Democracy Dies in Darkness

MLB

MLB's integration struggle started with Jackie Robinson. It didn't end there.

November 13, 2022 More than **3 years ago**

By Frederic J. Frommer

Major League Baseball recently wrapped up its season-long celebration of the 75th anniversary of Jackie Robinson breaking the color barrier, beginning with "Hamilton" star Leslie Odom Jr. narrating a video tribute to Robinson and ending with a nationally televised World Series promotion.

But if the high-profile commemoration gave the impression baseball solved its integration problem 75 years ago, history provides a much more complicated story. After Robinson's debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers on April 15, 1947, progress was haltingly slow across the sport.

Two other ballclubs integrated that year — the Cleveland Indians and St. Louis Browns. But over the next five years, just three more teams — the New York Giants, Boston Braves and Chicago White Sox — followed suit. And Robinson was not shy about calling out the holdouts, beginning with the New York Yankees.

On Nov. 30, 1952, about two months after the Yankees beat the Dodgers in a seven-game World Series, Robinson appeared on the NBC News show, “Youth Wants to Know.” A boy asked Robinson whether he believed there was prejudice, and he replied, “Yes,” according to the New York Times. Explaining he was referring to the club executives and not the players, Robinson said, “I think the members of the Yankees team are fine sportsmen and wonderful gentleman, but there isn’t a single Negro on the team now, and there are very few in the entire Yankee farm system.”

“It seems to me,” he elaborated in a follow-up interview with the Times, “the Yankees front office has used racial prejudice in its dealings with Negro ball players.”

Yankees vice president George M. Weiss claimed in an interview with the Associated Press that wasn’t the case.

“Our attitude always has been that when a Negro comes along who can play good enough ball to win a place on the Yankees we will be glad to have him but not just for exploitation,” Weiss said.

Some sportswriters defended the Yankees. In a 1955 Times sports column, Arthur Daley wrote:

“The charge has been leveled against the New York Yankees that they have been prejudiced against Negroes. It has been made mostly by irresponsible persons who point to the fact that the Bombers have never had one on their squad. It also has been made by the sensitive and crusading Jackie Robinson.”

Daley said he “never believed a word of it. The men in the Yankee front office have stubbornly refused to be panicked into hiring a Negro just because he was a Negro.”

But Roger Kahn would recount in his 1972 baseball classic “The Boys of Summer” that the real reason was in fact prejudice as Robinson had suspected. Kahn wrote that a high-ranking Yankees executive told him at the 1952 World Series that he would never allow a Black player to wear a Yankees uniform. “We don’t want that sort of crowd,” the executive said after three martinis, according to Kahn. “It would offend boxholders from Westchester to have to sit with” Black people, using the n-word.

‘Subversive persons came to Washington’

By 1952, 10 of the sport's 16 teams had yet to feature a Black player on their major league roster, but the track record was better in New York. The city was home to three teams at the time, and the Yankees were the only one that remained all White. The Giants had integrated in 1949 with two players — Hank Thompson and future Hall of Famer Monte Irvin (although Thompson made his MLB debut two years earlier with the Browns). Willie Mays joined the team in 1951.

Publicly, some owners would use the same justification Weiss did.

Writing in a 1952 Sporting News retrospective, Washington Senators owner Clark Griffith complained that a few years earlier "subversive persons came to Washington from New York, and picketed our ballpark. I was accused of discrimination against Negro players."

"I stand ready, and eager, to place Negro players on our Washington club," Griffith wrote. "But they must rate the jobs on the basis of ability, and not merely because they happen to be Negroes. I will not sign a Negro for the Washington club merely to satisfy subversive persons. I would welcome a Negro on the Senators if he rated the distinction, if he belonged among major-league players."

The Yankees could at least claim they were fielding a great team despite their refusal to integrate the roster. The Senators could not. They hadn't won a pennant since 1933 and often finished at or near the bottom of the American League standings.

Momentum to fully integrate baseball didn't build until the mid-1950s. In 1954, the Senators finally put a Black player on the roster, outfielder Carlos Paula, making them one of four teams to integrate that year. In 1955, eight years after their crosstown rivals had done so in Brooklyn — and a year after the Supreme Court ruled that segregated schools were unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education* — the Yankees debuted their first Black player, catcher Elston Howard. His first game came in the home opener of the Boston Red Sox, where Fenway fans, still waiting for their own team to have a Black player, gave him a rousing welcome.

"This is the first time I have ever been in Boston, and the people applauded me like that," Howard said after the game. "It was real nice."

The Yankees were the 13th team to integrate. This chart indicates when each of the 16 teams active in 1947 finally integrated.

TEAM	PLAYER	YEAR
Cleveland Indians	Larry Doby	1947
St. Louis Browns	Hank Thompson	1947
New York Giants	Hank Thompson, Monte Irvin	1949
Boston Braves	Sam Jethroe	1950
Chicago White Sox	Minnie Minoso	1951
Philadelphia Athletics	Bob Trice	1953
Chicago Cubs	Ernie Banks	1953
St. Louis Cardinals	Tom Alston	1954
Pittsburgh Pirates	Curt Roberts	1954
Cincinnati Reds	Chuck Harmon, Nino Escalera	1954
Washington Senators	Carlos Paula	1954
New York Yankees	Elston Howard	1955
Philadelphia Phillies	John Kennedy	1957

TEAM	PLAYER	YEAR
Detroit Tigers	Ozzie Virgil	1958
Boston Red Sox	Pumpsie Green	1959

The last holdouts

Robinson retired after the 1956 season — nine years after his debut — and strikingly, there were still three teams that had yet to employ a Black player: the Philadelphia Phillies, Detroit Tigers and Red Sox. Again, Robinson challenged the status quo.

“I can’t understand why 13 major league clubs have Negro players and the other three clubs can’t come up with any. I don’t know if it’s their scouting systems or what,” Robinson told Boston reporters in February 1957, following a breakfast with Mayor John B. Hynes to launch Robinson’s local campaign for the NAACP’s freedom fund drive.

When told at the news conference the Red Sox had two players on their San Francisco farm club, Robinson replied: “That doesn’t mean a thing. They don’t have any on the Red Sox roster.”

Rick Swaine, author of "The Integration of Major League Baseball: A Team by Team History," said there was a simple explanation for the slow progress by most teams.

"I don't think they wanted to hire Black people. It was largely racism," Swaine said in a telephone interview. "They actually thought Blacks were inferior players, even though they had proven to be as good if not better than the White players. And they were cheaper."

Around this time, Phillies owner Robert Carpenter trotted out the same rationale for his all-White team that the Yankees and Senators had used. "I'm not opposed to Negro players. But I'm not going to hire a player of any color or nationality just to have him on the team," he said, according to the "The Phillies Encyclopedia" by Rich Westcott and Frank Bilovsky.

The Phillies became the last National League team to integrate in 1957, when 30-year-old John Kennedy came into the game as a pinch runner. His career consisted of two at-bats across five games.

The Tigers were next, bringing up infielder Ozzie Virgil from the minors in 1958. Virgil, who already had played two seasons for the Giants, was also the first Dominican player in the majors. His Detroit debut followed a local boycott campaign that pressured the Tigers to integrate. And it came six years after the death of team owner Walter O. Briggs, whom Black sportswriter Wendell Smith described as "Oh so very prejudiced. He's the major league combination of Simon Legree and Adolf Hitler." (Legree was the villain in Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin.")

Briggs's great-grandson, Harvey Briggs, wrote a 2017 opinion piece in the Detroit Free Press condemning the late owner as a racist.

The Red Sox were the final holdouts. Back in 1945, under local political pressure, they had given a tryout to Robinson, along with two other Black players, but Robinson said years later he knew it was a sham and that he would never hear from the team.

The Red Sox finally integrated in July 1959 with infielder Pumpsie Green but not without attracting criticism over how they treated him. Boston sent Green down to the minors before the season even though he hit .327 in spring training.

"The Red Sox won no prizes this spring for the way they treated Pumpsie Green," Boston Globe columnist Harold Kaese wrote.

Kaese noted that Green spent half of spring training living alone in a motel on the outskirts of Phoenix, 10 miles away from where the rest of the team lived in Scottsdale, Ariz., because the "exclusive" Scottsdale hotels wouldn't let him stay at their establishments. "The Red Sox should not have lived in Scottsdale themselves under such conditions," he wrote.

Keeping up the pressure

Robinson, meanwhile, would continue to press baseball on its hiring practices. When MLB honored him at the 1972 World Series to commemorate the 25th anniversary of his debut, Robinson — just nine days before his death at 53 — used the occasion to urge a major league team to hire the sport's first Black manager.

At the time, Dusty Baker had just finished his first full season as a player. A half-century later, Baker this month became the third Black manager to win a World Series when his Houston Astros beat the Phillies. (The first two were Cito Gaston of the Toronto Blue Jays and Dave Roberts of the Los Angeles Dodgers.)

Baker has talked about growing up in Southern California and idolizing Robinson, whose No. 42 is worn across baseball on April 15 to commemorate his debut.

"I've kept every Jackie Robinson Day jersey that we've had," Baker said in April. "It means a lot to me. I think of my dad a lot on this day.

"All the time I was growing up as a kid, my dad would always remind me when I would get in a scrap or scuffle or something, especially like a racial scuffle, my dad would also tell me to think about what Jackie would do."

Democracy Dies in Darkness

Major League Baseball

Jackie Robinson's last plea to MLB: 'Wake up' and hire Black managers

April 14, 2022 More than **3 years ago**

By Frederic J. Frommer

MLB this week will mark the 75th anniversary of Jackie Robinson's major league debut with typical pomp: anniversary patches and players wearing Robinson's number in Dodger blue, a new tribute video and a campaign for mayors across the country to "tip their caps" to the trailblazer. But if Robinson's debut as a player is widely celebrated, his frustrations with baseball's underwhelming Black hiring practices are less noted.

A quarter-century after he brokebaseball's color barrier, Robinson was frustrated that the sport still hadn't hired a Black manager. And in what turned out to be his dying wish, Robinson used an appearance on baseball's biggest stage to urge a team to break *that* barrier.

On Oct. 15, 1972, before Game 2 of the World Series between the Oakland Athletics and Cincinnati Reds, MLB honored Robinson on the field to commemorate the 25th anniversary of his historic 1947 major league debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers. The event included a tribute from President Richard M. Nixon.

“I am extremely proud and pleased to be here this afternoon,” Robinson said, “but must admit I am going to be tremendously more pleased and more proud when I look at that third base coaching line one day and see a Black face managing in baseball.” Suffering from diabetes and blind in one eye, Robinson would die just nine days later, at 53.

Two years passed before baseball fulfilled Robinson’s wish. In October 1974, on the eve of the baseball playoffs, the Cleveland Indians named Frank Robinson the sport’s first Black manager.

“I thank the Lord that Jackie Robinson was the man he was in that position,” Frank Robinson said at a news conference. “If he wasn’t, it would have set back the whole idea of signing more Black players. The one wish I could have is that Jackie Robinson could be here today to see this happen.”

And as MLB celebrates this Jackie Robinson Day, Black managers remain woefully underrepresented. Just two of the sport's 30 managers — Dusty Baker of the Houston Astros and Dave Roberts of the Los Angeles Dodgers — are Black.

Jackie Robinson had been waging a campaign for a Black manager for years and often in more pointed language than his polite plea at the 1972 World Series. Earlier that year, he told the Los Angeles Times that baseball owners "are still wallowing around in the 19th Century, believing that Blacks and Whites cannot work together if the Black guy is a manager or if the Black guy is in the front office."

In a 1965 column in the Chicago Defender, a Black newspaper, he responded to a prediction by columnist Walter Winchell that the New York Mets would make him the sport's first Black manager in 1967.

"I wrote a letter to Mr. Winchell expressing my thanks for this kind and — for me — fantastically optimistic thought," Robinson wrote. "I believe it is extremely optimistic — as I said in my note — because I am not convinced that baseball is ready to allow Negro players or ex-players to enter the executive suite. In fact, I feel that there is as much resistance on the part of the top brass of baseball to the idea of letting Negroes get to the top as there was in the early forties to allowing Negroes to play."

He wrote that baseball owners are willing to “exploit the talent of Negro and other colored players,” but after their playing careers are over, they have nowhere to go. “Because the owners don’t have the courage or decency to think in terms of the contributions these players have made to their fortunes, they just let them go,” Robinson wrote.

In a 1968 column in the same publication, he lamented that baseball didn’t have anyone like Branch Rickey, the Brooklyn Dodgers president who had signed him back in the 1940s.

“I have yet to meet a white owner brave enough to hire a Negro manager,” Robinson wrote. “I guess when God made Branch Rickey, some devil sneaked in and broke the mold.”

The following year, he refused an invitation to participate in a Yankees old-timers game in protest of the lack of hiring progress, citing “my pride in my blackness.”

In his 1972 autobiography, “I Never Had It Made,” Robinson recalled how he started to think about a post-baseball career in 1954, when he was 35 and reaching the end of his prime. But he realized the chances of getting a job as manager or in the front office were slim.

“Had I been easy-going, willing to be meek and humble, I might have had a chance,” he wrote. “But in fact this has not changed much even today. There are many capable black athletes in the game who could contribute greatly as managers or in other positions of responsibility but it just isn’t happening.”

Responding to his own question of why there weren't any Black managers, he wrote, "I say that the answer is discrimination, bigotry, and racial prejudice on the part of the same kind of men who bitterly fought Branch Rickey and who do not want to see black men in power."

Even though Robinson didn't live long enough to see the first Black manager, he did discuss Frank Robinson as a potential candidate with the Dodgers' then-34-year-old president, Peter O'Malley. "I told Peter I was disturbed the way baseball treated Black players after they were through with the diamond," Robinson told the Sporting News in June 1972, just a few months before he died.

But Robinson also said he was impressed with the young executive's attitude, relaying that O'Malley "said he felt Frank Robinson has tremendous ability and that the club also recognizes the talents of Maury Wills and Jim Gilliam."

Had things gone a bit differently in the 1960s, the Washington Senators could have been the first team to hire a Black manager. As New York Times columnist Red Smith reported in 1974, Bill Veeck thought he had a deal to buy the Senators in 1967 and planned to hire as manager Elston Howard, who had been the New York Yankees' first Black player. But the deal fell through when Senators board chairman James M. Johnston died.

"Ellie would have been perfect for two reasons," Veeck, a former and future team owner, told Smith. "One, it was Washington with that big black population, and two, the club was so lousy nobody could blame him."

When the Indians hired Frank Robinson, he was taking over a pretty lousy team, too, coming off six straight losing seasons. The Indians had acquired Robinson, 39, a star player at the end of his career, in a trade the previous month, and they named him player-manager after the season.

At the introductory news conference, Cleveland General Manager Phil Seghi read a telegram from President Gerald Ford, calling Robinson's selection "welcome news for baseball fans across the nation" and a "tribute to you personally, to your athletic skills and to your unsurpassed leadership."

"We got something done that we should have done before," said Commissioner Bowie Kuhn, who had been on the field with Jackie Robinson at the 25th anniversary event.

“The only reason I’m the first Black manager is that I was born Black,” Frank Robinson said. “That’s the color I am. I’m not a superman, I’m not a miracle worker. Your ballplayers determine how good a team you have.”

The next year, Robinson seemed like Superman on Opening Day, hitting a home run in his first at-bat and winning his first game as manager, 5-3, over the Yankees in front of a home crowd of 56,000 that gave him two standing ovations. In a striking coincidence, the Dodgers had won Jackie Robinson’s first game by the same score. Before the Indians’ opener, Jackie Robinson’s widow, Rachel Robinson, threw out the first pitch — 2½ years after her husband had thrown out the first pitch at his 1972 World Series tribute.

The Indians improved a bit in Frank Robinson’s first year, finishing 79-80 in 1975. The following year, he led the team to its first winning season since 1968 (81-78), but the Indians fired him two months into the 1977 season after a 26-31 start. The dismissal left the sport again without a Black manager.

Robinson went on to manage the San Francisco Giants, Baltimore Orioles and the Montreal Expos/Washington Nationals. In Baltimore, Robinson was named American League manager of the year in 1989 a year after the team started the season with a record 21 straight losses.

“The day of the black manager is coming, but only because it is inevitable,” Jackie Robinson wrote in his autobiography. “It will get here when an owner finally realizes that the argument that white players will not accept advice and orders from a black is phony.”

He expressed admiration for Bill Russell, who became the NBA’s first Black coach when he took the Boston Celtics job in 1966.

“Baseball had better wake up,” Robinson wrote. “You can’t keep taking all and giving practically nothing back.”

POLITICO

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HISTORY DEPT.

Kennedy and Nixon Both Wooed Jackie Robinson. Guess Who Won.

The baseball legend was courted by both presidential candidates. His choice would torment him for years.

Then-Vice President Richard Nixon shakes hands with Jackie Robinson in Plainfield, N.J. on Oct. 4, 1960, where Nixon was campaigning. | Henry Griffin/AP Photo

By FREDERIC J. FROMMER

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In the summer of 1960, Jackie Robinson was one of the most prominent ex-athletes in America. He had retired after the 1956 season but was still hugely popular, having broken baseball's color barrier 13 years earlier. And he had a decision to make: Who was he going to back in the presidential election that fall?

Robinson's endorsement was so valuable that both John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon personally courted him. And in turn, the baseball icon vetted each candidate, hard. As the election approached, he met with both men on the same day, a kind of job interview for his support.

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AD

Robinson was an active supporter of the civil rights movement, and most Black Americans backed Kennedy. But Robinson had signaled early in 1960 that Democrats shouldn't take Blacks' support for granted. While his first choice for president had been a Democrat, civil rights champion Hubert Humphrey, Robinson made it clear that he was intrigued by Nixon as well.

"Though the Democratic nominee is still undetermined at this point, it would be folly to underestimate the impression Nixon's generally good civil rights record has made among Negroes," Robinson wrote in a column published in the *Chicago Defender*, a Black newspaper, in January 1960. "I've been following Nixon's career for some time now, and I don't mind admitting that generally I've liked what I've seen and heard."

Robinson added that while Nixon's record wasn't as good as Humphrey's, it was still "very attractive" compared to other Democratic candidates. "Many people whom I've talked with, whose first concern is civil rights, would not hesitate to support Vice President Nixon."

Robinson recognized that liberals disliked Nixon for how he had trashed his Democratic opponent, Helen Gahagan Douglas, in his victorious 1950 Senate election. And, as he acknowledged in his autobiography, *I Never Had It Made*, "there was a great deal of suspicion in the black community about Nixon." But he defended the vice president, writing that "in the years he's been prominent in national affairs, Mr. Nixon has grown more than any other person presently in political life."

At the time, the parties were not as ideologically uniform as they are today — there were liberal Republicans and Democratic segregationists. And Robinson wasn't ready to commit to Democrats if they didn't nominate Humphrey, which they didn't, leaving Robinson with a tough choice: Pick an untested Democrat or openly flout the preference of the Black community and support the Republican.

Robinson joined a picket line in Cleveland, Ohio, to protest discrimination against Black people at southern lunch counters in 1960. | AP Photo

So, a few weeks before the mid-July Democratic National Convention, Robinson had his doubleheader of meetings with Nixon and Kennedy.

In Nixon's office, the vice president "said all the right things," Robinson recalled in his autobiography. However, he was put off when he heard Nixon take a call and say, "No, well, I can't do that. I'm tired of pulling his chestnuts out of this fire. He'll have to work his own way out of this one." After hanging up, Nixon told Robinson he had been talking about President Dwight D. Eisenhower. "It sounded as if the Vice President wanted me to disassociate him from Eisenhower since he knew that blacks, in the main, didn't like Ike," Robinson wrote. "It had the feel of a cheap trick."

But he had a much worse impression of Kennedy, whom he met with at a private home in Washington later that day.

"My very first reaction to the Senator was one of doubt because he couldn't or wouldn't look me straight in the eye," Robinson recalled, and he wound up writing a letter to JFK suggesting he do so in the future.

"My second reaction, much more substantial, was that this was a man who had served in the Senate and wanted to be President but who knew little or nothing about black problems and sensibilities. He himself admitted a lack of any depth of understanding about black people … I was appalled that he could be so ignorant of our situation and be bidding for the highest office in the land."

That did it. Jackie Robinson chose Richard Nixon.

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He told the leaders at Washington's African Methodist Church that he asked the same questions of both candidates, and while Nixon gave straightforward answers, "I had to challenge Kennedy six times."

Robinson's decision to support Nixon was controversial. It earned him the enmity of some Black leaders, including Malcolm X, but Robinson didn't waver. Later, he would even support another Republican for president, moderate Nelson Rockefeller.

"That was a pretty gutsy thing for him to do, considering the entire black establishment was behind John F. Kennedy, but Jackie Robinson had unique experience in breaking through in the white world," recalled William Safire, a young Nixon aide at the time. "The athlete with the greatest positive influence on black-white relations since the boxer Joe Louis was not the sort to flinch at being called an Uncle Tom for supporting a Republican."

It was also a decision Robinson came to regret.

In the coming years, he became disillusioned not just with Nixon, but with the Republican Party. The GOP had moved steadily to the right through the turbulent 1960s, embracing a strategy of pandering to Southern whites that threatened civil rights gains spearheaded by the Democrats. When Nixon sought the presidency again eight years later, Robinson denounced him in a column headlined, "Nixon Candidacy Imperils America." Robinson would die in 1972, half a century before the reactionary forces he saw emerging ultimately came to dominate the GOP.

The relationship between Nixon and Robinson dated back to 1952, when Robinson was a star player in his prime and Nixon was a U.S. senator running as Eisenhower's vice presidential running mate, on their way to winning the White House.

Nixon was a huge sports fan and something of a fanboy, and had a hard time curbing his enthusiasm when he met Robinson at that year's Republican National Convention in Chicago. According to Harrison McCall, president of the California Republican Assembly, who introduced the two men, Nixon told Robinson about first seeing him compete in a UCLA football game in 1939 — and about a specific play that stood out all these years later.

"I said to Nixon as we walked away that, while Robinson had undoubtedly met a lot of notables in his career, nevertheless I was sure there was one person he would never forget," McCall said.

Nixon also watched Robinson play for the Brooklyn Dodgers at Ebbets Field, including the World Series that fall, which the New York Yankees won in seven games. The two men were around the same age — Nixon was born six years earlier, in 1913 — and they both grew up in California, although under far different circumstances.

Then-Sen. Nixon cheers on the Brooklyn Dodgers during game five of the 1952 World Series at Yankee Stadium, with Robinson (42, bottom right) waiting to bat. | AP Photo

By 1957, a year after Robinson retired, he was praising Nixon for a speech in Ethiopia in which the vice president declared that the U.S. will never be satisfied until all Americans have equal opportunity. “In this endeavor,” Robinson wrote in one of many letters to Nixon, “you have my best wishes and steadfast cooperation.”

“Dear Jackie,” Nixon replied. “As you can imagine, there were a number of letters on my desk when I returned to the office today after an absence of three weeks. I can assure you, however, that there were none which meant more to me than your thoughtful letter of March 19.” He called it a “privilege” to be working with Robinson “to achieve the important objective of guaranteeing equal opportunity for all Americans, and your expression of approval will be a constant source of strength and encouragement to me.”

So Nixon had built up a groundswell of goodwill with Robinson in the years leading up to the 1960 election. But he soon squandered it.

A key incident took place in October 1960, when Martin Luther King Jr. was jailed in Georgia. Nixon sat on his hands while the Kennedy campaign acted decisively. JFK called King's wife, Coretta, to express support, and worked behind the scenes to press for King's release. After he was freed, King publicly thanked JFK for his role and pointedly said he hadn't heard from Nixon.

At the Nixon campaign, Robinson had pushed for a robust response from his candidate.

"He has to do this," Robinson said at the time, according to a 1987 Safire column in the *New York Times*. "He has to call Martin right now, today. I have the number of the jail." Safire said he brought Robinson to the campaign manager, who then escorted him to see Nixon.

"Ten minutes later, he came out, tears of frustration in his eyes," Safire wrote. "'He thinks calling Martin would be 'grandstanding,' Robinson reported. 'Nixon doesn't deserve to win.'"


RING BELL

Martin Luther King was jailed in Georgia in 1960 (top), and Nixon refused to call King or push for his release. Robinson began to have doubts about Nixon after his inaction, but continued to support him for president. | AP Photos

In his autobiography, Robinson recalled: “I was in the behind-the-scenes struggle to persuade Dick Nixon to express his concern for Dr. King, but apparently his most trusted advisors were counseling him not to rock the racial boat. Add to this fact that Mr. Nixon refused to campaign in Harlem as his opponent did, and it is easy to understand why blacks overwhelmingly voted for Kennedy.”

Despite his anger with Nixon, Robinson resisted entreaties from his wife and friends to switch sides.

“It’s hard to explain why I stuck, disillusioned as I was,” he wrote. “It had something to do with stubbornness about continuing to want to believe in people even when everything indicates that they are no longer worthy of support.” He said he clung to the hope that Nixon would follow through on what he said at their meeting once the pressure of the campaign was over.

Nixon lost and Robinson began to warm to President Kennedy after initially calling him out for a lack of progress on civil rights. Following Kennedy’s assassination, Robinson still supported a Republican, albeit a moderate one, for president in 1964 — Rockefeller, the New York governor — but this time with his eyes a bit more open.

“I wasn’t about to be taken in instantly by the Nelson Rockefeller charm,” Robinson said. “After all, Richard Nixon had turned the charm on me too (although his is a bit more brittle compared with Rockefeller’s) and look how that had worked out.”

And Robinson made a distinction between Rockefeller and the rest of the GOP: “I was not as sold on the Republican party as I was on the governor. Every chance I got, while I was campaigning, I said plainly what I thought of the right-wing Republicans and the harm they were doing.”

Around this time, Robinson was also calling out Black militants such as Malcolm X, including in a November 1963 *Chicago Defender* column. Malcolm X replied in a Dec. 7 column in the same publication, addressed to "Dear Good Friend, Jackie Roosevelt Robinson":

Aren't you the same ex-baseball player who tried to "mislead" Negroes in Nixon's camp during the last presidential election? Evidently, you were the only Negro who voted for Nixon, because according to the polls taken afterward, very few Negroes were dumb enough to follow your "mislead." … You never give up. You are now trying to lead Negroes into Nelson Rockefeller's camp.

Robinson went to the '64 Republican National Convention in San Francisco as a special delegate, which he called "one of the most unforgettable and frightening experiences of my life." Those were particularly striking words from a man who had endured death threats, hate mail and other abuse after debuting with the Dodgers in 1947.

Boston Red Sox star Ted Williams (right) supported Nixon in the 1960 presidential election ahead of then-Massachusetts Senator John F. Kennedy. Other big-name players, like Stan Musial of the St. Louis Cardinals (left), backed JFK. | AP Photo

"A new breed of Republican had taken over the GOP," he wrote. "As I watched this steamroller operation in San Francisco, I had a better understanding of how it must have felt to be a Jew in Hitler's Germany."

When he cheered on his candidate — shouting "'C'mon, Rocky!'" — an angry Alabama delegate turned "menacingly" toward him, but the man's wife held him back. Robinson, who early in his career was forced to turn the other check in the face of white infielders spiking him and white pitchers throwing at his head, had no such restraints now: "'Turn him loose, lady, turn him loose!' I

shouted. I was ready for him. I wanted him badly, but luckily for him he obeyed his wife."

The Republicans nominated archconservative Arizona Sen. Barry Goldwater, who had voted against the 1964 Civil Rights Act. He'd also written off the Black vote, saying, "We're not going to get the Negro vote as a bloc in 1964 or 1968, so we ought to go hunting where the ducks are." Robinson denounced him as a bigot and joined "Republicans for Johnson" — working to elect Democratic President Lyndon B. Johnson, who won in a landslide.

In 1966, Robinson went to work for Rockefeller as a special assistant to the governor for community affairs, then backed him again in the 1968 presidential election, when Nixon staged a comeback. California Gov. Ronald Reagan challenged both candidates from the right, and when Robinson heard about reports of a possible Rockefeller-Reagan ticket to block Nixon, he told the New York governor he could never support that.

With a laugh, Rockefeller replied: "You should have heard the hard time I had explaining *you* to Reagan."

After Republicans nominated Nixon for president, Robinson said he realized that the party didn't care about him or his people.

"The Republican Party has told the black man to go to hell. I offer to them a similar invitation," Robinson wrote in his "Nixon Candidacy Imperils America" column, published by the *Chicago Defender* in 1968.

Delegates hold up signs at the Republican National Convention after Nixon won the GOP nomination for president in Miami, Fla. on Aug. 8, 1968. | AP Photo

Still just 49, Robinson suffered a heart attack that year, and skipped the GOP convention on doctor's orders — which he said was for the best.

"It was a white folks affair and the once Grand Old Party's new caretakers, under Richard Nixon, leaned over backwards to give Dixie some Southern comfort," Robinson wrote, calling the party "insensitive and stupid" for choosing Nixon over Rockefeller.

"They deserved the man they got — a two-time loser, an adjustable man with a convertible conscience — Richard Nixon."

Robinson quit his job with the Rockefeller administration and endorsed the Democratic presidential candidate, Humphrey, by now LBJ's vice president. At a joint appearance in Harlem, a small group of African Americans heckled both

men, one yelling "that Uncle Tom" Robinson should leave along with Humphrey.

This time, Nixon won in a close election as the Democratic Party splintered.

Even after turning away from Nixon, Robinson continued to correspond with him. In a 1970 letter republished in his autobiography, Robinson criticized the president for selecting "enemies" of the Black community as his top advisers. He singled out Sen. Strom Thurmond, the South Carolina Republican who had run for president in 1948 as a "Dixiecrat" and had played a key role at the '68 GOP convention; Attorney General John Mitchell; and Vice President Spiro Agnew.

"You would not support known anti-Semites to placate Jewish feelings. Why appoint known segregationists to deal with black problems?" he asked Nixon.

Nixon replied in an anodyne note thanking Robinson for his "thoughtful letter" — the same phrase he had used in responding to the former ballplayer in 1957. "All I can hope," the president wrote, "is that by my acts and those of the men who I have chosen to help set polices, I can earn the respect and the friendship of Black America."

In another letter, Robinson told Nixon he could never support his reelection as long as Agnew was on the ticket: "I feel so strongly about his being anti-black and anti-progressive in race relations that I dread the fact of anything happening to you and Mr. Agnew becoming President of the United States."

(Of course, Nixon did wind up resigning in the wake of the Watergate scandal, but Agnew resigned before that, sparing the nation a President Agnew.)

Perhaps no sentiment better captured Robinson's disillusionment with Nixon than his March 21, 1972, letter to Nixon, after the president proposed restrictions on school busing, which was a contentious issue at the time. In a

nationwide televised address, Nixon declared: “I am opposed to busing for the purpose of achieving racial balance in our schools.”

Robinson told Nixon he was wrong to suggest Black Americans wanted busing to achieve racial balance. “We want busing so our children can compete!” he wrote, and accused the president of “polarizing this country.”

And yet he expressed a glimmer of hope for his onetime ally.

“Because I want so much to be a part of and to love this country as I once did,” he concluded, “I hope you will take another look at where we are going and be the president who leads the nation to accept difficult but necessary action, rather than one who fosters division.”

Robinson's turn away from Nixon is a story of disillusionment with not just Nixon but the Republican Party, which moved steadily to the right through the turbulent 1960s. | Bettmann via Getty Images

In July 1972, Nixon selected Robinson as the "best all-around athlete" in the president's all-time baseball list. Initially, Robinson said, "I'm honored that he thought of me that way." But a week later, he had reconsidered, saying, "I mean, how many games has Nixon actually seen?" Robinson surely knew that Nixon had seen quite a few games, but his comment showed how much contempt he had for the president by then.

Still, Nixon continued to praise Robinson, perhaps in an effort to try to associate himself with a beloved national figure.

On Oct. 15, 1972, just nine days before Robinson's death, Major League Baseball honored him at a World Series event commemorating the 25th anniversary of him breaking the color barrier. Robinson, suffering from diabetes and blind in one eye, used the occasion to challenge baseball owners to hire a Black manager. Nixon sent a telegram that was read aloud by Commissioner Bowie Kuhn.

"Baseball has known many moments of greatness in its long history," Nixon wrote. "But none have been as significant or compelling as that April 15 afternoon, 25 years ago, when Jackie Robinson and eight other Dodgers took the field for his appearance at first base."

Robinson died on Oct. 24, 1972, at the age of 53. The White House sent a 40-person delegation to Robinson's memorial service in New York three days later, but the president did not attend himself.

Robinson ultimately got the final word on their relationship in his autobiography *I Never Had It Made,* which was published soon after his death as Nixon was cruising to a landslide reelection victory.

"I do not consider my decision to back Richard Nixon over John F. Kennedy for the presidency in 1960 one of my finest ones," Robinson wrote. "It was a sincere one, however, at the time. The Richard Nixon I met back in 1960 bore no resemblance to the Richard Nixon as President."