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Joe Louis, the Southern Press, and the “Fight of the Century”

Robert Drake
North Carolina A&T State University

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democracy in race relations will never be achieved until
the minds of the people are changed. The direct route
to these minds is through the great agencies
of mass communication.

L.D. Reddick, historian and civil rights activist (1944)

A number of historians have argued that the second fight between African American boxing great Joe Louis and the German fighter Max Schmeling was the “fight of the century.” Coming two years after their first fight, which Schmeling won in twelve tough rounds to give Louis his only loss, the rematch was a much-anticipated affair. However, from a modern perspective, it seems difficult to justify the fight of the century label based solely upon the fight, which was one of the shortest and most one-sided championship bouts in the history of boxing. Certainly, there must be some other explanation for its alleged infamy. Coming three and a half years before Germany declared war on the United States (occurring after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor), some of these authors have argued that the fight’s notoriety came because the world was teetering on the brink of war. As a result, they believe that the fight took on additional significance as a battle of good versus evil—Louis, representing democracy and freedom, and Schmeling, fascism and racial bondage. While it is questionable whether Louis saw himself in this light, it seems certain that Schmeling, who only a few months later would hide two Jewish children during Kristallnacht, did not.

Although the perception that war was inevitable or even that Germany was the enemy of the United States in the middle of 1938 has been challenged, these historians have based their arguments on two interrelated assumptions: (1) the fight was widely perceived by the public as one of “freedom against fascism” and (2) Joe Louis enjoyed wide enough popularity to be seen as the great American “hope.”

One example is David Margolick’s book Beyond Glory: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling, and a World on the Brink, which takes the position that the fight took on greater symbolic meaning than any other sporting event in history, affecting “both the future of race relations and the prestige of two powerful nations.” Margolick, relying largely upon quotes from sportswriters of the day, presents a unified America

Robert Drake is with North Carolina A&T State University, Greensboro, NC.
squarely behind Louis. Citing one writer from the *New York Evening Journal* and another from *Ring* magazine, the author concludes that Americans “generally liked” Louis and that he was seen as a “darn good” American.\(^4\)

Taking a similar stance, Patrick Myler calls the fight “the most politically charged event in boxing history.”\(^5\) His book *Ring of Hate: Joe Louis vs. Max Schmeling: The Fight of the Century* also stresses the racial and international implications of the fight while concluding that Louis had the backing of masses of Americans.

The world was on a direct course toward war, and the boxers found themselves reluctant pawns in the political game. The fight was seen as symbolizing the looming conflict between the United States and Germany . . . Americans put their faith in Louis to debunk the Aryan “master race” theory by thrashing Hitler’s hero.\(^6\)

Once again, Louis was the great American hope.

Lewis Erenberg’s *The Greatest Fight of Our Generation: Louis vs. Schmeling* refers to Joe Louis as someone who was seen as “an all-American hero” at the time of this fight.\(^7\) He also sees the issue of race as half-full when it came to the American press, stating that for “every derogatory image of Louis in the white press, there emerged a portrait of him as a black producer hero, a figure of common decency and fair play.”\(^8\) However, admitting to such widespread feelings of both disrespect and respect does not provide much evidence that Louis was depicted as representing all, or even most, Americans.

In making the argument that Louis represented American democracy and freedom, these authors have had to justify how Louis, an African American born into a poor Alabama sharecropping family, could come to represent America—especially the American South, where treatment of African Americans was akin to that of Jews in Germany. Once again, the evidence for the assumption that Louis symbolized democracy and freedom seems to have originated with syndicated sportswriters of the day. After all, they did witness thousands of Americans flocking to Louis’s fights and likely observed that their articles on boxing were being published by many member newspapers. However, all of Louis’s important 1930s fights occurred in Chicago or the greater New York City area and thus were reported from places that may have been more accommodating to African Americans than may have been the case elsewhere. For example, African Americans could attend Louis’s fights without being segregated, although most sat in the “cheap seats.”\(^9\) Also, national sportswriters covering Louis’s fights worked almost exclusively in the Northeast and may not have had a great deal of information on how Joe Louis was received in other areas of the country.

Therefore, it is the aim of this study to look more closely at the mainstream daily press to try to shed more light on how white Americans, in the North and West and in the Deep South, were presented the Louis vs. Schmeling fight of June 22, 1938. This content analysis begins with the premise that journalists and editors monitor their audience’s mood, values, and interests. They do this to communicate with their readers within boundaries that are acceptable to them in order to be able to continue their conversation and mutual reliance over time.\(^10\) Supporting this contention, Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, in *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion—Our Social Skin*, observed that public opinion is based upon fear and conformity rather