**American Experience** ***Forgotten Hero: Walter White and the NAACP***

**Premieres Tuesday, February 25, 2025**

**on PBS and Streaming on PBS.org**

**New Documentary Tells the Story of NAACP Leader Walter White and Others Who Shaped America’s Most Powerful Civil Rights Organization**



*1933 photo of the architects of the NAACP legal strategy. Left to right: Walter White, executive secretary; Charles Houston, lead counsel; James G. Tyson, Leon A. Ransome and Edward P. Lovett. Credit: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division,*

*Visual Materials from the NAACP Records*

(Boston, MA) — As the story is usually told, the civil rights movement began in 1955 when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat on an Alabama bus. In fact, the stage had been set decades before, by activists of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, who braved the appalling violence and oppression of the Jim Crow era. Some of their names are familiar: W.E.B. Du Bois and Thurgood Marshall. They all played prominent roles in the NAACP, the preeminent civil rights organization of the era. But Walter White — arguably the most influential Black man in mid-century America and the leader of the NAACP from 1929 to 1955 — has been all but forgotten. ***Forgotten Hero: Walter White and the NAACP*** traces the life of this neglected civil rights hero and seeks to explain his disappearance from our history. Directed by Michelle Smawley, written and produced by Rob Rapley, and executive produced by Cameo George, ***Forgotten Hero: Walter White and the NAACP*** premieres Tuesday, February 25, 2025, 9:00-11:00 p.m. ET ([check local listings](https://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001lswnKdgoPMzgPRrwVw-vyj3_5bjd7tOQsl3tGjb-IWipGusKrY3CZSgSpIlTd8ZNfk4e7Ak8ScIlTeg6-7XzMLQNctp9G92I6SJcXaMsBCQ8ODjOQpaSilvbPGXUlIoUDOCoL4BZpOQkn4BB0nGE46dYoeFMVwQP&c=cTqMsIBK_2RGunUpQSSKNc4lJsZ9neujUUK7Dt_3zZ_h47YqRnoXNA==&ch=2qYdCUxePWhlxKtPMFcWViHzlQnfxJnLApoQzZjon6rvM4_BpF5z9A==)) on **American Experience** on PBS, [PBS.org](https://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001lswnKdgoPMzgPRrwVw-vyj3_5bjd7tOQsl3tGjb-IWipGusKrY3CZSgSpIlTd8ZNIyfbJ505IadPifVGf1KWbe9EGTG7MAmdp5D4qbjvnssOdGSaPelgWKbbeMisqMmavgn8TswC_xw=&c=cTqMsIBK_2RGunUpQSSKNc4lJsZ9neujUUK7Dt_3zZ_h47YqRnoXNA==&ch=2qYdCUxePWhlxKtPMFcWViHzlQnfxJnLApoQzZjon6rvM4_BpF5z9A==) and the [PBS app](https://r20.rs6.net/tn.jsp?f=001lswnKdgoPMzgPRrwVw-vyj3_5bjd7tOQsl3tGjb-IWipGusKrY3CZYj5rBpqQbtocXi7D16xql3iz6VV4DPys1I_5jBxmC4XHldjxzofrvTaniceJ8TjxGiuxzIlQDdCzn0O-nWN04StGCWgA4m2yqN-o5J-2yjY&c=cTqMsIBK_2RGunUpQSSKNc4lJsZ9neujUUK7Dt_3zZ_h47YqRnoXNA==&ch=2qYdCUxePWhlxKtPMFcWViHzlQnfxJnLApoQzZjon6rvM4_BpF5z9A==).

With his blond hair and blue eyes, Walter White looked white; he described himself as “an enigma, a Black man occupying a white body.”  Like virtually all light-skinned African Americans of his day, White was descended from enslaved Black women and powerful white men. He was Black and that was underscored — by law, identity, and conviction. He spent his entire adult life fighting for Black civil rights. White studied at Atlanta University, where he caught the eye of James Weldon Johnson, the leader of the recently formed National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. An integrated, multiracial organization, the stated goals of the NAACP were almost unimaginable for most Americans of the time — full political, legal, and social equality for all African Americans.

In 1918, White took a job at the NAACP’s headquarters in New York, where he was welcomed by the guide and prophet of the movement, W.E.B. Du Bois. Over time, their relationship would sour, giving rise to some of the ugliest conflicts in the organization’s history.

Within weeks of his arrival in New York, White volunteered for an extremely dangerous assignment. The NAACP’s most urgent priority in those days was to eradicate the gruesome practice of lynching - the linchpin of white supremacy. Passing as a white traveling salesman, White traveled to Estill Springs, Tennessee, where a Black man had recently been tortured and burned. He hung out at the general store, where the unsuspecting white locals filled him in on every horrifying detail. White’s account made news across the country. Over the next decade, he would go on to investigate 41 separate lynchings. His work began to change national attitudes and was a powerful weapon in the NAACP’s fight for a federal anti-lynching bill (a battle which wasn’t won until 2022).

In 1929, White succeeded James Weldon Johnson as the head of the NAACP.  In 1934, he hired Charles Hamilton Houston and 27-year-old Thurgood Marshall to launch a legal assault on Jim Crow, which Houston called “the equalization strategy.” Houston and Marshall took a camera and drove to South Carolina, documenting the condition of Black schools and white schools, gathering evidence to show that schools were separate but definitely not equal. Under White’s leadership, the courtroom campaign became a vital aspect of the freedom struggle: battling segregation in graduate and professional schools, fighting workplace discrimination, and expanding voting rights. White also broke early ground fighting for better representation in Hollywood, after seeing David O Selznick’s glorification of the slavery-era South in “Gone with the Wind.”

Walter White’s career crested during the Truman administration. He played a central role in realigning Black voters from the Party of Lincoln to the Democrats, a pivotal factor in Truman’s stunning 1948 election. Their alliance paid massive dividends, including the desegregation of the military and federal government. But there were steep downsides: the NAACP was expected to support Truman’s Cold War policies, and some began to think that White had become too comfortable with the white elite, and disconnected from the people he was supposed to represent.

Over time, Houston and Marshall’s courtroom campaign became the most riveting aspect of the NAACP’s work. As the spotlight shifted to Marshall, White grew resentful, and his critics grew louder. Tensions exploded in 1949 when Walter divorced his Black wife to marry a white South African divorcée, Poppy Cannon. Many of White’s old colleagues never spoke to him again; his own son changed his name.

White’s last years should have been a triumph. Although he held on to his post at the NAACP, he spent his final days alienated from the movement he had led for decades. By the time the NAACP celebrated its greatest victory, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, White had been reduced to a figurehead.

Walter White died of a heart attack on March 21, 1955. Eight months later, Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat. A new story was being written by a new generation, with riveting new leaders who quickly eclipsed their predecessors. But the story of the long struggle for civil rights is not complete without the courage, fortitude, flaws, and complications of Walter White and the early leaders of the NAACP.

**American Experience*****Forgotten Hero: Walter White and the NAACP*** will stream for free simultaneously with broadcast on all station-branded PBS platforms, including [PBS.org](http://pbs.org/) and the [PBS App](https://www.pbs.org/pbs-video-app/), available on iOS, Android, Roku, Apple TV, Amazon Fire TV, Android TV, Samsung Smart TV, Chromecast and VIZIO. The film will also be available for streaming with closed captioning in English and Spanish on the **American Experience**website.

**About the Participants**

**Jose Anderson** is a professor of law at the University of Baltimore.

**Karlos Hill** is a professor of African and African American Studies at the University of Oklahoma. He is the author of *Beyond The Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory*, *The Murder of Emmett Till: A Graphic History*, and *The 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre: A Photographic History*.

**Kenneth Janken** is an adjunct professor of history at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and the author of several books, including *Walter White: Mr. NAACP*.

**Adriane Lentz-Smith** is an associate professor of history at Duke University and the author of *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I.*

**David Levering Lewis** is professor emeritus of history, New York University, and author of a Pulitzer Prize-winning two-part biography of W.E.B. Du Bois.

**Kenneth Mack** is a professor of law and history at Harvard Law School and author of *Representing the Race: The Creation of the Civil Rights Lawyer.*

**Ellis Monk** is a professor of sociology at Harvard University whose research focuses on race and colorism.

**Clarissa Myrick-Harris** is a professor at Morehouse College and public historian whose research and publications focus on intersectionality and African American leadership during the Civil Rights and Black Power/Black Arts Movement.

**Rose Palmer** is Walter White’s niece.

**Claudia Phillipe** is Poppy Cannon’s daughter and Walter White’s stepdaughter.

**Randolph Stakeman** is professor emeritus at Bowdoin College.

**Patricia Sullivan** is a professor of history at the University of South Carolina and author of *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement.*

**Kidada Williams** is a professor of history at Wayne State University.

**About the Filmmakers**

**American Experience *Forgotten Hero: Walter White and the NAACP***

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| Directed byWritten and Produced byProduced byEdited by | MICHELLE SMAWLEYROB RAPLEY  EMILY HARROLD LAUREN WIMBUSH CHARNETTE “CHA” QUALLIS |

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| Executive Producer | CAMEO GEORGE |

**Michelle Smawley** **(Director)** is an award-winning director, series developer and educator. Most recently, she ran a year-long series for a statewide initiative for WNET and was responsible for launching long form and documentary series programming. She was the founding Executive Producer for TRAX, the first podcast network for preteens. Funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the network launched on PRX and earned nominations from The Webbys, The Ambies and the 2021 Peabody Awards. Smawley has worked with ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, MSNBC, PBS, NPR, Sundance, HBO, NowThis, SONY Pictures, National Geographic and many others. An adjunct professor at NYU, she has also served on the faculty of the Missouri School of Journalism and the Graduate Program in Social Documentary at the School of Visual Arts. She attended the graduate journalism program at the University of Missouri and earned a Bachelor of Arts from New York University.

**Rob Rapley** **(Writer/Producer)** is the founder of Apograph Productions. His recent **American Experience** biography of singer and civil rights icon Marian Anderson, *Voice of Freedom*, was described by *The New York Times* as **“**an insightful documentary...explores the roiling social, racial and political currents that affected Anderson's life and career.” Rapley recently won a duPont-Columbia Award for *Reconstruction: America After the Civil War*, hosted by Henry Louis Gates Jr. He has received three Emmy nominations, a Writers Guild Award and two nominations, an IDA Award, a Western Heritage Award, a Western Writers of America Award, and a CINE Special Jury Award. A classically-trained musician, Rapley was also nominated for an Emmy as a sound mixer, and has engineered Grammy-winning recordings with some of the great classical artists of our time.

**Emily Harrold** **(Producer)** is a documentary filmmaker from Orangeburg, South Carolina. Her films have screened at festivals including the Tribeca Film Festival, DOC NYC and the Telluride Film Festival. Harrold has produced numerous films for **American Experience** including *The Lie Detector, Flood in the Desert*, and *Voice of Freedom*, about singer Marian Anderson. She was part of the team behind Discovery's *Tigerland* (Sundance, 2019) and National Geographic's Ron Howard-directed *Rebuilding Paradise* (Sundance, 2020). She was also a part of DOC NYC’s 2021 40 Under 40 Class. Harrold is a member of Film Fatales, Documentary Producers Alliance, and the collective The Filmshop. She is a graduate of NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts and has a MA in Film and Media Studies from Columbia University’s School of the Arts.

**Cameo George** (**Executive Producer,** **American Experience)** is an Emmy Award-winning producer, writer and journalist with more than 20 years of experience in documentary, broadcast television and digital content production. George has produced, developed and commissioned innovative programming at CNN, NBC News and ABC News. She was the senior producer of CNN’s groundbreaking series *Black in America* and *Latino in America* and executive producer of the eight-hour PBS documentary series 16 FOR '16: THE CONTENDERS, which was also broadcast on the BBC. George joined **American Experience** from ABC News, where she was head of development for long-form projects, responsible for creating a pipeline of docuseries and feature documentary films across Walt Disney Television platforms, including ABC News, Hulu, National Geographic and Disney+. She was recently named to *The Root*’s list of 2024’s 100 Most Influential Black Americans.

**About American Experience**

For over 37 years, **American Experience** has been television’s most-watched history series, bringing to life the incredible characters and epic stories that have shaped America’s past and present. **American Experience** documentaries have been honored with every major broadcast award, including 30 Emmy Awards, five duPont-Columbia Awards and 19 George Foster Peabody Awards. PBS’s signature history series also creates original digital content that innovates new forms of storytelling to connect our collective past with the present. Cameo George is the series executive producer. **American Experience** is produced for PBS by GBH Boston. Listen to the [**American Experience** Presents podcast](https://www.wgbh.org/podcasts/american-experience-presents) on Apple, Spotify, Amazon Music and more. Visit [pbs.org/americanexperience](http://pbs.org/americanexperience) and follow us on [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/AmericanExperiencePBS/), [X](http://twitter.com/amexperiencepbs), [Instagram](https://www.instagram.com/americanexperiencepbs/), [Threads](https://www.threads.net/%40americanexperiencepbs) and [YouTube](http://youtube.com/americanexperience) to learn more.

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