

UNVEILING UNITED STATES POSTAGE STAMP IN HONOR OF PAUL ROBESON

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OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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Mr. HOLT. Mr. Speaker, I submit to the Record remarks I gave this morning at the unveiling of a United States Postage Stamp in honor of Paul Robeson. He was an impressive American, and these remarks capture my thoughts and feelings on his remarkable, yet tragic, life and accomplishments.

I am honored to be here to recognize Paul Robeson and also to recognize his son Paul Robeson, who himself has done so much for America.

This is just a stamp. But I can hardly express how important this is to me personally.

You see, I grew up in the 1950's. My town was probably no more racially segregated than most of America, and anti-communism was no more at a fever pitch than anywhere else. But I never had heard of Paul Robeson.

When, as a young man, I learned about Paul Robeson I got all his recordings and watched all his movies and read all about him. I marveled at his voice, his intellect, his optimism. Several times as a student I even considered trips to meet him, just to show up at his door and ask to speak with him. But I was told he was in seclusion.

I did not know what I would do if I met him. Say I admired him? Apologize for his mistreatment? As a kid I did not think I could really do anything. Maybe I wanted to know how he got the courage to sacrifice his career by fighting for, what he called, his people.

Mostly I just wanted to meet the person who more than anyone else in America represented for me what had to be fixed.

How could this be? Not how could so much talent be in one person. Rather, how could a talent of this magnitude, a person of such dignity and such accomplishment be rubbed out of the history books? A great actor, singer, writer, linguist and scholar. And how could America, sports crazy America, fail to mention a note-worthy all-American football player. One of the great talents of our age. How much more he offered than so many of the shallow, faintly-talented people whom we celebrate in the papers, on television, and, yes, even on postage stamps. His autobiography and manifesto was not reviewed in a single main-stream publication. I felt cheated. Even as a boy, I considered myself very well informed about the world and about America. How did I not know about his role in the American labor movement? How could the knowledge of Paul Robeson be kept from me. Yes, I felt cheated and angry. Even more, I felt America had been cheated. Why was he denied to my generation? And worst of all, America had cheated itself. It was painful. In the person of Paul Robeson I saw the cost of racism and the cost of patriotic fear. It wasn't just a few vicious bigots. It wasn't just some anti-communist know-

nothings. It was the official policy of my country to commit this injustice. Our country, Paul Robeson's and mine.

And it was happening to the person who had popularized the song "The House I Live In" with the words "... the right to speak my mind out; that's America to me." Someone who had overcome racial exclusion to become one of the best-known and outwardly successful figures in the world, only to be benched. As Lloyd Brown had said, "The spotlight was switched off ... and a thick smokescreen was spread around him."

I could not fix it, and I regretted deeply that I couldn't. Even if I visited him, I couldn't. What could a white kid say, standing on his doorstep? I never met him.

When I heard about the decision of the commemorative stamp committee, I realized that I should bring this ceremony to Princeton, Robeson's birthplace. The irony, you say? That a white elected official would ask to bring this ceremony to Princeton, the town that Robeson himself said "was spiritually located in Dixie" and a home to Jim Crow? To the Princeton University Paul Robeson never could have attended? (Need I say that it hurt Princeton University more than it hurt Paul Robeson. They lost the benefit of a two-time all-American, a national-level debater, a Phi Beta Kappa and valedictorian level student, an actor and chorister unmatched in the collegiate world of the day, and they lost the bragging rights to Paul Robeson.) Yes, Princeton was where this ceremony should be.

Paul Robeson said Princeton not only gave him his start; it gave him his grounding. Princeton days were, he said, his "happier" days. After his mother died and his father was removed from his pulpit, the people of Princeton—not so much the white people, although he had white playmates, but the close-knit African-American community—gave him "an abiding sense of comfort and security." He had a Home in that Rock, don't you see? He was adopted, he said, by all of Negro Princeton. In his words: "Hard working people, and poor, most of them, in worldly goods—but how rich in compassion! How filled with the goodness of humanity and the spiritual steel forged by centuries of oppression! There was the honest joy of laughter in these homes, folk-wit and story, hearty appetites for life as for the nourishing greens and black-eyed peas and cornmeal bread they shared with me. Here in this hemmed-in world where home must be theater and concert hall and social center, there was a warmth of song. Songs of love and longing, songs of trials and triumph, deep-flowing rivers and rollicking brooks, hymnsong and ragtime ballad, gospels and blues, and the healing comfort to be found in the illimitable sorrow of the spirituals. Yes, I heard my people singing. ... And there was something else, too, that I remember from Princeton. Something strange, perhaps, and not easy to describe. ... People claimed to see something special about me ... that I was fated for great things." Princeton, he says, gave him what he needed to succeed, what every child needs. Yes, what every child needs, a sense of comfort and security, and a sense of possibility and expectation. We could still give that to every child, couldn't we?

He needed all the strength that was bred into him and more. Years later he was summoned before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee and he was asked, by someone like me, I regret to say, why, if he liked Russia so much on his repeated visits, why didn't he just stay there, he replied in a most imposing voice, "Because my father was a slave, and my people died to build this country, and I'm going to stay right here and have a part of it, just like you. And no fascist-minded people like you will drive me from it. Is that clear?" I suppose the Princeton and Somerville schools did not teach the Dale Carnegie method back then.

Paul Robeson began his autobiography with the sentences, "I am a Negro," and too, "I am an American." When he said that blacks should not fight the USSR, I'm sure he meant that the fight for freedom begins at home. Then, declaring him a security risk the government, our government, revoked his passport—even at a time that we were castigating China and Russia for not allowing their citizens freedom of travel. And as we castigated them for police-state tactics at the same time that we tailed Robeson, tapped his phone, opened his mail, and denied him his livelihood. Why? Out of irrational fear. Out of ill-considered patriotic fervor. Out of, yes, unexamined fear of terrorism. Paul Robeson must have scared the daylights out of America. It wasn't just white America; it was Jackie Robinson who spurned him, and the NAACP, and the leaders of the civil rights movement, and the labor leaders he had championed. Robeson said maybe his watch was fast. Explaining that he was ahead of his time is small consolation. How that must have hurt! The painful isolation, after he had broken the ground, from which a successful civil rights movement grew.

Yes, we can take satisfaction in knowing that the people here in New Jersey made Paul Robeson what he was. Then, too, we must remember we represent what brought him down, what blacklisted him, what crushed his optimism—ordinary Americans. We let it happen. We did it to ourselves.

A stamp does not make it all right. A stamp does not absolve us of our collective responsibility and regret. Too many lives were ruined by the hatred of racism and the fearful excesses of the Cold War. Still, this stamp helps a lot. This is First Class postage! This is official U.S. postage. Every time we affix one of these stamps to a letter—a stamp depicting Paul Robeson with cheerful dignity—let's draw a lesson or two. First, just as the people of Princeton once did for a boy, let's show young boys and girls that there is something special about them; that they can do great things. And second, let us remember that we as a government, we as the media, and we who comprise conventional wisdom can be wrong, painfully wrong. Let us guard against that possibility of self-deception in a skewed view of the world. The Cold War and fear of communism are past, you say? Let us remember that simplistic tests of patriotism appear from time to time in our history and in an unthinking love for our country we can crush the very greatness of America.