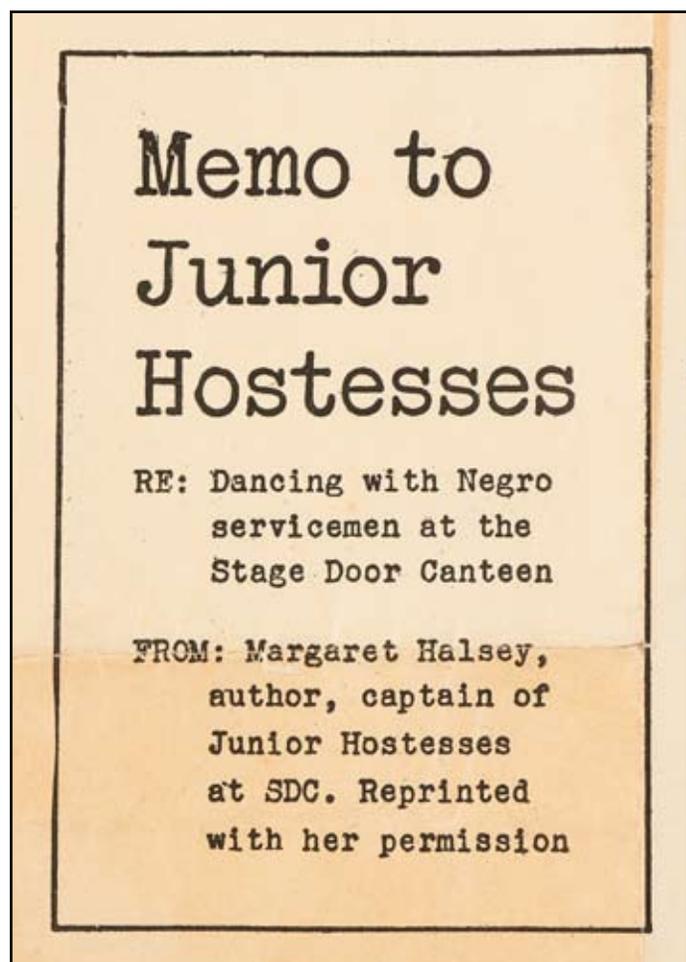


Margaret Halsey

[Broadside]: Memo to Junior Hostesses Re: Dancing with Negro Servicemen at the Stage Door Canteen

[New York?]: [1945?]



Full image featured on next page

Broadside. 11" x 14". Old folds, one section age-toned a bit unevenly, else near fine. A broadside of a memo from author Margaret Halsey, ("Reprinted with her permission") who was captain of Junior Hostesses at the Stage Door Canteen during World War Two, a club for servicemen that operated out of the 44th Street Theatre in New York City. A direct and very frank memo to white female hostess about their objections to interacting with black servicemen. In part: "Quite a few of you have asked me questions having to do with Negroes... so I think I better explain the matter in its entirety."

The Canteen's policy about Negroes is based on a quotation which runs as follows: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident. That all men are created equal...' After exploring various reasons for prejudice she delicately mentions: "Actually, I don't believe any of you are very deeply concerned with Negro intelligence. What worries you more is the fear of rape. You unconsciously, but very arrogantly, assume that no male Negro can so much as glance at you without wanting to get you with child. The truth is, that while you are an extremely attractive group of young women, there isn't one single one of you whose *that* good." She goes on at some length in a similar tone. A wonderfully blunt message that leads one to believe that messing with Ms. Halsey would be a very poor idea. Born in Yonkers, Halsey was a bestselling author and National Book Award-winner before the War. After the War she wrote *Color Blind: A White Woman Looks At the Negro* (Simon & Shuster, 1946). Although brief excerpts appeared in newspapers of the time, and the memo was referenced in books about race relations after the War, *OCLC* locates no copies of this separately printed broadside. [\[BTC#401892\]](#)

Memo to Junior Hostesses

RE: Dancing with Negro servicemen at the Stage Door Canteen

FROM: Margaret Halsey, author, captain of Junior Hostesses at SDC. Reprinted with her permission

QUITE a few of you have asked me questions recently having to do with Negroes at the Stage Door Canteen, so I think I had better explain the matter in its entirety.

The Canteen's policy about Negroes is based on a quotation which runs as follows: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal. . . ." I'm sure all of you know where that comes from.

The Canteen's policy about Negroes is also based on the 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution of the United States, in which it is specifically stated that nobody is to be denied the rights, privileges and immunities of American citizenship on account of race, creed or color.

One hears a good deal of talk, in some circles, about the Reds and long-haired radicals who want to tear down the Constitution. The Reds and long-haired radicals only *want* to tear it down. The people who deny Negroes democratic equality actually *are* tearing it down.

I know that some of you on our shift are very deeply prejudiced against accepting Negroes as your social equals. You can't be blamed for having that prejudice in the first place. It was taught to you when you were too young and helpless to be critical.

But you certainly can be blamed for hanging on to the prejudice when: (a) you are now old enough to know better; (b) you are being given, in the Canteen, a golden opportunity to come into contact with Negroes under the best possible circumstances and find out what they are really like.

Let's examine the feeling that some of you have against, for instance, dancing with Negro servicemen and see what it really amounts to.

There is no scientific basis for the notion that Negroes are inferior to white people. A scientist, given a collection of human brains pickled in alcohol, cannot tell which ones belonged to Negroes and which to white people. You can check this statement in any good reference library. Intelligence depends on the number and fineness of the convolutions in the brain. It has absolutely nothing to do with the amount of pigment in your skin. If it had, you would all be much stupider when you are sunburned.

ACTUALLY, I don't believe any of you are very deeply concerned with Negro intelligence. What worries you more is the fear of rape. You unconsciously, but very arrogantly, assume that no male Negro can so much as glance at you without wanting to get you with child. The truth is, that while you are an extremely attractive group of young women, there isn't one single one of you who's *that* good.

Negro males react to you no more and no less than white males. As women, you know in your hearts that men of any description respond to you pretty much as you intend them to respond. This is especially true in the Canteen, which has hardly any points of resemblance at all to a lonely, moonlit shrubbery.

The real basis of prejudice against Negroes is economic and historical, not sexual or psychological. The people who talk about "keeping the niggers in their place" never admit this, because it doesn't show them in an entirely favorable light. Such people prefer to fall back on more melodramatic arguments, usually (1) the honor of their women and (2) the danger of a Negro revolt. Neither of these two arguments stands up very well under close inspection. . . .

The real reason back of the refusal of some of you to mingle with Negroes at the Canteen isn't nearly as romantic and dramatic as you like to think it is. The real reason has nothing to do with rape, seduction and risings in the night. The real reason can be summed up in two extremely unromantic little words: Cheap labor.

As long as you treat Negroes as sub-humans, you don't have to pay them so much. When you refuse to dance with Negro servicemen at the Canteen, you are neither protecting your honor nor making sure that white Southerners won't have their homes burned down around their ears. All you are doing is making it possible for employers all over the country to get Negroes to work for them for less money than those employers would have to pay you.

Do you find that romantic?

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YOU don't live in a romantic age. You live in a machine age, and it's getting more machinery every day. In the old days, large groups of people could live out their entire lives without ever finding out what other large groups of people were doing. That is no longer possible. Unless you can de-invent the aeroplane and cause it to fall into general disuse, you are going to spend an increasing amount of your time mingling with Negroes, Russians, Chinamen, Patagonians and all sorts of hitherto unfamiliar people this side of accredited lepers. You might as well get used to it here and now, on Sunday nights at the Canteen. It will save you a lot of trouble later on.

In our world we have radios, telephones, bath-tubs, air-cooling, vitamin pills and sulfa drugs, but we no longer have any group privacy. We can no longer wrap ourselves up in the comforting notion that we are better than other sorts of people. Our own inventions drop these other sorts of people right into our



PHOTO BY IRVING HABERMAN

A sailor, a soldier and two Canteen hostesses.



PHOTO BY SYDNEY HUT

A couple of sergeants at the Stage Door Canteen.

laps, and we either have to get along with them or watch our inventions—along with a lot of other things we hold dear—go crashing into the dust in a series of obliterating wars.

There's only one possible basis for getting along with other sorts of people, and that basis is equality. Real, genuine, three-ply, copper-bottomed equality. If we have any secret yearning to think of ourselves as a Master Race, we have only to pick up a newspaper to see that nobody is giving odds on Master Races these days.

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ONE word of warning before I close. Don't be surprised if you find some of the Negro servicemen sullen and unresponsive and some of them aggressive and too responsive. The war has put the Negroes in a hell of a spot. We need them in the war effort, so we've been forced to give them more equality than we were ever willing to concede before. They aren't used to it, and neither are we. There are bound to be awkwardnesses and mistakes on both sides. If there are, remember that they are inevitable and take them in your stride.

Try to be a little imaginative and put yourself in the Negro's place. When you go into the Canteen, nothing worse can happen to you than getting tired or being bored.

When a Negro goes into the Canteen, he has no reason to suppose he won't be snubbed by one of the girls on our shift or openly insulted by a Southern soldier whose "superiority" has not been noticeably enhanced by rye with beer chasers.

Naturally, the Negroes are nervous and very possibly may not behave with Chesterfieldian calm. You wouldn't either, under the same circumstances.

The main thing to remember is this: The Negroes aren't under any obligation to behave better than we do. They didn't come to this country because they wanted to. We brought them here in chains. They didn't write the Declaration of Independence or the Constitution. We wrote those documents, and if we now wave them in the Negroes' faces and say, "Ha-hal Practical joke!" we must expect to meet the customary fate of practical jokers.

We kept the Negroes in official slavery until 1864 and we've kept them in unofficial slavery ever since. If you meet a Negro serviceman at the Canteen whose conduct doesn't come up to your delicate and exacting standards of behavior, just don't forget this one thing—whatever he is, you made him that way.

As a matter of fact, you meet plenty of white servicemen whose conduct fails to enthral. Few outsiders realize, but all of us know, that being a Junior Hostess and entertaining unselected strangers for three-and-a-half-hours is difficult at best. You only make it more difficult when you artificially set aside a portion of these strangers as targets for unreasonable, unscientific and undemocratic emotion. If you'd just relax and keep your pores open, there wouldn't be any "Negro problem."