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Paul Robeson Jr. Speaks of Human Rights, Not Civil Rights

By Jennifer Dotolo

At the peak of his career in 1944, Paul Robeson Sr. was called “America’s Number-One Negro.” By 1949, he had become one of the “most vilified black men.” What caused this transition? He actively challenged the subservient role of African Americans in society by rejecting the view that African Americans couldn’t fight for full freedom and by refusing to accept an “inferior brand” of civil rights.

Almost every seat in the Betty Tipton Room was occupied by students, teachers, faculty and staff eager to hear about the civil rights activist Paul Robeson Sr. from someone who knew him better than anyone: his son, Paul Robeson Jr.

Robeson Jr. spoke on February 5 at Eastern Connecticut State University (ECSU), sharing his recollections of a man whom he described as the “only person in modern times who was a particular combination of artist and prophet—a rare combination.” The speech was just one of a series of several events taking place on campus in February to celebrate African American History Month.

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Paul Robeson Sr. was a man of many achievements. He was a lawyer, admitted to the bar of New York; an actor whose stage appearances included *Show Boat* and *Othello*; a film star whose roles made memorable such films as *Body and Soul*, *The Emperor Jones*, and *Show Boat*; and a celebrated singer and recording artist.

Paul Robeson Sr., was, as well, among the best known and widely respected Black Americans of the 1930s and 1940s, and is remembered as a civil rights activist. A Rutgers graduate, he always believed that he had a “divine gift and a divine mission,” said his son. It was this belief that drove his desire to never conform to what blacks were supposed to be and to stress human rights to extend the struggle beyond civil rights.

Robeson Jr. spoke of three crucial periods in United States history during which the fight for human rights was aided by an alliance between the country’s president and a great black leader.

The first alliance was between President Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglass during the Civil War. Douglass convinced Lincoln to allow blacks to fight with the Union.

The second alliance was between President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Paul Robeson Sr. to rally opposition against WWII and fascism.

The third alliance, and probably the one most familiar, is that between President John F. Kennedy and the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. The two fought what Robeson referred to as “neo-confederates.” Here, King represents the victory of the civil rights movement, Robeson Jr. said.

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Robeson's fight for human rights came to a standstill when Roosevelt died in 1945 and Vice President Harry S. Truman acceded to the presidency. Robeson, tried to no avail, to persuade Truman to press for antilynching legislation. In its absence, the activist, "who would not submit on the issue of principle," warned that southern blacks would arm themselves for their own self-protection. From that moment on, he was a marked man.

The Robeson controversy did not end there, according to his son. During a rendition of "Ol' Man River" from the musical *Show Boat*, the baritone changed the words from

Niggers all work on the Mississippi
Niggers all work while the white folks play.

I gits weary and sick of tryin'
I'm tired of livin' and scared of dyin'
And Ol' man river, he just keeps rollin'
along

to

There's an old man called the Mississippi
That's the old man I don't like to be

I keeps laffin' instead of cryin'
I must keep fightin' until I'm dyin'
And Ol' man river, he just keeps rollin'
along.

The act of rebellion became "a land mark experience" for the nation, the revised lyrics acquired symbolic status in the fight for human rights. Robeson reminded his

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listeners, however, that we should not think of men like his father, Douglass, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Kennedy, Martin Luther King and others like them simply as icons. What we should do, he urged, is to become better acquainted with what they said, what drove them, what their human qualities were—and then learn from that knowledge. Only then can we “march forward together . . . in an army of progressive humanity.”

ECSU senior Brian Peters, from Norwalk, Connecticut was among those who were impressed by what he heard. Robeson was “enjoyable to listen to. It was educational and nice to hear a son talk about his father in such a positive light.”

Doris Mayo, a sophomore from Putnam, Connecticut agreed. “I think that it was enlightening to learn something about a civil rights leader that isn’t [typically] taught to us in history class.”

For more information about other events, please contact Averl Otis at (860) 465-4421 or by email at otisa@easternct.edu.

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