

Ann Hagedorn. *Savage Peace: Hope and Fear in America, 1919.* New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007. 543 pp. \$30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7432-4371-1.

Reviewed by David Bulla

Published on Jhistory (November, 2007)

Ann Hagedorn's *Savage Peace*, a study of America at an early twentieth-century crossroads, reads like a novel. Her fourth book establishes principal characters from around the nation and entwines their stories into a unified narrative. Hagedorn, a former reporter for the *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*, who has taught journalism at Northwestern and Columbia, interweaves the stories of those who were part of the nation's political and social elite, as well as those of its ordinary citizens. And journalists, including Carl Sandburg, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Ray Stannard Baker, play prominent roles in these stories. The overall effect of the book for the reader is dizzying at times, but Hagedorn creates a level of suspense that serves her larger story well.

Her book is yet another study of a single year. These works, including David McCullough's *1776* (2005) and Joseph E. Stevens's *1863: The Rebirth of a Nation* (1999), make connections to seemingly random ideas and events, a risky enterprise. However, using this structure gives her the opportunity to fashion a tapestry of those ideas and events into a unified text that speaks to the prominence of 1919. This is crucial since these single-year studies only work if the author can show how the particular year under study is a critical juncture in history, not just a series of random acts.

The theme of *Savage Peace* is failed idealism--that of President Woodrow Wilson, the nation's African American journalists, the politically un-

orthodox, and even ordinary Americans who lived in a time of fear caused by warfare, domestic spying, racism, and the rise of the Soviet Union. What makes this work of nonfiction so engrossing is that Wilson's attempt to establish a permanent peace and democracy around the world was dashed by a Congress that decided to bury its head in the sands of isolationism; at the same time, Wilson failed to counter both mob and formal (the Espionage Act) infringements on the civil rights of African Americans and political eccentrics. Congress found it convenient and pragmatic to snub Wilson's League of Nations because it did not trust the Germans. Wilson found it prudent and practical to ignore civil rights abuses because key allies in the Democratic Party were racist Southerners who avowed segregation. For the author, both cases represent regrettable moments in American history, precisely because each is an example of failed leadership in our democracy.

Among the most compelling stories in Hagedorn's study are those of black journalists who supported Wilson during World War I only to see soldiers not only fail to gain equal rights when they came home, but also to be humiliated--and even murdered--by white mobs, sometimes solely for wearing the uniform of the armed forces. Nobody embodies this experience of racial rejection better than Sgt. Henry Johnson, the first American soldier to win France's Croix de Grace, its highest

military honor. A native of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, Johnson earned the medal after he repulsed an attack by twenty-four Germans, killing four of them. After the war, a victorious nation put Johnson on display as a conquering hero, but in a St. Louis speech he detailed the prejudice that black soldiers faced from white American military men. That night, in his hotel room, Johnson received notes threatening his life, and he left town the next day. What an irony it was for black soldiers and sailors to be treated better by foreigners--the French--than by their fellow countrymen.

The best story involving black journalists in Hagedorn's book is that of Boston *Guardian* editor William M. Trotter, who tried to gain an audience with Wilson at the postwar Paris peace conference. Trotter hoped Wilson would include a race clause in the peace treaty--the addition of a fifteenth point to the president's acclaimed Fourteen Points for lasting world peace. Trotter's statement would have eliminated discrimination based on race, but Wilson would have none of it. The administration made it impossible for any black leader to obtain a visa to France for the peace conference, so Trotter, a Harvard graduate, made his way to Europe on board the SS *Yarmouth* as a cook. When he reached the shores of France, he fled on foot and tramped to Paris. There he stayed with an African American family, the Thomas Kanes. Although Wilson refused to meet him, Trotter made himself available to the French press and spoke about racism at home.

His efforts to show the world the evils of American segregation earned Trotter surveillance by the black subversion division of Military Intelligence, which conducted domestic spying on political mavericks. Trotter continued the fight for racial equality in the *Guardian* for the rest of his life. The cause of his death on his sixty-second birthday was ambiguous--possibly, it was suicide. His life and death serve as an analog to Wilson. Here was a man who failed to convince his coun-

try to live up to the ideals of democracy. Instead, he was left feeling melancholy about his failure. The same could be said of the president, who never really recovered from the stroke he suffered in the fall of 1919.

Still, Hagedorn shows that the real victory for the editors and other political outsiders in this book was the nobility of their fight for a democratic world, and that the black journalists were primed for the domestic political fight after the war. Indeed, the words of Robert S. Abbott, editor of the *Chicago Defender*, anticipated the Double V campaign in World War II. In February 1919, Abbott wrote to returning black soldiers: "You left home to make the world a safer place for democracy and your work will have been in vain if it does not make your own land a safer place for you and yours." Abbott said that the soldiers had been fighting for real democracy, where blacks would have "equal hope, equal opportunities and equal rewards with the whites. Any other sort of democracy spells failure," he wrote (quoted, p. 103). Similarly, W. E. B. DuBois, the editor of the *Crisis*, wrote that American soldiers, including black warriors, saved democracy in France and would now save it in the United States. Such a bold idea was too much for America's white racists. As James Weldon Johnson, who fought for a federal anti-lynching bill as field secretary for the NAACP, wrote in the *New York Age*: the critical question facing America was how to save "black men's bodies and white men's souls" (quoted, p. 195).

There is plenty more in Hagedorn's book for the mass communication historian, including the obstacles Carl Sandburg faced in trying to report on the Russian Revolution; the growing cynicism of Ray Stannard Baker, a journalist-turned-government-propagandist and Wilson administration insider who nonetheless recognized early on that the peace process had slipped away from the president; the trials and tribulations of attorney Harry Weinberger and his client, anarchist Mollie

Steimer, as they negotiated the Espionage Act; and Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes's deliberations on the limits of freedom of expression that led to his dissenting opinion against constraints and for the free market of ideas in *Abrams v. United States* (1919).

There are occasional missteps in Hagedorn's work. She misses an opportunity to more fully connect the suffrage movement with the larger quest for universal democracy. Black editors, for example, almost all of them male, covered the push for the Nineteenth Amendment. Those black editors often minimized the movement for women's right to vote, yet they tended to play up the achievements of black women, putting their stories and photographs on the front pages of their newspapers. Another minor nitpick is Hagedorn's over-reliance on the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* as primary sources. At the time, other Washington and New York newspapers were as prominent or even more so, and the author does refer to other New York papers when examining Holmes's dissent in *Abrams*. More of this would have provided a fuller range of understanding of this year of missed opportunity.

Overall, though, Hagedorn offers a compelling account of 1919. Much of what she narrates tends to be depressing, but there are moments of hope. For example, parallel to the troubles the black press had in presenting its case against racism and segregation was the rise of the Negro baseball leagues, the business proposition of former pitcher Rube Foster. This enterprise would not only make money for the owners and players, but would also help develop a whole generation of black sports writers. The *Chicago Defender* alone had a reporter covering each team in the league. The great irony--perhaps oddly symbolic of the entire book--is that 1919 also was the birth year of Jack Roosevelt Robinson, in Cairo, Georgia. Jackie Robinson would be the chief architect of the demise of Foster's business. He would also be a champion of equality for all America.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/jhistory>

Citation: David Bulla. Review of Hagedorn, Ann. *Savage Peace: Hope and Fear in America, 1919*. Jhistory, H-Net Reviews. November, 2007.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13816>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.