

DEFENDER, from page 4

small farmers in the South and all over the United States were paying a dollar a year to a newspaper in Chicago, were handing it over to a Pullman porter, that involves a lot of trust, and Robert Abbott took that relationship very seriously. The porters were essential to that whole relationship and that whole process of making the newspaper, as I said, a national communications vehicle for African-Americans.

A.G.: *And then when it was nationally known, The Defender not only reframed the narrative of a lot of things going on in the United States but also actually directed readers on what to do, like encouraging people to move North.*

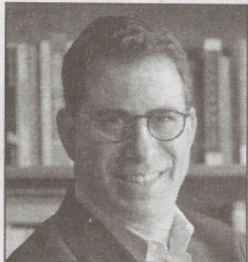
E.M.: That trust relationship that I was talking about with your last question was very much a part of the newspaper's influence. So when it came, for example, to the Great Migration, The Defender was reporting accurately on what was happening in Chicago. It was not sugarcoating things like the 1919 race riots or the vicious attitudes of some whites even in Chicago when it came to African-Americans. The editorial page would then be able to argue convincingly that, "Hey, you read the truth on the news pages, but you know it's still better than life in the South, so why don't you join the migration to come here." It was able to have authority because it could rely on the news on the front pages.

A.G.: *By the time Robert Abbott died, there were a number of black newspapers. Was it that trust that he established in the beginning that eventually set The Defender apart?*

E.M.: The Defender was not always the most popular or the most highly circulated African-American newspaper. It was superseded for some time by the Pittsburgh Courier, which in the '30s and '40s took a very aggressive line when it came to getting the best African-American columnists around the country and focusing the newspaper as an opinion shaper. That was cutting edge for its day. Eventually, The Defender started to do very similar stuff and over time reclaimed the mantle of the most widely circulated African-American newspaper. So the black press, there's some ebbs and flows, but it remains a powerful institution and a

voice of conscience in the country today.

A.G.: *What aspects of The Defender captivated you so much that you were willing to spend all these years working on a book about it?*



COURTESY OF JASON REBLANDO

"When the opportunity came to do a book about it, I seized on that because this was a way to walk a reader through the entire history of the newspaper. It was a way to give them the experience that I had of reunderstanding or getting a new understanding of American history and find out really what was missing."

ETHAN MICHAELI
AUTHOR AND JOURNALIST

E.M.: Honestly, for me, I was re-educated at The Defender. I didn't know anything about Black America or race relations in the United States, or Chicago for that matter. And I learned all of that there. It made me feel differently about the country and differently about American history and differently about my responsibility to both of those. When the opportunity came to do a book about it, I seized on that because this was a way to walk a reader through the entire history of the newspaper. It was a way to give them the experience that I had of reunderstanding or getting a new understanding of American history and finding out really what was missing.

A.G.: *Toward the end of the book, you say that working at The Defender helped you understand the truth about race in America. Could you talk a little bit more about how going through the process of writing this book changed your understanding of race or informed it more?*

E.M.: Well, I knew that there had been a lot of violence and oppression of course from white people against African-Americans in the South after the Civil War. I did not know how overt and popular that violence was. And that oppression, the violence, was a part of a whole pattern, a whole program of oppression that went along with suppressing electoral rights, suppressing rights of economic prosperity, of educational attainment. All of these things were closely monitored by Southern white authorities. It really was a totalitarian state for African-Americans. And that I don't think is well

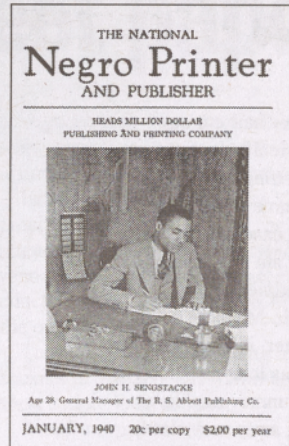
appreciated by people today, nor is it appreciated how creatively, thoughtfully and successfully African-Americans fought back, not just through The Defender, of course, but through myriad ways in which they resisted this kind of oppression and eventually overturned the regime, if not all of its institution. So all of that was definitely surprising and revelatory.

Although, I can't say that I walked away from the book with a great sense of optimism and a belief in progress in this country, because frankly there hasn't been. There definitely hasn't been enough progress. Perhaps an argument could be made that there has been some progress, but I am deeply disappointed and deeply dissatisfied that we sometimes seem to make gains in some areas only to lose more in others.

In Chicago, of course, we're dealing with the police killing of Laquan McDonald and the revelation of the video of that killing. And we had so many reactions to it, but my one thought I had was that one of the great tragedies is Laquan McDonald had been abandoned by our city and our system long before he ever got into that confrontation with the policemen. In a way, that makes it worse than the murder of Emmett Till, because Emmett Till at least had a lot more infrastructure behind him, a lot more opportunity ahead of him, than Laquan McDonald. So that's a real tragedy there, in addition to the tragedy of his murder. So, not to end my answer on a sad note, but I can't say I'm sanguine about where we are in terms of progress on race.

A.G.: *And what lessons do you think the story of The Defender has for digital media journalists today?*

E.M.: I think that it's really just a matter of time and creativity and effort until someone starts replicating the kind of success that Robert Abbott had at The Defender. There is that opportunity out there to build a mass audience for media and to have a very strong voice as a result. It's not going to be the same way that we did it in the past, but that's what The Defender was. It was something new. Use the technology the way that you know it should be used. Others may not understand it at first and may pooh-pooh, may scoff, may even ridicule you. But if you know that you're right, stick to it and it will succeed.



COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO DEFENDER CHARITIES

John Sengstacke on the cover of Negro Printer, January 1940. As Robert Abbott faded, the members of the black press increasingly looked to Sengstacke for leadership.



COURTESY OF THE CHICAGO DEFENDER CHARITIES
John Sengstacke speaks with President John F. Kennedy in 1962 at the White House.



COURTESY OF ABBOTT-SENGSTACKE FAMILY PAPERS

Former President Harry Truman, Chicago Mayor Richard Daley and John Sengstacke ride in the 1956 Bud Billiken Parade. Truman and Daley owed much to Sengstacke personally and the African-American electorate generally.

'THE DEFENDER' BANNED
PINE BLUFF, Ark., Feb. 24.—Eighteen leaders of the Colored community here, including two ministers, two school principals and professional men, have been named defendants in a suit filed by city officials seeking an injunction to prohibit circulation in the county of a Chicago newspaper on the ground that the paper tended to incite the Colored people. A temporary restraining order was obtained.