great American organization and even attempted to purchase the group and use it to start a fascist revolution in the United States.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience During World War II* (Plymouth, United Kingdom: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2011), 16.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>6</sup> Gilmore, *Defying Dixie*, 170-172.

However, as the Nazi party slowly started taking over Germany in the 1930's, African American intellectuals quickly began to associate the fascist regime in Germany with the various state governments in the American South. Many African Americans and some whites found it completely hypocritical to fight racism abroad but not at home. The black press and African American intellectuals made sure to highlight this hypocrisy. World War Two gave African Americans many opportunities to prove that they too were citizens of the United States and provided the necessary leverage to demand equal access to the rights given to every white American.

Just as during World War One, many African Americans migrated from rural areas to major cities where the war industry needed workers. In fact, between 1940 and 1945, 1.5 million people moved out of the state they lived in and to cities and states with a large defense industry.<sup>7</sup> Those African Americans who worked as sharecroppers and as housemaids took advantage of the situation to obtain skilled and semi-skilled jobs that also paid more. The rapidly increasing job market offered greater economic advancement for African Americans. Overall employment increased in general for African Americans, as the number of unemployed African Americans fell from 1 million in 1940 to 151,000 by 1945.<sup>8</sup>

World War Two also helped seal the transformation of the Democratic and Republican Parties. Ever since the Civil War and President Abraham Lincoln, the Republican Party had been the progressive party for African Americans and civil rights. However, at the end of Reconstruction, which lasted from the end of the Civil

---

<sup>7</sup> Wynn, *The African American Experience*, 69-70.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

War until the early 1890's, support for African Americans in the Republican Party began to dwindle. As a symbol of cooperation and political participation by the Republican Party, 120 African American delegates had been seated in the National Convention of 1892, but only 27 were seated in 1920, and by 1928 the party seemed ready to change constituencies entirely.<sup>9</sup> Republican candidates, starting with President Herbert Hoover, began courting southern white Democrats.

By the presidential election of 1932, some African Americans began to question whether they should support the Republican Party or vote for Franklin Delano Roosevelt.<sup>10</sup> With the outbreak of World War Two, African Americans forced President Roosevelt to grant concessions on civil rights that would further establish himself and the Democratic Party as the progressive option for African Americans. The transformation of the two parties had two particularly important effects on the African American community. For the first time, non-Republican politicians sought to cater to the African American vote. At that point, many African American leaders in the Republican Party had to decide whether or not they wanted to switch to the Democratic Party and lose some of the political power that they had worked so hard to obtain.

The combination of the African American community beginning to question its ties with the Republican Party and the demands of World War Two, African American political leaders found it easier to lobby for and demand more rights in the political arena. For example, A. Phillip Randolph and Walter White, executive

---

<sup>9</sup> David M. Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1971), 85.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-90.



director of the NAACP, organized the March on Washington Movement (MOWM) and informed President Roosevelt that if he did not do anything about the discriminatory hiring practices and the desegregation of the armed forces, over 100,000 African Americans would March on Washington D.C. and create the biggest embarrassment for a president the United States had ever seen. This threat culminated in the implementation of Executive Order 8802, which established the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) and called for the end to all segregation and discrimination in the military defense industry workplace.<sup>11</sup> The efficacy of the FEPC is up for debate, but the symbolism of the organization alone showed some African Americans that America was moving in the right direction and that African Americans could effect social change if they worked together.

Despite the advancement in the economic and political arenas, social equality did not develop as quickly. Even though African American leaders such as Randolph and a young Roy Wilkins, one of the leading members in the NAACP, continued to challenge those policies, legal segregation and de facto Jim Crow laws continued.<sup>12</sup> Whites often prevented African American families from moving into all white neighborhoods, and along with housing anxieties, some whites refused to work alongside black laborers. These social apprehensions sometimes erupted into white-led riots. In Detroit, for instance, social problems boiled over into a full riot that lasted three days. Thousands of whites started pulling African Americans off streetcars and attacked them, so African Americans responded by looting white-

---

<sup>11</sup> Wynn, *The African American Experience*, 32-35.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

owned businesses. The riot ended after 6,000 federal troops took control of the city and after 34 people were killed, 25 of whom were black and 9 white.<sup>13</sup>

As the black press and intellectual community attempted to connect the struggle for Civil Rights and World War Two, the *Pittsburgh Courier* eventually called for 'Double V,' which stood for victory at home and abroad. The *Chicago Defender* and many other black newspapers used the 'Double V' campaign until it ended in 1943.<sup>14</sup> Although it would seem simple enough to assume that the struggle for civil rights developed the same way everywhere, there were significant differences in civil rights progress all across the nation. For instance, northern African Americans had always had the right to vote, but most southern African Americans were still disenfranchised. So while the national narrative of the 'Double V' campaign demanded the end of segregation in the military and defense industry, a more local level understanding of victory at home looked completely different. That is why in Memphis, Tennessee victory at home did not mean an immediate end to segregation, but rather an attempt to create a more fertile environment for black pride and black business.

As a southern city, Memphis was uniquely situated heading into World War Two. In the early 1900s E.H. Crump started to build a political machine. By 1909, Crump was elected as the Mayor of Memphis.<sup>15</sup> However, in 1916 Memphis prohibitionists along with the state government ousted Crump as Mayor.<sup>16</sup> In order

---

<sup>13</sup> Wynn, *The African American Experience*, 73.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 40-41.

<sup>15</sup> G. Wayne Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It: Machine Politics in Memphis* (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 22-24.

to reestablish himself and his political machine, Crump ran as Shelby County Trustee and announced his candidates for virtually every position in the government.<sup>17</sup> With the special election of 1918, Crump was able to capture the Mayor's office once again, but this time through a puppet.<sup>18</sup> Crump and his political machine would control Memphis until his death in 1954, but his political power began to dwindle, starting in the 1940's.

Unlike most southern democrats at the time, Crump used the African American vote as a political base for elections. He essentially created a system that allowed African Americans to vote in Memphis as long as they voted for his candidates. Although this was a restriction on the African American community, it did allow African Americans some opportunity to make demands and requests. African American leaders would often promise strong support in the polls in return for better parks, schools, and hospitals.<sup>19</sup> In fact, Crump helped kick the Ku Klux Klan out of Memphis in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Crump also had an agreement with African American leaders about Beale Street. Beale Street was the most important hub of black life in Memphis, which included much of the economic, political, and social life. Crump essentially promised that he would leave Beale Street alone if black life stayed on Beale. This pact worked well enough that many African Americans who came to visit Memphis often described it as the most advanced city for African Americans in all of the United States, not just the South. This advancement had limits, however. In 1947, Mayor Pleasant, who replaced Mayor

---

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 27-28.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.,13.

Chandler, forbade the “Freedom Train” from stopping in Memphis because the train mandated a desegregated visitor policy. This “Freedom Train” contained the original Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and some other historical documents.<sup>20</sup> Despite some of the progressive treatment toward the Memphis African American community, the policies of segregation and Jim Crow were not up for debate.

As the United States headed towards war, Crump’s political machine began to fall apart. Throughout the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, E. H. Crump had close informants and advisors that he called “generalissimos.” However, in the late 1930’s, his two closest generalissimos died, leaving him without the advice and necessary information that they provided. He replaced them with yes-men and sycophants; this in part led to the downfall of the Crump machine. Crump hired two men as replacements for his generalissimos. They were public safety commissioner Joseph Boyle and Mayor Walter Chandler.<sup>21</sup> In 1939, Crump forced Robert Church Jr. out of town. Church was arguably one of the most influential African American leaders in the South, let alone Memphis. As the son of the first black millionaire and a national figure in the Republican Party, Church had an enormous influence over the African American community in Memphis.<sup>22</sup> For the most part, Church was Crump’s liaison to the African American community.

However, during the 1938 gubernatorial election campaign, police confronted a Memphis African American postal worker for ‘annoying’ a white

---

<sup>20</sup> Dowdy, *Mayor Crump don’t Like It*, 110.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>22</sup> Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 40-41.

woman. The confrontation ended in the shooting of George W. Brooks, the postal worker. African Americans around the city found this incident questionable and proceeded to inquire about what exactly happened. When the police and Mayor ignored them, African Americans expressed their frustration in protest and on Election Day. Several African Americans voted for anti-Crump machine candidate Gordon Browning.<sup>23</sup> Although there were not a large number of dissenting voters, Crump found this expression of disloyalty inexcusable. He then set off on a mission to remove the 'ineffectual' black leadership and he arrested any citizen who got in the way. Crump blamed Church and forced him out of Memphis. Crump continued to attack the black leadership in Memphis, and, as a part of the 'Reign of Terror,' Crump also kicked out another Church associate and the highest remaining black official in the Republican Party, Dr. J.B. Martin.<sup>24</sup> In 1940, Commissioner Boyle led what the African American community referred to as the 'Reign of Terror.' Under the guise of "cleaning up the city" from gambling, prostitution, and drinking establishments, Boyle harassed and arrested many African Americans and accused them of idleness, insolence, and vagrancy.<sup>25</sup> 'The Reign of Terror' in 1940 and the death of George W. Brooks in 1938 made Crump unpopular among many members of the African American community.

This 'Reign of Terror' created a dichotomy of representation for the new African American leaders in Memphis. The community leaders had to decide whether they would cater to the Crump Machine or the African American

---

<sup>23</sup> Dowdy, *Mayor Crump Don't Like It*, 96-98.

<sup>24</sup> Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 39-40.

community. A coalition of Blair T. Hunt, principal of the all black high school Booker T. Washington, Reverend T. O. Fuller, and Dr. J. E. Walker, owner of Universal Life Insurance in Memphis, came together and agreed to show their support of Crump. In a letter to the Mayor, Hunt said that “Mr. Crump is almost a human idol to us” and that they “appreciate[d] the clean-up efforts of Mr. Boyle.”<sup>26</sup> Others disagreed with Crump, however. Reverend George A. Long of Beale Avenue Baptist said that he appreciated what Memphis had done for African Americans in the past, but that “you do not want to deprive the Colored citizens... of the rights of citizens because of what has been done and what you plan to do for them in Memphis and Shelby County.”<sup>27</sup>

In addition to the ‘Reign of Terror,’ race relations deteriorated as white men joined the military and left their wives at home. Throughout the history of the South, there has been a notion of purity in white womanhood and an irrational fear of black men preying on innocent white women. From 1941 to 1942, several women complained to Mayor Chandler that they were afraid of all, “THESE AWFUL MEAN NEGROES,” and how, “as they pass you they RUB & STOMP all over you with that deasese [*sic*] that nearly every negro has.”<sup>28</sup> There was also a rumor spreading among whites that blacks were unsupportive of the war effort and that many were

---

<sup>26</sup> Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 41-43.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>28</sup> Anonymous, two letters written to Mayor Chandler, September 17, 1942 and September 20, 1942, both in The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, TN, box 38, folder: Negroes-1942.

forming Eleanor Clubs.<sup>29</sup> Although an FBI report found no evidence of any such group in Memphis, African Americans across the nation established Eleanor Clubs in support of the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt. Eleanor Roosevelt was much more outspoken about civil rights and equal treatment for African Americans than her husband, and she often tried to help African Americans arrange meetings with the President or at the least send him their messages.<sup>30</sup>

After Church and Martin left Memphis, Lieutenant George Washington Lee was the most influential black Robert Church Jr. official left in Memphis. Lt. Lee was forced to reconcile with Crump or face the same challenge as Church and Martin.<sup>31</sup> Lee decided to shy away from supporting either Church or Martin publicly, and when he had an opportunity, he showed his support for Crump. A staunch Republican, businessman, and race leader, Lee attempted to rally African American support for Mayor Chandler and Mr. Crump. He believed that in the current situation it was best for African Americans in Memphis to show support for Crump and that continued protest would make the situation worse. In order to secure his relationship with Crump, Lee held his annual 'Blues Bowl' football game in honor of Mayor Chandler and Mr. Crump. Lee used his relationship with W.C. Handy, the nationally popular, local product, and father of the blues, to get him to play at halftime and attract a large audience.<sup>32</sup> This turned out to be a critical moment for Lee. With the election of President Roosevelt and the transformation of the

---

<sup>29</sup> Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 137; Letter from Clifford Davis to Mayor Chandler, 10/9/1942, The Papers of Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler, Memphis Public Library, Memphis, TN, box 38, folder: Negroes-1942.

<sup>30</sup> Wynn, *The African American Experience*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 132-133.

Democratic and Republican Parties, Lee continued his support of Republican candidates and maintained his supported Crump. Lee remained a Republican because it was one of the only ways African Americans could participate on a more integrated level in the South and make valuable white connections.<sup>33</sup> He also had a deep-seated belief that the southern Democratic Party would always contain black-hating politicians.<sup>34</sup>

George Washington Lee grew up in and around Indianola, Mississippi, a small town with a fairly vibrant African American community.<sup>35</sup> After attending the all black Alcorn State College in Mississippi, Lee moved to Memphis and began to work as a bellhop at the Gayoso Hotel. While working in Memphis, Lee learned of the opportunity to become one of a thousand trained black officers in the Army.<sup>36</sup> He seized his chance and eventually became an officer for the United States Army during World War One, earning the title Lieutenant George Washington Lee.<sup>37</sup> Although Lee was interested in continuing his career in the peacetime army, Lee met with Robert Church Jr., who convinced Lee to start fighting for race progress in Memphis.<sup>38</sup> Lee saw the wealth and opportunity that a place like Beale Street in Memphis offered African Americans. He was a hard worker and he wanted to work his way up the economic ladder to gain more influence and power. He took a job as an insurance salesman and worked his way into higher positions in the black owned

---

<sup>33</sup> Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 81.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 6-10.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-26.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 28-30.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 41-42.



and operated Mississippi Life Insurance Company.<sup>39</sup> At this time, insurance companies were some of the most successful African American owned businesses, in part because segregation created a market of African Americans that needed life insurance.

During the 1920s and 30s Lee became more vocal about his philosophies on race. He believed that hard work, persistence, and race pride would earn him respect and that black business was the key to the advancement of African Americans. Lee argued that, "America is a commercial country. Its aristocracy is built upon the dollar. He that has the most dollars is prince."<sup>40</sup> So when white businessmen purchased Mississippi Life, Lee refused to work for a company that he believed white men had stolen from the black owners.<sup>41</sup> He decided to join Atlanta Life, which was the second largest African American owned businesses in the United States at the time.<sup>42</sup> Despite his understanding that black thought was important in general, he did not agree with the Memphis ministers Reverend T.O. Fuller and Reverend Sutton E. Griggs and their "Inter-racial League."<sup>43</sup> After failing as a black militant, Griggs reversed his ideas about black people. His new philosophy argued that black men lagged behind whites in social development and that they, "had a deficiency or lack of certain racial traits; the Anglo-Saxon traits of honesty, reliability, tolerance, patience, courtesy, tact, and self-control, were either absent from the mental make-up of many Negroes or were present only in negligible

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 47-49.

<sup>40</sup> Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 58.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 50-51.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 58-59.

amounts.”<sup>44</sup> Lee thought that this league stressed the worst characteristics of African Americans and, “advocated an impractical theory of racial adjustment.”<sup>45</sup>

With the United States’ entry into the war, it became necessary to raise funds for military production. In order to sell war bonds for Memphis, Mayor Chandler appointed Doddridge Nichols as the chairman of the Shelby County War Savings Staff and also asked Lt. George W. Lee to head the Negro Division of the Shelby County War Savings Staff. As chairman of the Negro Division, Lee’s task was to divide the African American community into different sectors (i.e. business, education, church) and organize various events to help sell war bonds during the seven War Bond Drives that the Federal Government announced throughout the war. Lee’s status as a veteran of World War One combined with his skills as a businessman made him a great fit for the position. The position also gave Lee the opportunity to express his belief once again in black pride and that “the only means of winning the approval of the white community and advancing the cause of the race was ‘an intelligent exercise of citizenship rights, buying homes, buying farms, building businesses, and producing wealth.’”<sup>46</sup> Buying war bonds exemplified an ‘intelligent exercise of citizenship rights.’ It “not only gives to the colored people of Memphis the opportunity to perform a simple patriotic duty, but also offers them the chance to save money which can be used after the war for the purchase of homes and farms and business establishments.”<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 61.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>47</sup> “New ‘Memphis Blues’ Will Be Axis Dirge,” *Commercial Appeal*, September 12, 1943.

During the First War Loan Drive, that took place from November 30, 1942 to December 23, 1942, the Negro Division of the Shelby County War Savings Staff collected \$302,000. Lee raised some of the money by having an auction during his annual 'Blues Bowl.'<sup>48</sup> With these funds, the Negro Division of the War Savings Staff was able to purchase a Consolidated Liberator Bomber for the United States Army and name it. In a letter to Doddridge Nichols, a committee of African American civic leaders named the airplane the 'Spirit of Beale Street' in honor of the "sacrifice of some of those people living on the border-line of mere subsistence, who emptied old pocket-books of pennies and dimes saved from hard and honest toll for bonds and stamps."<sup>49</sup> The letter also commemorates the history of Beale Street and the support and loyalty that African Americans have given to white Memphians throughout the history of Memphis. By discussing the history of loyalty and support, the letter attempts to show the patriotism and cooperation of Memphis African Americans during the war effort.

At the start of the Second War Loan Drive, which began in April of 1943, Lee pledged to raise \$1,000,000. He planned to host a 'Negro War Bond Day' that would include a parade down Beale Street and an auction, and conclude with several speeches, most notably from Roscoe Conklin Simmons, a nationally known orator and historian.<sup>50</sup> Simmons planned on giving a speech titled "The War, The Peace,

---

<sup>48</sup> "\$16,000 'Knockout' Is Scored by Louis' Gloves In Bond Sale," *Commercial Appeal*, 12-5-1942; Lee himself actually purchased Joe Louis's boxing gloves for \$16,000.

<sup>49</sup> Letter to Doddridge Nichols naming the "Spirit of Beale Street", *Memphis World*, January 15, 1943.

<sup>50</sup> "Negro Citizenry Sets Goal For A Million Today," *Memphis World*, April 27, 1943.

and The Negro.”<sup>51</sup> The ‘Negro War Bond Day’ ended successfully as Lee announced that he felt confident that they had in fact reached their goal of raising one million dollars. While thanking the community, Lee mentioned his hope that, “this will be an incentive for greater collective action in the months and years to come for it is the only way that leads to a brighter day for all of us.”<sup>52</sup> Lee was clearly trying to emphasize the importance of cooperation during the war. Buying war bonds not only displayed patriotism, but is also an intelligent financial decision that shows white Americans that African Americans belong in America.

On April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1943 Lee published an advertisement in the *Commercial Appeal* - one of the white run newspapers in Memphis - that appeared to commemorate African American patriotism from the Revolution to World War Two and ramp up support for the ‘Negro War Bond Day.’ Near the end of the ad Lee mentioned that:

“[D]espite the clash of race and tradition, there is a conscious struggle going on in the South to establish a larger measure of civic justice and a rough equality of opportunity for all. Indication of this struggle is expressed in the abolition of the poll tax law, and in the prose of the Memphis press, which grows more friendly to our racial way.”<sup>53</sup>

For the most part, this slight mention of progress toward equality went unnoticed. In fact, the *Memphis World* published an article on the ad’s positive reception among whites and blacks around the Nation. Chairman of the Shelby County War Savings Staff praised the ad by saying:

---

<sup>51</sup> “Negro War Bond Rally To Be Held April 27,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 18, 1943.

<sup>52</sup> “War Bond Chairman Expresses Thanks to Local Citizens,” *Memphis World*, May 4, 1943.

<sup>53</sup> “The Negro and The War,” *Commercial Appeal*, April 25, 1943.

“The idea of the committee, in publishing this special section in the white daily, was to improve the status of colored Americans thru mass education of thousands of whites on the Negro,” it was pointed out. “This sort of approach served to improve inter-racial good will and bring about a more liberal policy in dealing with the Negro in the South.”

The article went on to list favorable comments from prominent personalities across the nation, including President Gilbert A. Stanford of the University of Mississippi, George Schuyler, P.L. Prattis, columnist and executive editor respectively of the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and Lucius Harper, executive editor of the *Chicago Defender*.<sup>54</sup>

Despite national recognition and approval for the advertisement, E. H. Crump did not see the ad the same way. He felt that Lee was calling for civil rights and that it implied that Crump supported civil rights. For Crump, supporting equality among the races could not be further from the truth. Lee handled the advertisement with tact, however, and had called Crump’s office days in advance to inform him that he was going to place the ad in the *Commercial Appeal*. Crump warned Lee that talk of equality and civil rights would stir up trouble. He told Lee that he, “completely ignored all that we did for you – schools, streets, and hospitals. You’re ungrateful.” However, Lee handled the situation well by informing Crump that he had called his office before he placed the ad to notify him that he was going to go ahead with the advertisement. Lee managed to escape the wrath of Crump while slightly restoring his image as a race leader.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> “War Bond Sale Committee Lauded for Big Campaign,” *Memphis World*, May 14, 1943.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

The Third War Loan Drive had to be the most impressive show of George W. Lee's organization and African American support during any of the War Bond Rallies. Starting in September of 1943, Lee announced that the Negro Division of the War Savings Staff wanted to raise 2 million dollars in this rally in part to replace the "Memphis Blues," an airplane that had been shot down in an air raid over Europe.<sup>56</sup> One of the first events that Lee planned was to host Eddie Anderson, the comedian who played 'Rochester' on Jack Benny's radio show, on September 20, 1943.<sup>57</sup> 'Rochester's' visit to Memphis was important because he challenged the limits of segregation by first being a black comedian on a white radio show and second by occasionally making jokes about white people.

W.C. Handy, Father of the Blues, led the biggest event of the Third War Loan Drive. He first played his trumpet at a Negro League Baseball game, then led a parade down Beale Street, wrapping the day up with a jamboree and beauty pageant. African American soldiers stationed in the Mid South took part in the parade, as well as various civilians and civic groups.<sup>58</sup> This parade was, "a precedent breaking occasion, for it marked the first time an all-Negro procession had ever moved on Main Street."<sup>59</sup> On this day alone, the African American community raised

---

<sup>56</sup> "Memphians To 'Back the Attack' Set Negro Goal at \$2,000,000," *Memphis World*, September 10, 1943; "New 'Memphis Blues' Will Be Axis Dirge", *Commercial Appeal*, September 12, 1943.

<sup>57</sup> "'Rochester' Coming," *Commercial Appeal*, September 16, 1943.

<sup>58</sup> Nat D. Williams, "Bond Drive Goes Over In Big Way At Memphis," *Memphis World*, 10-5-1943.

<sup>59</sup> "Main Street Thunders Applause as First All Negro Parade Was Held," *Memphis World*, October 1, 1943.

\$1,042,407.<sup>60</sup> According to the CPI Inflation calculator, \$1,042,407 in 1943 is equivalent to \$14,069,722.78 today.<sup>61</sup> By the end of the War Bond Drive, Lee announced that they did in fact reach their goal of 2 million dollars.<sup>62</sup> Although 2 million dollars may not seem like that large of a figure, 2 million dollars in 1943 is equivalent to \$26,994,682.08.<sup>63</sup>

Shortly after the Third War Loan Drive, A. Phillip Randolph was scheduled to speak in Memphis. However, Crump threatened to send several of the African American community leaders to prison if they did not pull their support from his visit. Randolph was known around the country for his belief in labor organization and his campaigns to end segregation in the military. Crump did not want a labor leader causing more problems in his city than there already were. During a visit to Memphis in 1942, the FEPC, which Randolph had helped establish, found serious violations in terms of racial hiring practices. These disparities in hiring and in pay did not stem solely from the business themselves. The Crump machine mandated that businesses seeking expansion into Memphis adhere to the segregated and unequal employment practices. Meanwhile, Mayor Chandler made it appear that white officials were the protectors of African Americans and only denied equality because the white race was naturally superior. In a letter to Memphis Congressman Clifford Davis, Mayor Chandler declared that, “[n]aturally, if wage differentials

---

<sup>60</sup> “Handy Leads Negroes on Bond Buying Spree,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, September 28, 1943.

<sup>61</sup> CPI Inflation Calculator, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=2000000&year1=1943&year2=2013> (accessed July 29, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> “Negro Memphis Over Top In Bond Drive; \$2,000,000 Campaign,” *Memphis World*, October 5, 1943.

<sup>63</sup> CPI Inflation Calculator, <http://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/cpicalc.pl?cost1=2000000&year1=1943&year2=2013> (accesses July 29, 2013).

which have existed in the South because of the superior mental ability of the white worker are to be destroyed, I fear for the negro's welfare here," and that, "he has kept his job because he has not competed with the white worker in character of work or rate of pay, and, when work is not so plentiful as it is now, he will be laid off indefinitely and become a charge on the public."<sup>64</sup>

Faced with physical harm and prison time, the African American leaders in Memphis had to act quickly on Randolph's impending visit. Most of the leaders agreed that they themselves and the community would be better off if they canceled Randolph's visit. In a tactical move, Lee handed the responsibility of informing the community that Randolph's visit should be cancelled over to Blair T. Hunt. Lee therefore avoided the spotlight and any association with the event. As soon as Randolph heard about Crump's intimidation of local African Americans, he planned his retaliation. In a meeting with the Southern Tenant Farmers Union, Randolph made it clear that he abhorred the political machines of the South, which, like Hitler and Mussolini, were enemies of freedom and democracy. When Randolph returned to Memphis the following year, he compared E. H. Crump to Adolf Hitler, a tactic used by many national leaders to demonize corrupt and racist southern governments.<sup>65</sup> In his speech, Randolph decried Crump's politics and claimed that, "pointing to the establishment of schools and playgrounds by the city for Negro citizens is no proper justification for denying them or anybody else freedom of

---

<sup>64</sup> Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 52-55; Mayor Walter Chandler to Honorable Clifford Davis, November 13, 1943, box 15, folder: Labor-1944, Chandler Papers.

<sup>65</sup> Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 139-141.



speech,” and that, “Negroes do not want to be well-kept slaves. Like white people, they, too, want to be free.”<sup>66</sup>

The A. Phillip Randolph situation in Memphis exemplifies the difference between the national narrative of ‘Double V’ and the local struggle for Civil Rights in Memphis. Whereas other leaders like A. Phillip Randolph urged for the immediate eradication of segregation, some Memphis leaders like George W. Lee believed that working within the boundaries of segregation for the time being would offer the best path for the advancement of the African American community. In fact, the former NAACP president in Memphis, M.S. Stuart, Bert Roddy, and George W. Lee urged African Americans in Memphis to refrain from aggravating Crump after the ‘Reign of Terror.’<sup>67</sup> Lee continued his cooperation with Crump and yet justified his warning by saying that:

Other countries may give him (the negro) more social freedom, but no other country will give him more economic liberty. For, after all, in what country could a Booker T. Washington rise out of the womb of slavery and dip his pen in the blood and sweat of slaves and write into the curriculum of Time the greatest system of industrial education the world ever knew?<sup>68</sup>

Lee felt that faith in the power of capitalism and a strong black business society would eventually create equality and civil rights for everyone, but sometimes the only way to build a healthy black business class was to work within the system.

---

<sup>66</sup> “Randolph Scores Attitude of Memphis Labor Leaders,” *Memphis World*, April 4, 1944; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 75.

<sup>67</sup> Tucker, *Lieutenant Lee of Beale Street*, 133.

<sup>68</sup> “‘Loyalty, Every American’s Duty’ Says Negro Writer,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 22, 1942.

Although expressing in a similar fashion to Lee, Randolph stressed a different aspect of American society. In an article written on December 20, 1941, titled 'The Negro Has a Great Stake in This War,' Randolph "pointed out that although American democracy might be limited, it did allow the right to campaign for civil rights."<sup>69</sup> These two quotes represent two different interpretations of Double V. On a national scale, Randolph was able to use World War Two as an instrument to criticize Americans' lack of progressive mentality. In Memphis, however, victory at home entailed working within the system to get the most out of it.

As a part of the Fourth War Loan Drive that started in January of 1944, Lee organized speeches that really emphasized the role of African Americans in this effort. On January 21, the *Memphis World* published an appeal by Bishop A. B. McEwan for black Memphians to buy war bonds and support the war effort. In this appeal, McEwan emphasized all of the opportunities and establishments that Memphis had for African Americans. He mentioned that they had some of the best schools, modern parks and swimming pools, and free hospitalization for those who could not afford it.<sup>70</sup>

In keeping with the theme of emphasizing the role of the African American community in the war effort, Lee asked Dr. William Pickens, member of the U.S. Treasury Department's War Finance Committee, to come speak in Memphis. Pickens's appearance in Memphis had two effects. First, his position in the Treasury Department symbolized progress in the desegregation of the Federal government,

---

<sup>69</sup> Wynn, *The African American Experience*, 39.

<sup>70</sup> "Memphis Bishop Suggest Way To Keep Up With Negro Bond Buying For Fourth War Loan Drive," *Memphis World*, January 21, 1944.

but his speech also emphasized the importance of supporting the nation. In his talk, Pickens said, "if America loses the war, negroes will lose the best chance for race advancement they have ever had. It is our duty to defend America with our lives and with our money." The Negro Division of the War Savings Staff also wanted to emphasize the role that women played in the war effort. At the Pickens's speech, Lee and his staff handed out the award of "Champion Negro War Mother of America" to Olivia Jones. Jones was the mother of twenty children, nine of whom were fighting overseas. Lee stressed the importance of black motherhood and felt that this moment was important to express appreciation for what women have done for the war effort.<sup>71</sup>

It appears that after the first four War Loan Drives, the enthusiasm from the community diminished. The Fifth War Loan Drive, which took place in the summer of 1944, left Lt. Lee unsure of whether or not they reached their goals in sales.<sup>72</sup> Unfortunately with the schools closed for the summer, Lee had to rely on the Inter-Church division to make the rally successful. They helped return W. C. Handy to town and he performed with the Reception Center Chorus.<sup>73</sup> The event was extremely popular and raised over \$50,000.<sup>74</sup> Lee also helped bring Captain S. A. Owens to Memphis, an African American veteran of two years military service. They hosted a parade in his honor and set up an Amateur Bond Show following his

---

<sup>71</sup> "Negro Stake in War Stressed at Rally" *Commercial Appeal*, January 24, 1944; "War Mother Inspires," *Memphis World*, February 1, 1944.

<sup>72</sup> "Local War Bond Workers Close 5<sup>th</sup> War Loan Drive With Head Expressing Thanks For Effort," *Memphis World*, July 11, 1944.

<sup>73</sup> "Negro Division Completes Plans for 5<sup>th</sup> War Bond Drive Stressing Invasion," *Memphis World*, Jun 13, 1944.

<sup>74</sup> "Big War Bond Song Festival – Successful," *Memphis World*, July 4, 1944.

meeting.<sup>75</sup> Lee hoped that an African American Captain in the United States Army would help raise support for the War Bond effort.

The Sixth War Loan Drive, that took place at the end of 1944, also lacked serious enthusiasm. Women, however, were not absent from this campaign. The Women's Division of the War Bond Committee hosted a dinner that featured special guests. Following the dinner was a Bond Banquet and Entertainment show.<sup>76</sup> Much like during the Fourth War Loan Drive, women played an important role in helping to raise money for the war effort. Although often celebrated solely as mothers, African American women seized the opportunity of World War Two and the labor shortage to gain better jobs. In Memphis, that meant leaving either sharecropping jobs or work as a housemaid or nanny. Some women took up jobs as nurses and laundry workers. When White Rose Laundry put up a sign depicting a sexualized black woman doing the laundry, the Memphis African American community came together and demanded that the sign be removed. After the government declared laundry work essential to the war effort, African Americans made an effort to portray laundry workers as just as respectable and important to the war effort as other riveters.<sup>77</sup>

Unlike the Fifth and Sixth War Loan Drives, the Seventh and final War Loan Drive had one particularly spectacular event. On June 25, Memphis held 'Captain Luke Weathers Day' in honor of Memphis' only Tuskegee Airman. Lee asked Captain

---

<sup>75</sup> "Negro Division Completes Plans for 5<sup>th</sup> War Bond Drive Stressing Invasion," *Memphis World*, June 13, 1944.

<sup>76</sup> "Women to Boost Sixth War Loan With Dinner," *Memphis World*, December 8, 1944; "Noted Leaders Spearhead Women's War Bond Rally at Foote Homes Last Week," *Memphis World*, December 22, 1944.

<sup>77</sup> Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 63-63.

Weathers and the 99<sup>th</sup> Pursuit Squadron to present an air show for the city of Memphis and then follow it up with a citywide parade, mass meeting, and dance.<sup>78</sup> The event was extremely popular and helped raise more money for the War Loan Drive. The success of Captain Weathers as a pilot in a segregated army further reinforced Lee's beliefs in hard work and black pride. Lee argued that hard work and achievement demanded the respect of whites in America. Weathers was just another example of how succeeding in a segregated system naturally pressured the boundaries of segregation. By winning the Distinguished Flying Cross, Weathers showed that he deserved to be equal to other white pilots.<sup>79</sup> For African Americans to witness white Memphians celebrate the accomplishments of a black soldier, instead of lynching him like many other cities, had to be a sign of relief and cooperation that Lt. Lee had stressed from the outset of World War Two.

Civil rights historians can no longer underappreciate the 1930s and 1940s. With the rise of fascism in Germany and the outbreak of World War Two, there were many opportunities for African Americans to campaign for civil rights and push for equality. At the beginning of 1942, a writer for the *Pittsburgh Courier* named this fight the 'Double V' campaign, which stood for victory at home and abroad. Although this battle for equality had been ongoing since even before the Civil War, the stages of civil rights for African Americans were not the same in different parts of the country. In Memphis, Tennessee, where African Americans had the right to vote, accommodation became a key tactic for the African American community that

---

<sup>78</sup> "Over Half Million In War Bonds Sold As City Looks To Air Show Here June 25" *Memphis World*, June 19, 1945.

<sup>79</sup> "Capt. Luke Weathers Takes Honors In Stride As City Pays Him Glowing Tribute" *Memphis World*, June 29, 1945.

allowed them to make small gains and create a stable society. Lieutenant George Washington Lee and other African American leaders in Memphis tried to build an infrastructure for the African American community that would eventually establish a larger, more successful, and economically savvy black middle class. The outbreak of World War Two allowed George Lee to prove that his philosophy of black pride and black business was best. As director of the Negro Division of the War Savings Staff, Lee could bring in famous African Americans that preached his beliefs and explain them to the African American community. On top of that, the selling of war bonds made the African American community seem extremely patriotic to their white neighbors, but also created financial stability for those who allowed their war bonds to mature. With a stable economic future, African Americans were able to focus on their aspirations that would put pressure on the boundaries of segregation.