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The NAACP national officers in 1937. (center) James Weldon Johnson and Walter White.

H. L. Mencken: Racist or Civil Rights Champion?

by Larry S. Gibson

The question is “Was H. L. Mencken a racist or a civil rights champion?” If the question was whether Mencken used racist language, it would be an easy question. The answer would be an emphatic “Yes.” Mencken lived in a time when, unfortunately, negative racist labels for blacks and other groups were ubiquitous. Racial epithets appeared constantly in literature, in the press, in entertainment, and in everyday conversation; and Mencken did not abstain.

To the contrary, Mencken loved words. He was what is called a philologist. He liked to play around with words and try them out. He used all the racial pejoratives. One can find in Mencken’s writings most

of the offensive terms used for black people – nigger, coon, darkey, blackamoor. Mencken even invented some words of his own, like “niggero.”

A student of language, Mencken researched and wrote a scholarly essay entitled “Designations Given to Colored Folks,”¹ that explored the history of many words applied, over the centuries, to people of color. Reading that essay, I learned of some words for black folks that I had never heard before (and might try out when not in mixed company).

1. American Speech 19/3 (October 1944) 161-74.

Mencken was an equal opportunity slur monger.² He did the honors for all groups – Italians, Catholics, Jews, Irish, and Dutch. But his most contemptuous labels were reserved for Southern whites, whom he called crackers, lint heads, vermin, and a litany of vile names – as my mother would say, “everything but a child of God.”

So, as I said at the outset, if the accusation is that Mencken used offensive racist language, he stands “guilty as charged.” But that is not the question. The question is “Was H. L. Mencken a racist?”

At this point, some definitions might be helpful. For today, let us pretend that there are only two relevant races, white people and black people (whatever those terms mean), and let us consider only racism against black people.

Next, we need to define what a racist is. I define as a racist a person who a) believes that black people are inherently inferior to white people, or b) practices and supports discrimination against black people, or c) hates black people. Let us measure H. L. Mencken under these three definitions.

First, did Mencken believe that black people were inherently inferior to white people?

Mencken became an adult at a time of intense attention to eugenics and so-called “race science,” which had been spawned by 18th century classifiers of plants and animals. Some of these botanists and biologists, and their successors, had extended their concepts to people and had defined categories and rankings of races, with allegedly distinct characteristics.³ Applying their interpretations of Charles Darwin and Thomas Huxley, they structured a racial hierarchy, with white people as superior and darker people as inferior.⁴

2. This characterization of Mencken was coined by Les Payne, the 1968 Mencken Day lecturer.

3. See works of Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778), George Leclerc de Buffon (1707-1788), Johann Friedrich Blumunbach (1752-1840), Arthur de Gobineau, (1816-1881); Houston Stewart Chamberlain (1855-1926).

4. Richard Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1944; Marion Elizabeth Rogers, *H. L. Mencken: The American Iconoclast*, Oxford / New York, 2005, 119-20 and 578, n. 10.

As Mencken reached adulthood, the literature was full of this “race science,” and it had popularized negative images of black people in books and magazines, in the names and logos of products, in songs, on the radio and on the movie screen. Specific negative stereotypes of black people emerged and became all too familiar. Such stereotypes were, for example, the lazy watermelon-eating darkey, the street-smart crap shooting slickster, the picturesque picaninny, the lustful menacing black thug, and the loving faithful Mammy.

These caricatures appeared everywhere, and they reinforced notions that black people were lesser human beings and less intelligent than white people.⁵

These stereotypes also encouraged violence directed at African Americans and against black communities, in what were called “race riots.” The right to vote was taken away from blacks in most of the South and public accommodations became segregated. The Ku Klux Klan re-emerged as black people faced whippings and lynching.

So, did Mencken buy into these notions of black inferiority? Some say he did, and they cite Mencken’s own words as evidence.

In the course of his career, Mencken said many things. He authored about forty books. He wrote thousands of editorials, newspaper columns, and book reviews; he sent more than 100,000 personal letters.⁶ Fortunately, most of Mencken’s writings are available in the Enoch Pratt Free Library, as originals, in books, or on microfilm.

Over the past several months, with the assistance of the Mencken Collection curator, Vincent Fitzpatrick, I have tried to find the most offensive thing Mencken ever said about black people. I believe I have found it. In *Men versus the Man: A Correspondence Between Rives La Monte, Socialist, and H. L. Mencken, Individualist* (1910), there is a letter written by Mencken which is most often quoted as evidence that

5. The most dramatic and effective negative portrayal was D.W Griffith’s virulently anti-black motion picture “The Birth of a Nation.” (1915): See also Charles Carroll, *The Negro a Beast*, American Book and Bible House, St Louis 1900 and Thomas Dixon’s Ku Klux Klan trilogy, *The Leopard’s Spots* (1902), *The Clansman* (1905) and *The Traitor* (1907).

6. Fitzpatrick (2004) 2.

Mencken was a racist:

By careful breeding, supervision of environment and education, extending over many generations, it might be possible to make an appreciable improvement in the stock of the American negro, [...], but I must maintain that this enterprise would be a ridiculous waste of energy, for there is a high class white stock ready to hand. It is inconceivable that the negro stock, however carefully it might be nurtured, could ever even remotely approach it. The educated negro of today is a failure, not because he meets insufferable difficulties in life, but because he is a negro. [...]. He is, in brief, a low-caste man, to the manner born, and he will remain inert and inefficient until fifty generations of him have lived in civilization. And even then, the superior white race will be fifty generations ahead of him.⁷

“Personally, I hate to think of any man as of a definite race, creed, or color; so few men are really worth knowing that it seems a shameful waste to let anthropoid prejudice stand in the way of free association with one who is.”

If that were the end of the story and the last thing Mencken wrote about black people, one would have to conclude that he was a racist. But that is not the end of the story. Mencken wrote that letter in 1910, rather early in his career. He stopped saying things like that; and, through most of his career, he said just the opposite. Mencken reversed his belief about there being “a high class white stock ready to hand,” and his later writings became replete with statements extolling the intelligence and character of African Americans.

So, what caused Mencken to change his assessment of the races? I believe there are three overlapping developments that influenced Mencken’s dramatic reversal.

7. *Men versus the Man: A Correspondence Between Rives La Monte, Socialist, and H. L. Mencken, Individualist*, New York: N=Henry Holt, 1910, 116-17; see Rodgers (2005), 119-20 and 578, n. 10.

First, there was Mencken’s intellectual growth, from broader experiences and contacts. Mencken’s thinking and conclusions about people were reshaped by knowledge he acquired from traveling in the United States and abroad, from extensive reading, and from contact and correspondence with a wide range of people, including black intellectuals and leaders. In other words, Mencken learned and grew.

In addition to this general expansion of Mencken’s understanding, there was a second factor which reshaped Mencken’s thinking about minorities, namely, World War One. Mencken was a German-American, and being German-American during the First World War became quite uncomfortable, especially for one who publicly opposed the U.S. entering the war. The German language was dropped from the curriculum of many schools. German teachers were fired from faculties. Streets, buildings,

and places with German names were renamed. For example, Baltimore’s downtown German Street became Redwood Street. German social organizations went underground. Previously popular German music was removed from concerts and German foods were removed from menus or renamed.⁸

Mencken felt directly the effects of this anti-German wave. His newspaper columns were discontinued, and he was not allowed to publish in most journals. He found himself writing mainly in the literary magazine *Smart Set*, often under pseudonyms. Long-term friends stopped communicating. He was suspected of being a German spy. His mail was opened and inspected. Mencken feared for his life.⁹ These experiences

8. Nathan Miller, *New World Coming: The 1920s and the Making of Modern America*, New York, Da Capo Press 2003, 37-38; See Rodgers 175-177.

9. See Rodgers 182.

deepened Mencken's sense of himself as an ethnic, as a member of a distrusted minority.

The United States entered World War One in 1917. The impact on Mencken is best summarized by Charles Scruggs, who notes that, "In 1917, Mencken woke up and discovered himself to be a Negro."¹⁰ Mencken had become an ethnic outsider. He therefore began to empathize more closely with America's longest-term ethnic outsiders, African Americans.

During the war and post-war years, Mencken discovered black intellectuals, and they discovered him. Mencken stepped up his aggressive counterattack against white America and white Americans. White people no longer looked so superior to him.¹¹

There was a third and perhaps even more decisive factor in Mencken's ultimate rejection of white superiority. I call it his "Nietzscheism". In 1910, when he made his most offensive comments about the American Negro in one of his letters to Rives La Monte,¹² Mencken was still shaping his philosophy of mankind and was exploring a range of ideas, including the Social Darwinism then in vogue. But ultimately it was the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) who shaped Mencken's outlook, as expressed in his *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche* (1908), the first book to be published in English on Nietzsche's writings.

Like Nietzsche, Mencken came to believe that mankind was comprised of two groups – a small percentage of highly intelligent people, so-called "superior people," and the rest of mankind, who were ignorant, fearful, and superstitious. Mencken gave several labels to this larger group of inferior people, the most creative of which was the "booboisie," a distortion of the French word "bourgeoisie". This philosophy extended to all races and all nationalities, with each group consisting mostly of inferior people and producing only a handful of superior people.¹³

10. Charles Scruggs, *The Sage in Harlem: H.L. Mencken and the Black Writers of the 1920s* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1984) 52.

11. As Les Payne wrote: "As a fierce attacker of Anglo-American culture, Mencken was the enemy of the enemy of the Negroes – and thus their vital ally." "Is Mencken Relevant to Blacks? Was He Ever?" *Menckeniana*, Fall 1990, 9.

12. See *Men versus the Man* (1910).

13. See *Rodgers*, 118-120.

Mencken never saw enough variation in intelligence within the masses, white or black, to be worth his attention. But, to the extent he did make comparisons, Mencken's depictions of white Americans, particularly white Southerners, became infinitely more negative than what he said about the masses of black people.

In his infamous essay, "The Sahara of the Bozart",¹⁴ Mencken set forth his extremely low assessment of whites in the American South. In this essay, and in its expanded version,¹⁵ Mencken challenged "any fair observer to find anything approaching culture in the South today," for it was "as if the civil war [had] stamped out every last bearer of the torch and left only a mob of peasants on the field."¹⁶ Mencken claimed that, "The South has simply been drained of all its best blood. The vast blood-letting of the Civil War half exterminated and wholly paralyzed the old aristocracy, and so left the land to the harsh mercies of the poor white trash, now its masters".¹⁷ Mencken believed that almost no superior people were left among the Southern whites.

In contrast, Mencken pointed to the intelligence, character, and contributions of the Southern Negro, observing that, "In many obvious ways they [black southerners] are superior to the whites against whom they are commonly pitted".¹⁸ Qualities that Mencken identified with black people were realism, a willingness to engage in self-criticism, professional and artistic creativity, resilience, and a sense of humor.

Over the years following "The Sahara of the Bozart," Mencken repeatedly returned to the theme of black superiority in the South. After 1920, the worst thing Mencken said about black people, anywhere, was not nearly as bad as the disdainful things he said about whites in the South and Appalachia. He described the whites in the mountain areas of North Carolina as "a wretchedly dirty, shiftless, stupid and rascally people".¹⁹

14. *New York Evening Mail* (13 November 1917) 6.

15. *Prejudices: Second Series* (1920) 136-54.

16. *Prejudices* (1920) 138.

17. *Prejudices* (1920) 143.

18. "Treason in the Tabernacle," *American Mercury* 23/2 (June 1931) 160.

19. *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*, edited by Charles A. Fecher, New York: Knopf, 1989, 325.

Therefore, notions of white superiority just did not fit with Mencken's Nietzsche-inspired philosophy of mankind. There could be no white superiority, because most white people were inferior.²⁰

Clearly, Mencken did not think of himself as a racist and wrote: "Personally, I hate to think of any man as of a definite race, creed, or color; so few men are really worth knowing that it seems a shameful waste to let anthropoid prejudice stand in the way of free association with one who is."²¹

If one were to label Mencken's way of looking at mankind, one could rightly call it "elitism." It was not "racism."

That attitude did not stop Mencken from continuing to use racial slang in his writings. Sometimes, the use was gratuitous. Other times, it appears to have been strategic. For example, the first sentence of

"What the [Negro race] needs most, of course, is a fair chance in the world, a square deal in its effort to rise."

an October 1927 editorial in the *American Mercury* asked: "Can it be that the Republic, emerging painfully from the Age of Rotary, comes into a Coon Age?"²² Reading that introductory question, one would naturally be repulsed and expect something uncomplimentary about black people to follow. But the substance was just the opposite. Mencken's thesis was, as formulated in an editorial in the *Pittsburgh Courier* entitled "Mencken Again" (24 September 1927), "that almost everything that is internationally recognized as American is derived from the dark brother," and that the list includes, among other things, music, language, cooking, and dancing.²³ In other words, America had been transformed from the Rotary Age to the Coon Age.

20. As Dr. Arnold Rapersand, the 1990 Mencken Day lecturer stated, "At some point Mencken clearly saw the folly of racial theory, how it could be made to work against white as well as black."

21. "The Curse of Prejudice," *American Mercury* May (1931) 125.

22. *American Mercury* (October 1927) 159. "Coon" was a frequently used racist pejorative for black people.

23. On cooking, Mencken wrote: "The white cooks of New England invented apple pie, a fodder fit only for hired hands and the rev. clergy; the black cooks of the Chesapeake littoral invented stewed terrapin, chicken a la Maryland, fried soft crabs and panned oysters, not to mention strawberry shortcake and crab soup."

I owe my understanding of this technique of Mencken's to my wife Diana, who explained to me that Mencken's bait and switch reminded her of what boxing champ Muhammad Ali called his "Rope-a-Dope." Mencken would use language suggesting that he shared negative views of black people, and once the reader was hooked, he would switch to his main points with positive observations about black people.

The *Pittsburgh Courier*, a leading black newspaper, understood exactly what Mencken was up to. Its editorial about the "Coon Age" piece called Mencken the Dean of American Critics, observing that "Here he points out, what every well-informed Negro knows; that almost everything that is internationally recognized as American is derived from the dark brother."²⁴ This editorial also commented directly on Mencken's use of racial pejoratives:

Some Negroes who are overly sensitive will squirm at Mr. Mencken's free use of nicknames for them, but almost all will agree that he is performing a great service for us in vanquishing bigotry, prejudice, and ignorance so effectively. America would unquestionably be a much more livable place for the Aframerican,²⁵ if there were a lot more intelligent people like Mencken.

Another example of this "Rope-a-Dope" was an earlier essay Mencken wrote for the *Smart Set*. Mencken gave his essay a Latin title "Si Mutare Potest Aethiops Pellum Suam",²⁶ meaning "Can The Ethiop Change His Skin?" Throughout the essay Mencken inserted racial pejoratives – "coon," "darkey," "niggero" – as if he intended to share some negative impressions of black people. But the message of the article ridiculed Southern whites and claimed that they had been repeatedly outsmarted and outperformed by the

24. "Mencken Again," *Pittsburgh Courier* (24 September 1927).

25. The *Pittsburgh Courier* tried unsuccessfully to popularize the term "Aframerican."

26. *Smart Set*, September 1917, 138-44.

black Southern, who “has been making fast and secure progress, not in mere education, but in competence, in self-confidence, in wealth [...], because, in all that is essential and lasting, he has shown better progress than the Southern whites”²⁷

One must notice that these observations about black people were in direct contradiction to Mencken’s assessments and predictions in his letter to La Monte seven years earlier. The black intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois saw through Mencken’s name-calling charade. Du Bois described Mencken’s essay as a “delicious” piece of writing, with the racial epithets sprinkled in “to prove himself the southern gentleman.”²⁸

Now, I do not want to give the impression that Mencken completely cleaned up his act and became post-racial. He continued to say noxious things about groups of people, including African Americans. His diary, which caused so much controversy when it was published in 1989, contained a statement about black women that received much attention. It certainly riled up the sisters. Mencken wrote that, “But it is impossible to talk anything resembling discretion or judgment into a colored woman.”²⁹ I must confess that I have said almost the same thing on more than one occasion. But I guess there are some things a white guy can’t say!

But even here the context is important. Mencken was complaining in this diary entry that earlier that day his housekeeper, Hester Denby, whom he greatly admired and respected, had ignored his warnings about a heavily waxed floor and had fallen and injured herself. So, as bad as what he wrote sounded, it was, in context, quite benign.

It should be pointed out, however, that there were times when Mencken discussed important race-related issues without first horsing around. On those occasions, he usually referred to African Americans as “the dark brethren”³⁰ or “my colored brother.”³¹

27. *Smart Set*, September 1917, 139.

28. “*The Looking Glass*,” *Crisis* 14 (October 1917) 298.

29. *The Diary of H. L. Mencken*, September 23 1943, 272- 273.

30. See, e.g., *American Mercury*, Editorial, (June 1929), 152, “*The dark brethren have had a hard time in the world, and every boon they enjoy today the have got by bitter effort.*”

31. See e.g. “*Notes on Negro Strategy*,” *Crisis* 41/10 October 1934.

I find it fascinating, almost humorous, how Mencken sounded at times like a black nationalist! In addition to repeatedly returning to the theme of black superiority that he had begun developing in “*The Sahara of the Bozart*,” Mencken encouraged young black writers to take pride in their blackness rather than trying to copy whites. Responding to a questionnaire, Mencken urged black writers to use more satire in describing whites: “The white man, it seems to me, is extremely ridiculous. He looks ridiculous even to me, a white man myself. To a Negro he must be a hilarious spectacle, indeed. Why isn’t that spectacle better described?”³²

Mencken cautioned against black writers putting too much emphasis on trying to please whites. He criticized Booker T. Washington, claiming that, “the most he [Washington] could imagine was a Negro almost as good as a white man.”³³ According to Mencken, “What the Negro needs is leaders who can and will think black.”³⁴

He was strongly in favor of blacks using self-defense in response to violence. After a race riot in August 1919, Mencken wrote to James Weldon Johnson:

What the inciting cause of the current riot may be is hard to determine, but it is easy to see [...] the familiar liking of the of the low class white man for a chance to be cruel, with huge odds on his side. He is, by nature, a gang fighter; he fights in operations which allow him to without risk. Fighting back changes the scene. Once that he is convinced that chasing Negroes is dangerous, he will stop it.³⁵

32. Quoted by W. E. B. Du Bois, “*The Negro in Art*,” *Crisis* (1926) 220.

33. *American Mercury* (February 1926) 254.

34. *American Mercury* (June 1929) 252. Novelist Richard Wright (*Uncle Tom’s Children* (1938), *Native Son* (1940)) frequently claimed that reading Mencken inspired him to become a writer. Richard Wright Talks to the AFRO.” *Afro-American*, March 24, 1945; “*Juvenile Delinquent Becomes Famous Writer*,” *Afro-American*.” June 22, 1949.

35. H.L. Mencken to James Weldon Johnson, August 1919, *New York Public Library*.

Mencken urged blacks to be resilient and persistent:

The advanced wing of Negroes [...] must be prepared to break their backs at the oars. They will find it lonesome in their little skiff, and often dangerous. They will be tempted more than once to turn back. But no race, I believe, ever gets anywhere, so long as it permits itself to think of turning back. It must navigate its own course, in fair weather and foul, [...] carrying all arms and ready for any combat.³⁶

Those were not the words of a man who believed that black people were inherently inferior to white people.

So, let us turn to my second definition of a racist. Did Mencken discriminate against black people? I have not found any examples of where Mencken personally discriminated against someone because they were black, or where he supported or encouraged racially discriminatory acts.

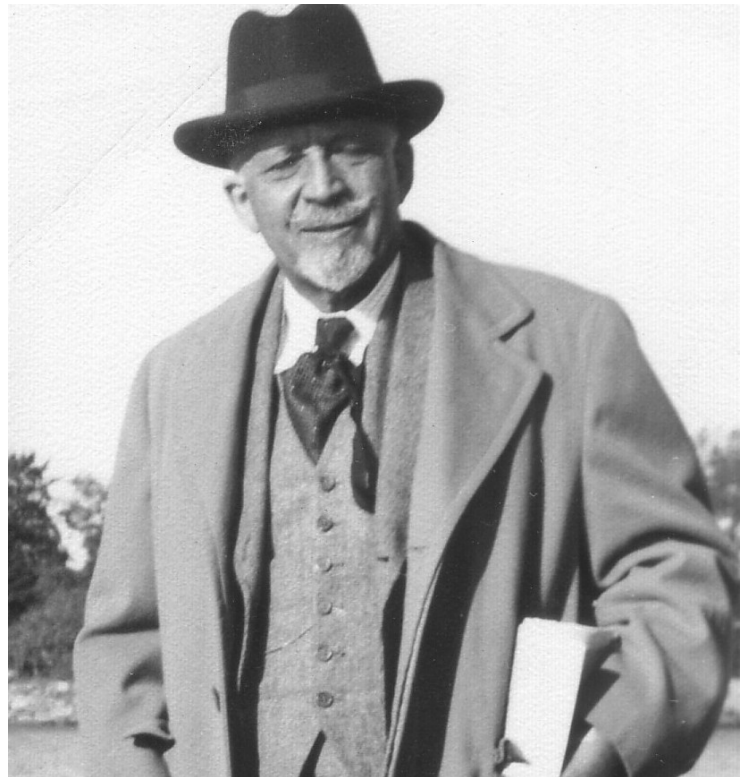
Of course, he lived in a Southern city with its structural racial segregation. Mencken had many encounters with African Americans at all levels, and they are often mentioned in his writings. It does not appear that Mencken treated black people less decently than he treated white people.

In his writings Mencken consistently advocated that all persons should be treated equally, irrespective of race. He also repeatedly observed that “What the [Negro race] needs most, of course, is a fair chance in the world, a square deal in its effort to rise.”³⁷

Let us look beyond words and focus on actions. One reliable means of assessing a person is to review how that person conducts themselves in matters important to them. Most revealing are the choices a person makes when they have options and something important is at stake. Mencken’s choices on racial matters were perhaps most clearly made as editor of the *American Mercury* from 1924 to 1933, when he had the power to choose which writers to publish - the power to discriminate. At a time when other mainstream journals would not print contributions

36. “The Aframerican: New Style,” *American Mercury*, February 1926, 255.

37. “Gropings in the Literary Darkness,” *Smart Set*, October 1920, 141.



W.E.B. Du Bois

by black writers, Mencken opened up to them the pages of the *American Mercury*.

When Mencken founded the *American Mercury*, he was already well known to black writers and leaders as the author of the controversial essay “The Sahara of the Bozart,” which had been widely circulated in the black community. Mencken had corresponded with some black leaders since 1917, particularly: James Weldon Johnson, the national head of the NAACP; Johnson’s assistant and later successor, Walter White; and W. E. B. DuBois, editor of *Crisis*, the magazine published by the national NAACP. Mencken invited Johnson to submit an essay for publication in the very first issue of the *American Mercury* in January 1924. Johnson did not submit his piece on time. But an essay by Du Bois was published in the issue of October 1924.³⁸

The *American Mercury* became a venue where black writers could boldly discuss racial issues, and it published more works by black writers than all the other major white-owned journals combined.³⁹

38. W.E.B Du Bois, “The Dilemma of the Negro,” *American Mercury*, October 1924, 174-185.

39. Payne argues that: “Mencken was not only nonracist, but, on the whole, positive, progressive, and, in deed, extraordinarily supportive of authentic

Mencken called *Pittsburgh Courier* journalist George Schuyler “the best columnist, of any race, now in practice in the United States”.⁴⁰ Mencken tried unsuccessfully to get the *Baltimore Sun* to hire Schuyler.⁴¹ Schuyler had nine pieces in the *American Mercury*,⁴² more than any other writer, black or white. James Weldon Johnson published five pieces.⁴³ Walter White published a report about forty-two lynchings he had investigated.⁴⁴ Langston Hughes had two short stories.⁴⁵

In reviewing a manuscript for possible publication in the *American Mercury*, what mattered to Mencken was the thoughtfulness of the ideas and the quality of the writing. He advised black intellectuals to dispel the stereotypes and to write about a wide range of topics related to the black community – politics, occupations, travel, economics, language, and history.⁴⁶ Black writers found Mencken to be tough-minded and non-patronizing. They sought his advice on topics to write about, and he assisted them in finding publishers for their books.

Mencken did not favor timid pieces from black authors. Instead he gave preference to essays that challenged the establishment and were provocative, such as Du Bois’ essay “The Dilemma of the Negro” that predicted violent conflict between the blacks and whites in America.⁴⁷

black writers:” Menckeniana , Fall 1990 , 6. Columnist Floyd J. Calvin observed, “Mencken recognized a whole company of Negro writers. Most write editors will call it a day when they recognize one, or maybe two, or perhaps three at the most. But Mencken, true to himself, when he went ‘Negroid’ shot the works. Almost every Negro who can write has been in the Mercury.” The Pittsburgh Courier, December 30, 1933, for an extensive treatment of Mencken’s involvement with black writers, see Scruggs.

40. Mencken to the editor, *Pittsburgh Courier*, January 1947, quoted by Scruggs 38.

41. Payne, (*Menckeniana*, Fall 1990): 7.

42. “Keeping the Negro in His Place” August 1929; “A Negro Looks Ahead” February 1930; “Traveling Jim” August 1930; “Black Warriors” December 1930; “Our White Folks” December 1927; “Memoirs of a Pearl Diver” April 1931; “Black Begins to Doubt” April 1932; “Black Art” November 1932; “Uncle Sam’s Black Step-Child” June 1933; See Hobson 247.

43. See, e. g. “The Dilemma of the Negro Author,” *American Mercury*, December 1928, 477; “A Negro Looks at Politics” *American Mercury*, September 1929, 93,

44. “See, e. g. “I Investigate Lynchings” *American Mercury*, January 1929, 77-84.

45. See, e. g. “Poor Little Black Fellow” *American Mercury*, November 1933 (a progressive white couple who raise an orphaned black youngster into manhood concludes that his white girlfriend must be a prostitute) .

46. Fred Hobson, *Mencken. A Life*, New York: Random House. 1994, 247.

47. *American Mercury*, October 1924, 174-85.

Mencken was almost ecstatic in his review of Alain Locke’s 1925 book *The New Negro*.⁴⁸ Locke, the first black Rhodes scholar and a leader of the Harlem Renaissance, had published a set of bold and provocative essays, and Mencken cheered:

The Negroes who contribute to this dignified and impressive volume [...] show no sign of being sorry that they are Negroes; They take a fierce sort of pride it. For the first time one hears clearly the imposing doctrine that, in more than one way, the negro is superior to the white man. [...]. Here a Negro full of easy grace and not at all flustered by good society.⁴⁹

Mencken also encouraged white writers to submit essays related to race. Between 1924 and 1933, the *American Mercury* published fifty-four articles about Afro-Americans– half of them by black writers and half by white writers.⁵⁰

Under my second definition of a racist, Mencken did not discriminate against black people in either his personal or his professional affairs.⁵¹ He was not a racist on that score.

Let us now turn to my third definition of a racist. Did Mencken hate black people? Unfortunately, there are people we must call racists, because blacks just get under their skin. They might not even know why. They just do not like black people. What about Mencken? Did he hate black people? The simple answer is that there is no evidence that he did.

As we all know, Mencken disliked many things and many kinds of people, and he made no effort to hide his dislikes. He disliked, among others, Puritans, religious fundamentalists, most politicians (especially presidents), chiropractors, and the Ku Klux Klan.

48. *The New Negro: An Interpretation*, Alain Locke, editor, Boni, 1926.

49. “The Aframerican: New Style,” *American Mercury*, February 1926, 254-55.

50. Fenwick Anderson, “Black Perspectives in Mencken’s Mercury,” *Menckeniana* 70 (Summer 1979): 2.

51 One of the few portrait painters for whom Mencken sat was an African American, O. Richard Reid, who described Mencken as “the most polite man I have ever known. “Mencken Most Interesting of All, Reid Says,” *Afro-American*, December 13, 1930. See also *The Diary of H. L. Mencken* 6 (November 7, 1930).

What Mencken liked is a fairly short list. He liked books, music, food, beer, really smart people, and what he called “decency.” Mencken called “decency” the cornerstone of a good society. “By this common decency,” he said, “I mean the habit, in the individual, of viewing with tolerance and charity the acts and ideas of other individuals – the habit that makes a man a reliable friend, a generous opponent, and a good citizen.”⁵²

Mencken said many things about black people, but he never said they were not decent⁵³ or that he did not like them. On the contrary, Mencken had a genuine interest in the black experience in America, and he called himself “a sincere friend of the colored people.”⁵⁴

Perhaps the most reliable indication of Mencken’s attitude toward black people is what blacks who were his contemporaries said about him. For more than forty years, I have taught a course in law school called “Evidence.” This body of law gives great weight to what we call “character witnesses,” that is, to the opinion of a person held by their contemporaries, derived from direct contact over a period of time. Fortunately, we have the benefit of several Mencken character witnesses, statements about Mencken by black writers and leaders who had contact with him. These were people who knew what racism looked like and who had no hesitancy about exposing racism when they saw it.

James Weldon Johnson, author of the Negro National Anthem “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” corresponded with Mencken from 1917 until Johnson’s death in 1938. Johnson noted, “Mr. Mencken has written on the race question, and although he has no special interest in the Negro’s rights and wrongs, he always writes on the Negro’s side, because he sees that on that side lies the truth.”⁵⁵

W. E. B. Du Bois, author of *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), observed: “There can be no question of H. L.

52 “Notes on Democracy” (New York) Knopf, 1926) p. 172. “The Ethical Conflict” See *Smart Set*, August 1921, 46.

53. He suggested just the opposite. “That Negroes, in more than one way, are superior to most American whites is something that I have long believed . . . In brief, the race is marked by extraordinary decency.” “The Burden of Credulity,” *Opportunity*, February 1931, pp. 40-41

54. “Treason in the Tabernacle,” *American Mercury* 23/2, June 1931, 160.

55. “Views and Reviews,” *New York Age*, February 21, 1920.

Mencken’s attitude toward Negroes. He is calmly and judiciously fair. He neither loves nor hates them.”⁵⁶

In an article, “Mencken Mentions Us,” which appeared in both the *Baltimore Afro-American*⁵⁷ and the *Amsterdam News*,⁵⁸ Howard University Dean Kelly Miller, a frequent contributor to black periodicals, wrote: “From the first of his literary career, Mr. Mencken has given much attention to the Negro question. He neither loves nor hates them. He has no propaganda for or against him. He undertakes to describe the Negro, not to reform him. Like Shakespeare, he does not make the original, but holds the mirror up to nature.”



Carl Murphy, publisher of the *Afro-American* and a leader of both the national and Baltimore NAACP, corresponded with Mencken for two decades.

Black newspaper publishers and editors were especially sophisticated and well read. Their racism detectors were fine-tuned. It is noteworthy that materials by and about Mencken appeared frequently in the *Amsterdam News*, *The Pittsburgh Courier*, the

56. *Crisis*, October 1927, 276.

57. 8 October 1927.

58. 12 October 1927.

Baltimore Afro-American, and other black-owned newspapers. Occasionally, an editorial, columnist, or letter to the editor, criticized Mencken's atheism, his attacks of preachers, and his opposition to Prohibition.⁵⁹ But he was not accused of being a racist. In the language of the day, it was never said that Mencken was "prejudiced against colored people."

Carl Murphy, publisher of the *Afro-American* and a leader of both the national and Baltimore NAACP, corresponded with Mencken for two decades. Their letters exhibit mutual respect. In a 1926 letter, Murphy invited Mencken to address all forty employees of the *Afro-American* at their weekly staff meeting.⁶⁰

No one was more race-conscious than W. E. B. Du Bois, when he selected items to appear in the *Crisis*. He would not publish in the national journal of the NAACP material from anyone he believed was not a friend of black folks. In a 1934 *Crisis* essay entitled "Notes on Negro Strategy," Mencken was pessimistic about the near future of black progress.⁶¹

Mencken had more than a neutral, dispassionate interest in the black experience in America. He studied and wrote about black language, literature, cooking, music, and art. He read black newspapers and maintained a running correspondence with a number of black writers. Mencken was much more than a casual observer of his "darker brother". Mencken certainly did not hate black people.

Therefore, my answer to the first part of the original question is clear. Mencken did not believe that black people were inferior to white people, did not discriminate or support discrimination against black people, and did not hate black people. This leaves us then with the second part of the question: Was H.L. Mencken a civil rights champion?

First, Mencken would have denied that he was anybody's champion. He railed against reformers and

59. See e.g. "Pickens, Darrow, Mencken are Fools Seeking Publicity." *Afro-American*, June 20, 1931: "New York Minister Assails Mencken." *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 30, 1927.

60. Carl Murphy to H.L. Mencken, June 25, 1929. Mencken also exchanged letters with Carl Murphy's brother, George B. Murphy, who was the treasurer of the *Afro-American*, and with the city editor Ralph Matthews.

61. *Crisis*, October 1934, 289, 304.

people on missions; he criticized moral crusades. "My one purpose in writing," he wrote in his *Diary*,⁶² "I have explained over and over again: it is simply to provide a kind of catharsis for my own thoughts. They worry me until they are set forth in words. This may be a kind of insanity, but at all events it is free of moral purpose".⁶³

Nevertheless, I am not sure that Mencken really believed or practiced what he wrote in his *Diary*. Mencken certainly did undertake reform missions. He undertook, for example, a mission throughout the 1920s to end Prohibition. He fought to reduce government censorship, and he was an intrepid champion of free speech. Indeed, Mencken waged many battles, with specific real-world objectives.

Mencken may not have considered it his mission to look out for black people. Civil rights may not have been a high priority for him. Yet, on more than one occasion, he did fight for the civil rights of African Americans.

For example, Mencken waged a relentless campaign against the Ku Klux Klan. He published several editorials and columns attacking lynching, especially after the lynchings of Matthew Williams in Cambridge, Maryland⁶⁴ and George Armwood in Princess Anne, Maryland.⁶⁵ Mencken's efforts took personal courage at the time. His writings led to threats and warnings for him not to set foot on the Eastern Shore of Maryland.⁶⁶

One of the few times Mencken ever admitted to changing his mind about anything was when he reversed his thinking about whether there should be a federal law against lynching. His original position was that this kind of violence should be handled at the state level. But, after the 1931 and 1933 lynchings in Maryland, he concluded that a federal law was needed. Mencken then testified before the U.S. Congress in support of the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill.

62. 29 November 1939.

63. *Dairy* 133. Mencken often disavowed reform objectives, writing, for example, "The American Mercury is not dedicated to reforming the United States or to saving the human race. It believes that most reformers are frauds [...]," Editorial on the journal's fifth anniversary, December 1928, 407.

64. "The Eastern Shore Kultur," *Baltimore Evening Sun*, 7 December 1931, 25.

65. "Plans to Put Down Lynching," *BES*, 30 October 1933, 19; "Victory," *BES*, 4 December 1933, 17.

66. *Rodgers* 390.

Mencken appeared on February 14, 1935, and his testimony (the only time he ever testified before Congress) increased the media attention the hearing received.⁶⁷

Letters between Mencken and NAACP leader Walter White reveal that they collaborated on their respective testimonies and also engaged in a coordinated effort to pressure Maryland's two U.S. Senators to support the anti-lynching bill.⁶⁸ The proposed legislation was not adopted, because it was fiercely opposed by Southern senators and because President Roosevelt did not aggressively support it. But Mencken's efforts were not just detached journalistic commentary. He waged an active campaign for a specific reform.

Another example of Mencken's active involvement was his support for the desegregation of the University of Maryland School of Law and the admission of Donald Gaines Murray in 1935. I have known for some years that Mencken had written an *Evening Sun* column in support of Murray's admission



A young Thurgood Marshall

67. Senator Edward Costigan of Colorado had Mencken's remarks and anti-lynching article placed in the Congressional Record. "Costigan Tells Senate Public is Behind Bill." *Afro-American*, February 10, 1934.

68. At White's request, Mencken had tried to persuade Maryland Governor Albert Ritchie to attend the hearing. See letters White to Mencken. January 19, 1935, January 23, 1935, January 24, 1935, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

to the Law School,⁶⁹ and I mention Mencken's column in my book *Young Thurgood: The Making of a Supreme Court Justice*.⁷⁰ But only while engaged in research for this book did I learn about the circumstances surrounding Mencken's column.

The University of Maryland Law School suit was Thurgood Marshall's first major case. Historians of the civil rights movement call it "the first step on the road to *Brown v. Board of Education*,"⁷¹ because it was the first time that a judge in any state ordered the desegregation of an educational institution. Mencken's column came at a key point, just after the university had appealed the judge's order that Murray be admitted, before the appeal was heard, and before Murray had started classes.

At the Library of Congress, I came across a letter from Walter White to Thurgood Marshall, in which he informed Marshall that he had been corresponding with Mencken during the case, that he had sent Mencken the various court filings, and that Mencken had alerted him that his next *Evening Sun* column would be about the Murray case.⁷² This advance notice gave Marshall and the local NAACP the opportunity to get maximum benefit from Mencken's column.

NAACP organizer, Juanita Jackson (later Juanita Jackson Mitchell) wrote excitedly to White: "Mencken has written an article on the University of Maryland case about which everybody is talking. I suppose you've seen the article. That was good strategy on your part. Congratulations and thanks. It will help us on our membership drive."⁷³ Of course, White already knew about the article, because Mencken had alerted him.

69. "The Murray Case," *Evening Sun*, 23 September 1935, 17.

70. Larry S. Gibson, *Young Thurgood: The Making of a Supreme Court Justice* (New York, Prometheus Books, 2012) 252.

71. The inscription on the Thurgood Marshall Memorial in Annapolis, Maryland, reads: "Thurgood Marshall's first major victory in his life-long career for equality under the law for all Americans took place in the Maryland Court of Appeals which stood near this memorial. In 1935, Marshall successfully argued for the admission of Donald Murray to the University of Maryland School of Law. This was the first step on the road to *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka* in which the United States Supreme Court in 1954 overturned the doctrine of 'separate but equal, established by *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). Thurgood Marshall fought to fulfill the promise held within the quotes above the entrance of the United States Supreme Court Building in Washington D.C., "Equal Justice Under Law."

72. Walter White to Thurgood Marshall, September 20, 1935, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

73. Juanita Jackson to Walter White, September 25, 1935, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

Mencken sent a copy of his column to James Weldon Johnson, who had by then retired from the NAACP. Johnson complimented Mencken on his column and called it “a great blow for law, order and justice and for the establishment of democracy in this great union of ours.”⁷⁴

After discovering this active collaboration between Mencken and White, I wanted to learn more about the relationship between Mencken and black leaders. As I explored further, I discovered extensive correspondence between Mencken and African American leaders, in which they discussed strategies and, in some cases, coordinated their respective actions to promote the civil rights agenda.



NAACP Organizer, Juanita Jackson

NAACP Leader, Walter White

The Baltimore branch of the NAACP clearly believed Mencken to be a friend and supporter. Juanita Jackson sent Mencken a letter inviting him to become a member of the NAACP. Mencken’s letter declining the invitation is quite revealing:

Dear Miss Jackson. Thank you for your letter. As you know, I am greatly interested in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and have often written articles in support of its various projects. Mr. Johnson and Mr. White are old friends and we exchange ideas constantly. Unluckily, I am thoroughly convinced that it is unwise for men engaged in active daily journalism to join associations of any sort. I have had a rule against doing so for many years, and I hesitate to break it now. Thus I fear I had better not come in. Sincerely, H. L. Mencken.⁷⁵

74. James Weldon Johnson to H.L. Mencken October 19, 1995, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress.

75. H.L. Mencken to Juanita Jackson, September 23, 1935, NAACP Papers,

That was in 1935. To understand that Mencken never stopped his opposition to racial discrimination, one need only consider that the very last column that he wrote, before his disabling stroke in November 1948, protested racial segregation. In “Equal Rights in Parks: Mencken Calls Tennis Order Silly,” Mencken castigated the policy of the Baltimore City Parks Board, under which black and white tennis players were not permitted to play together on the same courts in Baltimore’s public parks.

After millions of published words, Mencken’s last exhortation was: “It is high time that such relics of Ku Kluxry be wiped out of Maryland”.⁷⁶ Mencken’s words could have just as well been written by my personal hero, Thurgood Marshall. It even sounds like how Marshall would have said it. But, the statement was by that other Baltimorean, H. L. Mencken.

Returning now to the question of whether Mencken was a racist or a civil rights champion, I offer my conclusion. I have reviewed what Mencken said over the years. I have considered what he did in his personal affairs and professional life. I have given weight to the opinions of people who knew him, especially black intellectuals, leaders, and journalists.

On the basis of the evidence, I conclude that H. L. Mencken was not a racist and that he was consistently a civil rights advocate and occasionally a civil rights champion.

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The images in this article were provided courtesy of the Clarence and Jaunita Mitchell family.

Library of Congress.

76. Evening Sun, 9 November 1948, 14.