Cold War Stories: William Worthy, the Right to Travel, and Afro-American Reporting on the Cuban Revolution

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Abstract

In 1962, David Dyer, judge for the Southern District of Florida, convicted William Worthy of returning to the U.S. without a valid passport. Worthy, the foreign correspondent for the Baltimore Afro-American and member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee, believed that U.S. press coverage of the Cuban Revolution had been tainted by Cold War antagonisms. Worthy aimed to provide more balanced news accounts of post-Revolution Cuba. In so doing, he defied State Department regulations by secretly traveling to Cuba to study racial politics on the island. Upon his return from Cuba, he began to tour the U.S., speaking and reporting on the Revolution’s racial achievements and criticizing U.S. officials for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion. Six months later, federal authorities arrested and convicted him for returning to the U.S. without a valid passport. Worthy, the first U.S. citizen ever indicted for violating the U.S. travel ban to Cuba, charged that he was being selectively prosecuted due to his radical journalism.

In this article, I explore how Worthy challenged Cold War limitations on U.S. citizens’ right to travel. Worthy and his supporters framed their international campaign around the Fifth Amendment and Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and the Fifth Circuit eventually overturned his conviction, declaring that “inherent in the concept of citizenship...[is] a right to return.” In this article, I also demonstrate that Worthy’s efforts to domesticate human rights in the U.S. had global ramifications. The United Nations Sub-Commission on the Prevention of Discrimination and Protection of Minorities relied on Worthy’s prosecution in the Jim Crow South—a site often overlooked when examining the genealogy of international human rights norms and law—to author the landmark Study of Discrimination in Respect of the Right of Everyone to Leave any Country, Including His Own, and to Return to His Country.