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Leading from the back : Roy Wilkins and his leadership of the NAACP, 1955-1968

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LEADING FROM THE BACK

**THE LEADERSHIP OF ROY WILKINS,
1955-1968**

Yvonne Ryan

Leading from the Bank: The Leadership of Roy Wilkins, 1955-1968

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Contents

Acknowledgements	7
Introduction	9
<i>Chapter One</i>	
“I Never Wanted to be White”	24
<i>Chapter Two</i>	
Treading Water	71
<i>Chapter Three</i>	
Master of Power	96
<i>Chapter Four</i>	
Politics and Protest	156
<i>Chapter Five</i>	
All the Way with LBJ	231
<i>Chapter Six</i>	
The Crisis of Victory	278
<i>Conclusion</i>	319
Bibliography	333

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This study relies heavily on the magnificent archives available in American collections, especially the Library of Congress, the Lyndon B Johnson Library, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University and the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University. The dedicated staff at each of these institutions was patient and responsive and I owe a debt of gratitude for their help. Finally, I am also grateful for funding offered by the Lyndon B Johnson Presidential Library and the British Association for American Studies. Thank you to both institutions for their generous grants that allowed me to complete research that may not otherwise have been possible.

Introduction

Roy Wilkins occupies an enigmatic place in the history of the civil rights movement. Between 1955 and 1977 he led the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the largest and oldest civil rights organization in the United States, a position that put him firmly at the centre of many of the most important events of the civil rights movement. However, although most, if not all, significant histories of the movement mention him, he often disappears into the wings. In most scholarly examinations he appears as a minor actor in unfolding events often to provide a contrast to more charismatic, courageous or controversial leaders. His representation by historians is also often paradoxical; for a man who was intensely private, frequent and usually negative references are made to his personality; and for one so inextricably linked with his organization, the activities of the NAACP are often discussed with little or no reference to Wilkins, although his ideology permeated the organization.¹

While many aspects of the period covered by this study have been subject to scholarly examination, the role played by Roy Wilkins has been neglected. By contrast, the life and work of Martin Luther King has been amply and thoroughly studied and his contribution to the civil rights movement has been noted to almost universal acclaim. Each of the 'big six' civil rights leaders of the 1950s and 1960s have either detailed their contribution in their own autobiographies or have been the subjects of scholarly assessment that link each to the other through a matrix of history.² Other NAACP leaders have also warranted scholarly attention. Walter

¹ Manfred Berg cites several examples of Wilkins' tendency towards petty vengeance in Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005), 169, 23 while David Garrow makes reference to Wilkins' jealousy of Martin Luther King and recounts several instances of the difficulties in dealing with Wilkins.

² Among the most thorough of the many books about Martin Luther King are: Taylor Branch's trilogy: *Parting the Waters: American in the King Years 1954-1963* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1988), *Pillar of Fire: American in the King Years 1963-1965* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998), *At Canaan's Edge: American in the King Years 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006); David Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: Quill, 1986) and *The FBI and Martin Luther King* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981); Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001); For other civil rights leaders, see John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co, 1998); Nancy J Weiss, *Whitney M Young Sr and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton

White, who led the Association's between 1930 and 1955, Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP's charismatic legal counsel and architect of some of its most successful litigation, and Clarence Mitchell, the highly respected director of the NAACP's Washington bureau all have their biographers.³ Marshall has attracted particular consideration, in large part because of his flamboyant character and his appointment as the first Supreme Court justice. He was even the subject of a highly successful one-man show on Broadway during the spring of 2008 and will be one of the central characters in a proposed film about the NAACP's legal team.⁴

Wilkins, who became Executive Secretary of the NAACP following White's death in 1955 until his retirement in 1977, has received none of this attention or acclaim. Although his position made him one of the most powerful African-Americans in the United States, Wilkins' contribution to the civil rights movement remains undefined in the scholarly examinations of the period. In fact, he appears almost a chimera, whose presence in the civil rights historiography mainly serves as a backdrop or counterpoint to the more interesting players. To be sure, he was a conservative, reticent and pragmatic leader, all qualities that combine to form a less than compelling subject. However, by failing to examine Wilkins' position it is impossible to build a complete picture of this period, and most importantly of the part played by the NAACP, arguably the most important civil rights organization.

University Press, 1989); James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1997); James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (Fort Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1985); Paula F. Pfeffer, *A Philip Randolph, Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1990).

³ Carolyn Wedin, *Inheritors of the Spirit: Mary White Ovington and the Founding of the NAACP* (New York: John Wiley, 1998); Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York: The New Press, 2003); Mark Tushnet offers the perspective of a legal scholar in *Making Civil Rights Law: Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court, 1936-1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Juan Williams' biography of Marshall: *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary* (New York: Times Books, 1998) is less reliable both as an historical account of the relationship between Wilkins and Marshall; Denton L Watson, *The Lion in the Lobby: Clarence Mitchell Jr.'s Struggle for the Passage of Civil Rights Laws* (New York: Morrow, 1990). The first comprehensive and scholarly history of the NAACP is scheduled for publication in August 2009, Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New Press, 2009).

⁴ Actor Laurence Fishburne played Thurgood Marshall in "Thurgood" on Broadway between March and August 2008. "The Crusaders" is tentatively scheduled for public release in 2010 and is based on Jack Greenberg's book *Crusaders in the Courts* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). Greenberg worked with Marshall at the NAACP's Legal Defense and Education Fund, better known as The Inc. Fund or LDF, which was the legal arm of the NAACP until 1957.

The absence of any examination of Wilkins is particularly surprising in light of the growing amount of attention paid to the NAACP's role in the fight for equal rights.⁵

Even in his own words, Wilkins remains a mystery. His autobiography, *Standing Fast*, was published posthumously in 1982. Unfortunately, by the time the book came to be written, Wilkins was very ill and therefore much of the content relies heavily on primary sources already available in the Library of Congress. *Standing Fast* reveals little about his work or himself that cannot already be found in other books or in the archives; nor does it provide much information about the internal workings of the organization in which he spent most of his adult life. Most disappointingly, it offers little perspective from Wilkins' very privileged vantage point at the apex of the civil rights movement.⁶ Wilkins was the subject of a thirty-minute documentary commissioned by the United States Information Agency and made with the assistance of the NAACP, which provides an uncritical, and at times inaccurate, picture of Wilkins' work.⁷ His wife Minnie published a small and unrepresentative anthology of some of his newspaper columns and speeches following his death. Unusually, much of the material in the book dates from the late 1960s and early 1970s and so, once again, offers only a small insight into his role at the height of the civil rights movement.

To get a more defined picture of Wilkins' life and work the historian must piece together disparate sources. The voluminous archives of the NAACP at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, provide the best resource, and the primary source material from that collection forms the basis for this study. Roy Wilkins' own papers are also housed in the Library of Congress but are not comprehensive; much of the content duplicates material held in the NAACP archives and the collection sheds little light on Wilkins' personal views or the workings of the NAACP. The NAACP Papers contain an astonishing variety of material from the mundane to the extraordinary so it seems unlikely that that any explicit decision was taken to

⁵ Nationally, each of the Association's main areas of legal focus has been the subject of scholarly studies although a study of the organization's national agenda remains to be written.

⁶ The book was co-written with Tom Matthews, a former journalist for *Newsweek* magazine.

⁷ The documentary, "Roy Wilkins: The Right to Dignity" (Peter Rosen Productions, 1989) repeats an assertion made in several obituaries of Wilkins that he was an architect of the NAACP's legal strategy to desegregate schools. There is no evidence to suggest that Wilkins played anything other than a supporting role in this part of the Association's program.

exclude documents. Therefore, it seems more likely that Wilkins' deeply political character, described in less flattering terms as an "opportunist" by W.E.B. Du Bois, encouraged him to be circumspect in much of his correspondence both within and outside the NAACP. He tended to reveal little in his official statements and his remarks were often carefully guarded — even in personal correspondence — unless he was particularly exercised about an issue. The papers of Arthur Spingarn, who was president of the NAACP between 1940 and 1965, which are also housed in the Library of Congress, offer a valuable adjunct to the NAACP Papers, as do the James Weldon Johnson and Walter White and Poppy Cannon White Papers housed at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, although in both cases the material on Wilkins is sparse. The Lyndon Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Texas contains an invaluable record of the administration's view of the important and productive relationship between Johnson and Wilkins. Wilkins was also interviewed for several oral history projects, including the Kennedy and Johnson presidential archives, Columbia University's own oral history collection, and the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.

One resource that does offer another perspective into Wilkins' activities, views and contribution is the wealth of newspaper articles about the NAACP and its leader. Wilkins was an accomplished journalist and for many years wrote a bi-weekly syndicated news column. Those columns give some insight into his views on the issues of the moment, and also those matters he considered to be important, although these sometimes did not necessarily reflect the preoccupations of his peers or colleagues. The black news media had long looked on the Association as a difficult family member, but as direct action protests moved civil rights to the top of the domestic political agenda the Association increasingly commanded the media's attention. Even if one allows for the self-aggrandizing motive behind a newspaper or magazine profile, for example, interviews of the kind that appeared towards the end of Wilkins' career, when he appears to have been less cautious in his comments and opinions, provide especially perceptive illustrations of this most reserved of men.⁸ Wilkins' speeches and statements often received coverage in the national

⁸ Martin Arnold, "There Is No Rest For Roy Wilkins," *New York Times*, September 28, 1969; Celeste Durant, "Roy Wilkins: Pushed Off the Mountaintop," *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1977.

press, and these articles are particularly valuable in fillings gaps in the NAACP and Wilkins archives where a transcript of a particular speech might be missing.

Wilkins grew up in St Paul, Minnesota in a poor, white neighborhood that defined his attitude to integration and informed his devout belief in the ability of black and white to live harmoniously side-by-side. One contemporary writer suggested that Wilkins' success in his role could be attributed to his understanding of white culture, which was a direct result of his childhood experiences. One of the questions that must be answered when analyzing Wilkins' contribution to the civil rights movement is how he used that knowledge to navigate the white power structure, and translate the frustration and anger that fuelled the direct action protests of the 1960s into legislative gains. Joseph Rauh, one of Wilkins' colleagues on the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), agreed that while Martin Luther King changed public opinion through his protests, "Roy was the one who was able to use that shift in public opinion to bring about legislation and legal rulings that benefited blacks, as well as any number of other people."⁹

While Wilkins had a finely honed ego, and made many public appearances, he was extremely reticent about his private life. His life was marked by loss, with the premature deaths of his sister, mother, brother, aunt and uncle.¹⁰ He was married to Aminda Badeau, a social worker, for over fifty years, but kept his distance from other personal relationships. Wilkins claimed, in an interview given in the late 1960s, not to have a single close personal friend and his remarks at the time indicated the deep level of suspicion that governed his relationships. "I've maintained friendly relations with a lot of people but I've never permitted them to get too close. I just don't want to be sullied by the suspicion that this or that action of mine was dictated by a friendship."¹¹ One of the questions that arise in an examination of Wilkins' leadership is whether such detachment affected his ability

⁹ Warren Brown, "U.S. Civil Rights Leader Roy Wilkins Dies at Age of 80," *Washington Post*, September 9, 1981.

¹⁰ Wilkins' mother died when he was five years old, his sister Armeda died of tuberculosis in 1927 at the age of 24, his aunt and uncle, who looked after the children upon the death of their mother, died within two days of each other in 1928 and his brother Earl died in 1941 at the age of 36.

¹¹ Charles L. Saunders, "A Frank Interview with Roy Wilkins," *Ebony*, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 36, LOC.

to manage an organization as large and complex as the NAACP. This study does not attempt to make any assessments of Wilkins' psychological composition but this particular aspect of his personality informed the culture of the Association under his command and, arguably, contributed to the accusations that it perpetuated a 'top-down' perspective that failed to fully acknowledge the complexity of the black communities in which its membership lived and operated.

Apart from the Association, his interests were few. Arguably his most rebellious enthusiasm was a passion for sports cars - in the 1960s he had a black TR-3 that he polished on Saturday mornings when at home, then drive out on Saturday afternoons, occasionally in the company of his nephew Roger. According to Nathaniel Jones, who became the NAACP legal counsel in 1969, Wilkins also liked to spend afternoons with Red Cap porters at La Guardia airport. Wilkins read detective novels and was an avid collector of railway timetables, possibly a legacy from his Uncle Sam, who worked for the head of the Northern Pacific Railroad, and also from his own time spent as a railway porter when he was a student at the University of Minnesota. However, while such self-containment suggests a solitary and possibly unpopular man, he appears to have been held in great affection by those worked with him and by the Association's members. Few of Wilkins' colleagues survive, but those who were interviewed for this study spoke of Wilkins not only warmly but also with respect. While the importance of the good opinion of others is debatable, there is no doubt that the high level of support he enjoyed among the NAACP's membership allowed him to retain his position for so long.

This study offers a re-assessment of a leader who steered the NAACP through a turbulent and challenging period that saw the success of the NAACP's legal strategy and the passage of civil rights legislation, but only limited economic and social gains. There are several potential pitfalls in conducting such an examination. Firstly, a study of Roy Wilkins is not necessarily a study of the civil rights movement. While Wilkins was clearly an integral part of the activities that took place during the most active years of the movement between 1955 and the mid-1960s, the trajectory of his story sometimes does not parallel that of the movement in a conveniently linear narrative. Naturally, some events are of such importance that even where Wilkins did not play a key role, as in the Birmingham and Albany

campaigns, their impact makes a brief digression necessary for reasons of context; but a detailed examination is left to other studies.

The term civil rights movement, at its broadest, has come to represent the most powerful social movement in modern American history. The wave of protest that defines the movement in cultural memory brought black Americans on to the streets with demands for equal rights, equal opportunities under the rhetorical cry of "Freedom Now" after centuries of oppression.¹² The birth of the movement is often cited as 1955 when a black woman, Mrs. Rosa Parks, refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama bus, sparking a boycott that became the most public challenge to the southern caste system to date. However, as will be seen in this dissertation, historians have in recent years questioned the importance of that event in launching the civil rights movement. They argue that the struggle for equality had been waged in pockets of the United States for many years prior to the Montgomery boycott, and that struggle had escalated in the years following the Second World War as black veterans returned home after fighting for freedom and democracy abroad only to find those same qualities missing in their lives at home.¹³ As race relations moved up the domestic agenda, it became

¹² For a comprehensive and scholarly introduction to the civil rights movement see Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000*. London: Penguin Books, 2001); Hugh Davies Graham, *The Civil Rights Era: Origins and Development of National Policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990; Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1991); Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1991); Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Plume, 1991).

¹³ The origins of the civil rights movement are discussed in Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984) and McAdam, Doug. *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Richard M. Dalfiume, "The 'Forgotten Years' of the Negro Revolution." *Journal of American History* 55 (June 1968): 90-106; August Meier, "Negro Protest Movements and Organizations." *Journal of Negro Education* 32 (Autumn 1963): 437-450.

The nature and extent of regional protest is examined in several state and local studies, most notably William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Equality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995); Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana 1915-1971* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995); John A. Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma*

intertwined with international politics, labor issues, the roles of the government, the church and the courts. All of these aspects are part of Wilkins' story and will be examined within the context of his career. Other subjects, notably the issue of armed self-defense, the rise of Black Power, and the potential infiltration of Communists, warrant more examination than might be the case in other studies of the movement because of Wilkins' close involvement.¹⁴

Although the national media often called upon Wilkins to speak for the civil rights movement, Wilkins himself frequently complained that the press ignored NAACP activities in favor of protests by other groups, a complaint that was not without foundation. A letter written to Wilkins following his arrest in Jackson in 1963 succinctly illustrates the problem: "I think it might be accepted as truth that such is the drawing capacity power of national television today that in our larger cities the local NAACP might be diligently involved in mass protest, picketing and boycott of a store on one street, while a block away, the Negro citizen, sitting in his house and watching Dr Martin Luther King on television 2000 miles away says: 'Go get 'em Rev. King – that's the boy- tell 'em off'. Then after a minute of reflection, he is likely to say: 'By God, the NAACP ought to be doing something like this' completely unaware that the NAACP is doing something like this – and only a block away."¹⁵

Wilkins considered himself an expert in managing the press and he frequently cited his early experience as a journalist as evidence that he was better equipped to promote the NAACP's activities than its own public relations department. However, the comment above begs the question of how the NAACP was represented in the press and by television, and whether Wilkins saw the issue of public recognition as a problem of public relations or action. The issue of public recognition is an important one. For each of the civil rights organizations, publicity

(Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002); Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001).

¹⁴ Many of the complex issues inherent in the civil rights movement are discussed in Charles W. Eagles, Ed. *The Civil Rights Movement in America* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986); Jeffrey Ogbar, Ed. *Problems in American Civilization: The Civil Rights Movement* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002); Armistead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan, Ed. *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1991); Brian Ward and Tony Badger, Ed. *The Making of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement*. (London: Macmillan Press, 1996)

¹⁵ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 289.

frequently translated into financial contributions, members and political influence, and so grew increasingly important as the field of civil rights became more competitive. Wilkins' own representation in the press has also helped to define his legacy. This study therefore pays considerable attention to the portrayal of both Wilkins and his organization in the media of the day.

Any study of Roy Wilkins and his leadership of the NAACP must also contend with the 'Great Man' school of historiography.¹⁶ Although contemporary historians have challenged the view that history is defined by leaders, it was possibly Wilkins' misfortune to lead the organization during the years of charismatic leaders such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, men whose appeal made them compelling subjects for historians over the past forty years. Certainly his predecessor, Walter White, did not face the same competition for attention during his tenure. In light of the competition from other leaders, the contribution of a pragmatist like Wilkins has been overlooked. A pragmatist would, by definition, appear to be at odds with the visionary, and there was no shortage of visionary leaders fighting for equal rights. This suggests that Wilkins' greatest contribution to the movement may have been in bringing a practicality to the moral and visionary leadership that was offered by other leaders.

If one judgment of Wilkins overshadows any other it is that of an irascible bureaucrat who promoted a program that was at odds both with contemporary events and the wishes of the Association's membership. One of the principal questions about Wilkins and his leadership that this study endeavors to address is whether that reputation is warranted or even accurate. Wilkins fulfilled much of the Weberian criteria of a bureaucrat in that he operated within an organizational hierarchy.¹⁷ However, Wilkins more closely represents sociologist William Whyte's

¹⁶ The "Great Man" theory was posited by historian Thomas Carlyle in his book, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History*, published in 1841. Carlyle's thesis was that history is shaped by the actions of 'great men.' While this theory has now been broadly discredited as historians examine the wider context of events, the historiography of the civil rights movement is populated with heroic figures who would seem to exemplify Carlyle's argument.

¹⁷ In his classic textbook, *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, sociologist Max Weber identified three forms of authority in organizational structure of which rational-legal, or bureaucratic, authority was one. The other two were charismatic domination and traditional domination.

Organization Man. Whyte's thesis, that a culture of corporate conformity had replaced the pioneering and individualism of earlier generations, attracted a great deal of attention when his book, *The Organization Man*, was published in 1956.¹⁸ Whyte identified a cohort of employees who not only worked for an organization but 'belonged' to it spiritually as well as physically. Such a description must surely apply to Wilkins.

Wilkins' advocacy of process rather than protest meant that more charismatic or dramatic peers have overshadowed his role in the history of the movement. Therefore, several questions remain to be answered: Was Wilkins simply a bureaucrat who stifled his organization? Or did his political skill help consolidate the emotional impetus provoked by events such as Selma and Birmingham into solid legislative achievements?

An examination of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR) provides a useful illustration of Wilkins' role. As well as leading the NAACP for almost a quarter of a century, Wilkins also led the LCCR, a coalition of religious, fraternal, civil and labor organization, founded in 1950 by Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, the leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters railway union, and Arnold Aronson, a leader of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council. It was as chairman of the LCCR — which the NAACP had instigated — that Wilkins addressed congressional committees and waged lobbying campaigns that supported the passage of the landmark civil and voting rights legislation of 1957, 1964, 1965, and 1968. Civil rights historians have, thus far, overlooked the LCCR, but it is of crucial importance in assessing Wilkins' leadership.

Any assessment of Wilkins must pay equal attention to the organization to which he devoted almost his entire adult life. The NAACP was founded on February 12, 1909 by a bi-racial group of progressives including W.E.B. Du Bois. It was no

¹⁸William H. Whyte, *The Organization Man*. 1956. Reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1961). White's observations were entirely based on workers in corporations rather than interest groups such as the NAACP. However, given the organizational structure of the NAACP, Whyte's conclusions are equally applicable in this instance. Whyte described the bureaucratization of corporate life in America and argued that the 'rugged individualism' that characterized the protestant ethic of the country's early years had been replaced by that of the 'social ethic' through which the individual could be more creative, productive and effective within a group rather than alone.

accident that the date was also the centenary of Abraham Lincoln's birth; from its inception, the Association stated its objective as achieving full equality for black Americans. To do this, the NAACP developed a program of litigation and lobbying. It was in the courtroom that the organization won many of its early successes: legalism was central to the NAACP's strategy of achieving equal rights. The Association developed a methodical legal program during the 1930s in which litigation was conducted to achieve a legal precedent as well as redress for the plaintiff. Under the guidance of Charles Houston and later Thurgood Marshall, the Association's litigation strategy enjoyed an increasing number of legal triumphs, with each case contributing a precedent for the next. Through its legal arm the Legal Defense and Educational Fund, more commonly known as the Inc Fund, the NAACP was responsible for *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), in which the Supreme Court deemed segregation in public schools unconstitutional.¹⁹ *Brown* not only set the stage for the civil rights movement but also influenced a profound difference of opinion over the relative merits of legalism and nonviolent direct action. Wilkins became a central figure in this debate over strategy.

When Wilkins became head of the NAACP in 1955, its membership numbered approximately 305,000 in about 1300 branches across the United States. The national office directed operations from its headquarters in New York City, an arrangement that was both a strength and a weakness. Traditionally, the Association used its members to support its lobbying and litigation tactics, particularly in its fight to secure federal anti-lynching legislation and a fair employment commission. While autonomous action was not explicitly discouraged, branches were expected to comply with the Association's charter of operations and program. The NAACP's branches became less easy to control once the wave of direct action protests swept through the South in the early 1960s, putting the Association in the position of having to quickly react to developments rather than direct protest activities. It is this shift that has been responsible for much of the criticism of Wilkins, both at the time and in subsequent histories. In

¹⁹ *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954); A series of favorable Supreme Court decisions were prompted by cases brought by the NAACP, most notably *Irene Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia*, 328 U.S. 373 (1946), which invalidated segregation on interstate transport, *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948), which attacked restrictive covenants, and *Smith v. Allwright*, 321 U.S. 649 (1944), which abolished the white primary that had kept black Americans away from the ballot box.

particular, critics have argued that Wilkins' fondness for organization hampered the NAACP's ability to respond effectively to the challenges posed by direct action protests. Whether this criticism has any validity is one of the fundamental questions that this study aims to address.

By the early 1960s, as the NAACP's legal program had almost achieved its aim of dismantling the legal framework for segregation, the future role and direction became less clear. This is where questions about Wilkins' leadership take on additional importance and where the most significant gap in the historiography exists. The NAACP's activities in specific arenas — education, the law, anti-lynching, and voter registration — have been examined in a number of studies.²⁰ Several of the lawyers who worked either for the NAACP or its sister organization, the NAACP Legal Education and Defense Fund, have published their own accounts of their parts in the civil rights struggle.²¹ However, a broad, critical study of the Association, and Wilkins' role in it, has yet to be written. This thesis attempts to fill some of these gaps by examining what the NAACP under Wilkins' guidance ultimately contributed to the civil rights movement in the years following the *Brown* decision.

While the time frame of this thesis primarily follows the familiar chronological trajectory of the civil rights movement of 1955 to 1968, Wilkins' early experiences were pivotal in forming the philosophy that underpinned his later work. Wilkins did not have experience of consistent and blatant racism until he left university and moved to Kansas City; in fact, he attended integrated schools and colleges, and the neighborhood in which he spent his childhood was almost entirely white, made up of immigrants from various parts of Europe. This experience was profoundly

²⁰ Manfred Berg, *Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005); Darlene Clark Hine, *Black Victory: The Rise and Fall of the White Primary in Texas* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003); Mark Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law: Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court, 1936-1961* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); Mark Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy against Segregated Education, 1925-1950* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Clement Vose, *Caucasians Only: The Supreme Court, the NAACP, and the Restrictive Covenant Cases*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1959); Robert L. Zangrando, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980).

²¹ Robert L. Carter, *A Matter of Law: A Memoir of Struggle in the Cause of Equal Rights* (New York: The New Press, 2005); Jack. Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Constance Baker Motley *Equal Justice Under Law* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1998).

important in informing his fundamental belief that racial integration was possible. For that reason Chapter One examines those influences. Wilkins joined the NAACP in 1931 and archival evidence suggests that many of the beliefs that shaped his leadership appear to have been formed during those early years at the Association. The first chapter therefore also examines the events that created and shaped the organization that he took over in 1955.

The period covered in Chapter Two, between the end of the Second World War and his assumption of leadership of the NAACP in 1955, saw Wilkins exist in a state of near-suspension. Walter White's ill health, and his frequent absences during and after the War, often left Wilkins in charge of the organization but without any autonomy or authority to take substantial action. This was also a time when Wilkins had to confront his own mortality, and his commitment to the NAACP. However, it was also the time when the Association grew rapidly, and when its strategy to dismantle the legal framework for segregation began to reap rewards.

Chapter Three examines the challenges Wilkins faced when he assumed control of the organization in which he worked for more than twenty years. He became Secretary of the NAACP in 1955 following the death of his predecessor, Walter White. The Montgomery Bus Boycott, which by coincidence began in December of that year and which is often used as the historical starting point for the modern civil rights movement, posed one of the greatest challenges of Wilkins' first months as Secretary.²² Montgomery encapsulates the dilemma that Wilkins faced: He believed that the legal case against segregated bus seating would have been won "without a day's marching," but his argument failed to acknowledge that, as with *Brown*, blacks could have been waiting another twenty years for a desegregated bus to appear.²³ In Wilkins' defense, although the boycott captured the world's attention and gave the civil rights movement the moral ascendancy, white resistance was so entrenched that the boycott could not have achieved integration in the absence of court action. Nevertheless, the boycotters' embrace of non-violent

²² Although the Montgomery Bus Boycott is frequently cited as the beginning of the civil rights movement, August Meier argues that the modern civil rights movement began in earnest with the Greensboro sit-in protests in February, 1960, "Negro Protest Movements and Organizations," *Journal of Negro Education*, 32: 4 (Autumn 1963): 437-450.

²³ Wilkins with Matthews. *Standing Fast*, 238.

direct action and the emergence of Martin Luther King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), threatened the organizational hegemony and posed a question mark over its use of litigation and lobbying as the best means to achieve its objectives. This chapter will examine this dilemma in more detail and how Wilkins responded to these new challenges.

Wilkins also had to contend with a challenge on a second front. While for some, non-violence quickly became the preferred means by which to search for a solution, other blacks began to advocate armed self-defense.²⁴ Wilkins opinion about armed self-defense was ambiguous, but there was nothing ambiguous about his reaction to any challenge to his position. When Robert F. Williams, a branch leader, publicly advocated meeting violence with violence, he was threatened with suspension from the Association. As well as challenging the NAACP's principal beliefs, the case was also an important early challenge to Wilkins' authority. Wilkins' response to that challenge gives a valuable indication of the extent of his political influence within the organization. During this period, the NAACP and its sister organization, the Legal Defense and Education Fund, finally separated. This division posed several problems, not least of which was how the Association could now define its fundamental program, which had up until now relied on litigation, if much of that program was now administered by another organization. The implications of this division are discussed in this chapter.

With the wave of sit-in protest that began in 1960, non-violent direct action became an even stronger challenge to the NAACP's legalistic approach. Also, the birth of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, better known as the SNCC or Snick, brought yet another competitor for the NAACP to deal with. SNCC was far more militant than the SCLC and far more willing openly to criticize the NAACP. While Wilkins was often dismissive of SNCC, its appearance prompted him to encourage NAACP branches to support nonviolent direct action, even if he remained personally skeptical of its value. The protests of 1963 finally forced the

²⁴ The two main studies that examine armed self-defense in the civil rights movement are Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004) and Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

charismatic young president, John F. Kennedy, into taking action. Chapter Four deals with his relationship with President Kennedy as civil rights rose to the top of the domestic agenda.

Chapter Five studies the relationship between the NAACP leader and President Lyndon Johnson, a collaboration that contributed to the achievement of the two landmark pieces of legislation: the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. When Lyndon Johnson unexpectedly became president in 1963, Wilkins was not optimistic that the pace of civil rights reform would continue. Johnson's credentials on the issue were inconsistent to say the least. Confounding Wilkins' worst fears, however, Johnson not only proved to be a great ally for the cause in general but was also an ardent supporter of the NAACP leader. For Wilkins, the period covered by this chapter was the apex of his professional life. His relationship with Johnson allowed him to make full use of his strengths, particularly in mobilizing the LCCR, whose lobbying tactics were credited with helping the successful passage of the 1964 civil rights bill. Wilkins' closeness to Johnson was not universally approved of, however, and this chapter also examines the controversy about, and the response from within the Association, to this relationship.

By 1965, the NAACP no longer dominated the civil rights agenda. The Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts produced what has been called "a crisis of victory." Those legislative gains, while momentous, only highlighted what still remained to be done in addressing economic and social problems, particularly in urban ghettos. Unfortunately, the Association was unable to articulate a coherent program to deal with these issues and a new generation of more militant activists lost patience with what they saw as Wilkins' conservatism. He was particularly challenged by the concept of 'black power' and his uncompromising response has come to define the latter part of his career. The Vietnam War, urban riots, the death of Martin Luther King, and the collapse of the civil rights coalition posed additional challenges. Chapter Six assesses Wilkins' difficulties in navigating this new landscape, and evaluates the extent of the achievements secured by the NAACP under his leadership.

Chapter One

“I Never Wanted to be White”

Roy Wilkins liked to claim that he and his family were “entwined” with the NAACP almost from its beginning. As a youth, Wilkins sold copies of the NAACP’s house magazine, *The Crisis*, from door to door.¹ By the time he was twenty-two Wilkins was secretary of the St Paul chapter when he also attended his first NAACP conference. His Uncle Sam, who, with his wife Elizabeth, acted as surrogate parent to Wilkins and his two siblings following the death of their mother and near abandonment by their father, was the 42nd member of the St Paul branch when it received its charter in 1913.²

Wilkins was the grandson of a slave who had won his freedom when he was fourteen years old and became a sharecropper in Holly Springs, a small town in rural Mississippi. Wilkins’ father had ambitions. He attended a local college, Rust College, but, after several confrontations with white authority, he and his wife fled Mississippi, taking a route familiar with blacks leaving the South, up the Mississippi to northern cities that offered more employment opportunities and a chance to live a life relatively free of segregation if not discrimination. The Wilkins eventually settled in St Louis, Missouri where Roy Wilkins, his brother Earl and sister Armeda were born. When Wilkins was four years old, his mother died of tuberculosis. On her deathbed, she had begged her sister Elizabeth not to send the children back to Mississippi and she took the three young children to live with her husband, Sam Williams, and herself in St Paul, Minnesota as Wilkins’ father was unable to care for the three young children. U

¹ Edward Weiland, “No, I Never Wanted to Be White,” *Long Island Sunday Press*, May 26, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I16. Library of Congress, Washington, D.C, hereafter referred to as LOC; Details of Wilkins’ early life are also drawn from the transcript of his reminiscences for the Columbia Oral History Project, Roy Wilkins, interview by William Ingersoll, New York City, 1960; Albin Krebs, “Roy Wilkins, 50-Year Veteran of Civil Rights Fight, is Dead,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1981; Cleophus Charles, “Roy Wilkins, the NAACP and the Early Struggle for Civil Rights: Towards the Biography of a Man and a Movement in Microcosm, 1901-1939” (PhD diss., Cornell University, 1981), 301-302; George R Metcalf, *Black Profiles* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 85-111.

² Roy Wilkins with Tom Matthews. *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 36.

Several leadership studies have argued that paternal absence, whether physical or emotional is a psychological component often found in potential leaders.³ If that is the case, then Wilkins' childhood provides an interesting dilemma. In keeping with the reserve he displayed for much of his life, Wilkins said little about the relationship with his father although some comments suggest exasperation with his father's rather peripatetic lifestyle and he certainly appeared to feel a distance from his father that was never apparent in the relationship with his uncle.⁴ Uncle Sam gave the Wilkins children a stable and seemingly caring home in which they flourished. Wilkins' uncle worked as a waiter in the private railway car of the president of the Northern Pacific Railroad and as such held a position of middle class respectability among the local community. Wilkins was always proud that his uncle owned his own house and that he raised his adoptive children to believe that blacks could advance through education and hard work.

St Paul, while no haven of equal rights, was not segregated for the most part, and Wilkins attended the local integrated elementary and high schools.⁵ The neighborhood in which Wilkins was raised proved to be as profound an influence on his views of racial integration as the bitter experiences of racism that many leaders of the civil rights movement encountered in their early lives. There were only three black families in the area; the others were Swedish, Norwegian, Polish, German and Irish first- and second-generation immigrants, many of whom spoke

³ J. M. Burns *Leadership* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), L. Iremonger, *The Fiery Chariot* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1970), Abraham Zaleznik, "Managers and Leaders: Are They Different?" *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 1992): 2-11. www.hbr.org. Reprint: R0401G; All cited in Micha Popper, "The Development of Charismatic Leaders," *Political Psychology* 21 (December 2000): 729-744; Psychanalyst, John Bowlby, also identified the maternal relationship as a crucial factor in an individual's later interaction with others; see J. Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss* (Vol. 1, Attachment) (New York: Basic Books, 1969) and *Separation: Anxiety & anger* (Vol. 2 of [Attachment](#) and Loss) (London: Hogarth Press, 1973). Bowlby's 'attachment theory' has subsequently been applied to leadership theory in the context of assessing motivation and character, See: Stanley Allen Renshon, "Personality and Family Dynamics in the Political Socialization Process," *American Journal of Political Science* 19 (February 1975), 63-80; Popper, "Charismatic Leaders," 732-734.

⁴ Roy Wilkins, interview by William Ingersoll, New York City, 1960, Columbia Oral History Collection, Columbia University, New York, 4-6. After working in a series of manual labouring jobs throughout Kansas and Missouri Wilkins' father eventually became a church minister. He subsequently remarried and Wilkins continued to provide some financial support for some years following the death of his father in 1951.

⁵ Although housing, schools, public leisure facilities and transportation were not segregated in St Paul while Wilkins was growing up, hotels and restaurants operated exclusionary practices.

little English. Wilkins' best friend was Swedish as were the Williams' immediate neighbors who treated Wilkins as one of their own family.

The lasting influence this had on his approach to integration could be seen nearly eighty years later when he wrote: "no-one can tell me that it is impossible for white people and black people to live next door to one another, to get along - even to love one another. For me integration is not an abstraction constructed on dusty eighteenth-century notions of democracy. I believe in it not only because it is right but because I have lived it all my life."⁶ An indication of the legacy this neighborhood had on him, as well as a glimpse of a sharp sense of humor, can be seen in a letter Wilkins wrote to White in 1931 en route to his new life with the NAACP in New York, "We leave here next Friday for ten days in Minnesota where I will get in a little golf, fishing, and swimming along with my people, the blond, blue-eyed Scandinavians."⁷

While he clearly felt intense anger at the injustices of racism, he readily admitted that he could not share the experiences of those such as fellow NAACP officials William Pickens and James Farmer who had grown up amid the violence of the rural South.⁸ One of the most interesting passages in his autobiography, which otherwise gives little illumination into most aspects of his personal life, occurs when Wilkins writes poignantly about the lack of a documented past in his family; his outrage at the frustrations and indignities his ancestors suffered simply by being black is evident, "The slave census lists 17,000 chattels not by name but by age, sex, and color alone – as if they were the livestock of their owners."⁹ Nevertheless, there is a sense of detachment in his recollections that was evident throughout Wilkins' career, suggesting that his upbringing informed an intellectual rather than emotional approach to integration and the fight for equal rights.

⁶ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 30.

⁷ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, July 25 1931, NAACP Papers, Part I, Reel 13, LOC.

⁸ James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press; 1985); William Pickens, *Bursting Bonds: The Autobiography of a 'New Negro'* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991). However, contrary to common perception, although most of Wilkins' peers were born in the South, all were the products of middle-class families; Farmer was the son of a college professor, King was the son of a well-known Baptist preacher, A. Philip Randolph was also the son of a preacher, Whitney Young's father was a headmaster of a black boarding school.

⁹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 7.

If Wilkins' formative years did not reflect the experiences of his southern peers, he did experience that moment of epiphany that is a familiar part of many of the autobiographical narratives of civil rights leaders: that moment where racism, however much of an abstraction it might previously have been, becomes personal. For Wilkins, that moment came when he was 19, with the lynching of three young black men in Duluth, Minnesota. The proximity was shocking. As Wilkins said later, "This was Minnesota, not Mississippi." He was particularly appalled at the hatred of the thousands of white people who had joined in the attacks. "For the first time in my life," he said, "I understood what Du Bois had been writing about. I found myself thinking of black people as a very vulnerable *us* - and white people as an unpredictable violent *them*."¹⁰

Although keen on journalism, when Wilkins entered the University of Minnesota he majored in Sociology, with a minor in economics, in the hope of finding secure employment upon graduation. He financed his studies with various summer jobs including working in a slaughterhouse, as a dining car waiter on the railroad back and forth to Seattle and as a red cap at St Paul's Union Station.¹¹ However, the pull of journalism was strong. While in high school, he had edited the school newspaper, the *Logwheel*, and regularly contributed poetry and articles. In his second year at the University, he joined the staff of the *Minnesota Daily*, a commercial newspaper with a circulation of around 10,000 produced by the college, as the paper's first black reporter. After a year he became editor of the paper, a

¹⁰ Ibid., 44; Wilkins reflected on the danger posed by the Duluth lynchings in an essay he wrote for *The Messenger*, a black literary magazine when he was twenty-two. In the article, he berated the state's small black population for their complacency and apathy. Black Minnesotans were typically individualistic rather than organized in social groups. This was driven in large part, Wilkins argued, by the relatively benign racial conditions in the state but he warned that such indifference was dangerous given the unwelcome change in circumstances foretold by the lynching in Duluth. The article is an interesting early example of Wilkins' views on the political apathy of blacks and his belief in the efficacy of organized groups, both of which barely changed throughout his life. Roy Wilkins, "Minnesota: Seat of Satisfaction." *The Messenger*, 6: 5, (May, 1924). Reprinted in Tom Lutz and Susanna Ashton, Ed. *These "Colored" United States: African American Essays from the 1920s*. (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 167-173.

¹¹ According to Judge Nathan Jones, in his later years, Wilkins often spent Sunday afternoons talking with the red caps at La Guardia airport close to his home in Queens. He also had a lifelong fascination with train timetables and could instantly recall the best route to get from one city to another. Judge Nathan Jones, interview by author, New York City, December 6, 2007.

position he held for the remainder of his time at college.¹² By the time Wilkins left the university in 1923, it was inevitable that he would continue working in journalism. His career appeared to be set when, thanks to a family connection, Wilkins became editor of the *Kansas City Call*, a small black newspaper owned by an entrepreneur called Chester Franklin.

Journalism gave Wilkins a forum to protest against incidents like the Duluth lynching. Having been relatively sheltered from the worst effects of segregation in St Paul and then at university, the Duluth lynchings triggered an awareness of how violent white racism could be. Now, in Kansas City, Wilkins was suddenly confronted by the harsh reality of the daily indignities perpetuated upon black Americans, "The segregation appalled me. Everything was segregated but the trolley cars. The attitudes appalled me, the stuff that came across my desk, the persecution, the unfairness, and I itched to get my fingers in," he later said.¹³ "I think Kansas City was responsible for impregnating me with the desire to fight against this thing. I was so impressed by the senselessness of it, the unfairness of it, the idiocy of it."¹⁴

One of his earliest campaigns was against a school bond issue, which would have allocated almost \$1,000,000 to build a new high school for white students, while under \$30,000 was allocated to remodel a factory building for a black elementary school. The *Call*, "crusaded and beat the bushes and whipped up community sentiment," and defeated the issue. Wilkins was typically pragmatic in his assessment of the victory, "We didn't accomplish it because of the unity and outrage of the Negro community, you see. We accomplished it because few people take the time to vote on a school bond issue anyway. And if you have enough people – a substantial number of people – voting against it, then you defeat it, because people that are for it don't necessarily bother to come out and vote."¹⁵

12 Gene Grove, "Roy Wilkins Columnist," *Tuesday* magazine, July 1966. Roy Wilkins papers, LOC.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Wilkins, interview, 1960, 27.

¹⁵ Wilkins, interview, 1960, 29.

Wilkins' role as editor also offered an opportunity become more closely involved with the NAACP and to meet its leaders as they traveled through the Midwest. Just before joining the *Call*, Wilkins attended the NAACP's Midwestern Race Relations Conference where he was impressed by James Weldon Johnson's impassioned rebuttal of a white speaker who had advised patience, industry and thrift rather than the pursuit of "so-called equality".¹⁶ By the late 1920s Wilkins had become secretary of the Kansas City branch of the NAACP. From this position he led the branch's campaign against the nomination of Judge John Parker to the Supreme Court. Wilkins used advertisements and his column in the *Call* to urge people to write to their congressmen. Then, at the request of the NAACP's head office, he waged a similar campaign against Senator Henry Justin Allen from Kansas who had voted for Parker's confirmation.¹⁷ "I got into the Kansas fight with both feet," Wilkins later said describing the technique he adopted to defeat Allen, "Wrote pieces against it and made speeches against Allen and helped mobilize the NAACP in the state of Kansas against Allen." Wilkins also persuaded his boss, Chester Franklin to get involved by donating advertising space to the campaign against Allen.¹⁸

Wilkins' contribution to the defeat of Parker and Allen made a favorable impression on Walter White, at the time the Association's assistant secretary, during several visits he made to Kansas City and the two maintained a casual correspondence during the following year. This contact proved useful when, in 1930, W.E.B. Du Bois invited Wilkins to join the staff of the NAACP as business manager for its magazine, the *Crisis*. Wilkins pointed out that he had little, if any, experience as a business manager, in fact, he later told a doctoral researcher that he "didn't know a damn thing about business."¹⁹ Wilkins sought White's advice on

¹⁶ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 54.

¹⁷ Charles, 301-302.

¹⁸ Roy Wilkins, interview by Robert Wright, April 29 1970, New York City, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center ((hereafter cited as MSRC), Howard University, Washington, DC, 4-5.

¹⁹ Du Bois' biographer, David Levering Lewis, suggests that Du Bois heard of Wilkins via Wilkins' former fiancée, Marvel Jackson, who worked as Du Bois' secretary at The Crisis during the late 1920s, 276. This is corroborated by Marvel Jackson Cooke in an oral history interview in 1989: Washington Press Club Foundation, Marvel Cooke, Interview by Kathleen Currie, October 30, 1989, New York City, #3, 51-65, Washington Press Club Foundation Oral History Project. <http://wpcf.org/oralhistory/cook3.html>; Charles, 303.

whether or not to accept the position and White encouraged Wilkins to move, despite the latter's reservations about the small salary and the potential difficulties of working with the notoriously prickly Du Bois. Wilkins evidently valued his skills highly, writing to Du Bois, "I doubt whether you will be able to find a young man, already established, who is not now commanding a good income, who will be willing to come to the *Crisis* and take charge of its very apparent business difficulties."²⁰ After much deliberation Wilkins declined the offer, but the recruitment process had introduced him to several board members and the chairman, Joel Spingarn, who was impressed by the tone of Wilkins' correspondence. Board member Lillian Alexander was also impressed by Wilkins' approach. She told Du Bois that his letters "seemed to me to show the foresight, penetration and comprehension of the whole thing that I expected of him."²¹

In his refusal letter, Wilkins pointed out what he felt were several serious flaws in the magazine's editorial stance, and what needed to be done to improve it.²² Despite his self-confessed lack of business knowledge, Wilkins had no hesitation in offering Du Bois some suggestions on how to improve the magazine's financial health. "Whether the magazine secures a business manager at once or not," he wrote, it was essential for the magazine, especially during this business depression "to hold its present circulation, to keep its accounts collected as near as possible to date, to scrutinize new business carefully and tighten up on the old accounts gradually, but effective."²³ Such comments, combined with Wilkins' arguments that the *Crisis*, governed as it was by Du Bois' philosophical and intellectual character, focused too much on literary and academic subjects at the expense of more newsworthy stories, suggest that the two would have been a combustible combination.²⁴ Nevertheless, the force of Wilkins' opinion struck Johnson to such

²⁰ Letter, Roy Wilkins to W.E.B. Du Bois, April 12, 1930. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 34. Roosevelt Center, Middleburg, The Netherlands (RSC).

²¹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 97; Letter, W.E.B. Du Bois to Roy Wilkins, Feb 27, 1930, Letter, WEB to Roy Wilkins dated March 28, 1930; Letter, W.E.B. Du Bois to Roy Wilkins, June 11, 1930, Letter, J.E. Spingarn to W.E.B. Du Bois, April 25 1930, Letter, Lillian Alexander to W.E.B. Du Bois, May 15, 1930 W.E.B. Papers, Reels 33 and 34. RSC.

²² Letter, Roy Wilkins to W.E.B. Du Bois, July 9, 1930, W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 34. RSC.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Charles, 304.

an extent that when Walter White began looking for an assistant, he asked, "What about that young man who wrote the letter?"²⁵

Wilkins accepted the position of assistant secretary to White, who had recently succeeded Johnson, but not without driving a hard bargain. A number of letters traveled back and forth between Kansas City and New York as the finer points of what salary Wilkins could expect were finalized. While the position, as Wilkins wrote to White, offered "the opportunity to acquire more than a local reputation, and, perhaps, most significant, of all, in the opportunity to share in the crusading for a great cause," he also pointed out that the \$3000 per annum proposed by the Association would not be enough to cover his living expenses in New York City. Displaying the acute financial awareness that is evident throughout his career at the NAACP, he wrote White, "To show you that I have not hit simply upon a grand-sounding figure in my correspondence and conference, but have tried to base everything on facts as nearly as they can be determined accurately, I spent an entire afternoon in Harlem looking over apartments, getting rentals, noting locations and equipment. It took only a few hours to convince me that in order to maintain my simple standard of living in New York I would have to spend an additional \$500 a year in rents alone."²⁶ A salary of \$3300 was eventually agreed upon, despite the Association's perilous finances, and Wilkins took up his new position at 69 Fifth Avenue on August 15, 1931.

Wilkins arrived at the national office amid high expectations. A press release announcing Wilkins' appointment suggested his role at the Association would make use of his campaigning skills: "Mr. Wilkins is widely and favorably known, especially in the newspaper world. He is an excellent example of the progressive and aggressive group of younger Negroes who have taken a vitally important part in Negro development within the last decade."²⁷ However, the organization that Wilkins joined was a place where "the pall of office politics and intrigue was thicker than the smog in Los Angeles."²⁸ In a departure from Johnson's relatively

²⁵ George R Metcalf, *Black Profiles* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1971), 88.

²⁶ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, April 10, 1931. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box A17, LOC.

²⁷ Press Release, August 14 1931, NAACP Papers, Microfilm, Part I, Reel 13, LOC.

²⁸ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 116.

collegiate style of management, White had an autocratic approach, and his reluctance to delegate even the simplest of tasks had already sapped morale and created an atmosphere of tension and discontent. Making matters worse, relations between White and Du Bois, which had been tense, to say the least, since the 1920s and had deteriorated further as the battle between the two for severely depleted finances intensified.²⁹

The financial battle came to a head in December 1931 when the budget committee proposed that all salaries be cut by between five and ten per cent, for some support staff be cut, and that the administration of the *Crisis* be handed over to the Association. That was infuriating enough, but when White also presented what Du Bois asserted were misleading, and possibly duplicitous, accounting statements to the Budget Committee, Du Bois instigated a memo challenging White's leadership.³⁰ Four other senior officials: William Pickens, the NAACP's field secretary, Herbert Seligmann, who was director of publicity, Robert Bagnall, the director of branches, and the newly arrived Wilkins, signed it.

The memorandum pulled no punches, "These facts illustrate the utter viciousness of the present method of appointing the Budget Committee and laying facts before it. The slightest disposition to deal fairly with us, would have brought adequate answers to the charge upon which the proposed dismissal of one of our members was predicated. We are not acting under the assumption that we have any vested rights in our positions, but, on the other hand, we do not propose to sit down and allow the Secretary and the Chairman of the Board or any other officers of the Association to malign and traduce us without giving us a reasonable chance to answer."³¹ Wilkins later claimed it made no mention of White "by name", a particularly disingenuous assertion when the final, damning sentence said, "We

²⁹ The internal politics at work in the NAACP during this time are discussed in several biographies and autobiographies of participants including Wilkins with Matthews. *Standing Fast*; B Joyce Ross, *J.E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP* (New York: Atheneum, 1972); David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963* (New York: Henry Holt, 2000), 283-294; Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York: The New Press, 2003), 162-164.

³⁰ The episode is examined in detail in Janken, *White*, 166-167, Ross, *Spingarn*, 133-135 and Levering Lewis, *Du Bois*, 293-294.

³¹ Memorandum, W.E.B. Du Bois, Herbert J Seligman, William Pickens, Robert M Bagnall, Roy Wilkins to Board of Directors, December 1931. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 35, RSC.

have all had considerable and varied experiences but in our several careers we have never met a man like Walter White who under so outward and charming manner has succeeded within a short time in alienating and antagonizing everyone of his colleagues, including all the clerks in the office.”³²

A *coup d'état* was avoided when, encouraged by Joel Spingarn, the NAACP's president, who promised to investigate the charges laid against White and Mary White Ovington, the NAACP's chairman, Wilkins withdrew his support for the memorandum the following day. The other signatories, except Du Bois, were equally quick to recant “so that the Board may not be forced to take some form of action which will grieve your friends.”³³ A repentant Wilkins went further by offering his resignation to White the following day, “I am simply sick over the part I took in that awful mess before the Board yesterday. I regret the whole incident, I withdraw all charges and insinuations, and in decency and respect for you, the work of the Association, and my conscience, I hereby tender my resignation to take effect at your pleasure.”³⁴ This is a curious episode, not least because it raises the question of why Wilkins, with his cautious and rather diplomatic nature, became embroiled when he was far more closely allied to White than Du Bois.

Wilkins' later claim that the memo concerned “administrative procedures” was clearly nonsense. However, all of the signatories, apart from Du Bois, also claimed that they held no animosity to White and that they were surprised that any slight on the integrity of either White or Ovington could have been inferred from the note.³⁵ It is possible that he was compelled to sign the memorandum out of concern about his position or maybe the future of the organization, but any theory would be speculative at best in the absence of any primary evidence explaining the motives of any of the participants. It is possible, too, only to speculate on why White

³² Memo to the Board of Directors from W.E.B. Du Bois, Herbert J Seligman, William Pickens, Robert M Bagnall, Roy Wilkins, December 1931. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box 11, Reel 8. W.E.B. Du Bois Papers, Reel 35, RSC.

³³ Letter, Joel Spingarn to W.E.B. Du Bois, December 29 1931. NAACP Papers, Part 1, Box A17, LOC.

³⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, December 22, 1931 Arthur Spingarn papers, Reel 7, LOC

³⁵ Letter, Herbert J. Seligmann to Walter White, 22 December, 1931; Letter, Robert W Bagnall to Walter White, 22 December, 1931; Letter from William Pickens to Walter White, 22 December 1931. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box A17, LOC.

rejected Wilkins' resignation. Indeed, some months later, when Joel Spingarn suggested Wilkins' position become part-time to save money, White argued that he could not be an effective secretary without Wilkins' assistance.³⁶ The episode did not appear to damage Wilkins' prospects at the Association. Two months after the contentious board meeting, Du Bois took a leave of absence and Wilkins was appointed to serve on the editorial board of the *Crisis*.

While the personal hostility between Du Bois and White was intense, such tensions were not unusual within the NAACP. Records of disputes between one or more members of the national office, board directors and branch officers can be found throughout the Association's archives, with Wilkins seemingly to be often at the centre. Relations between head office and the branches were hardly more cordial. In a letter to regional field secretary Daisy Lampkin in April 1936, Wilkins referred to "some feeling on the part of many of the branches that the National Office is not just as it should be," and he complained that he had spent a futile two years encouraging those "dissenters" to speak openly about their dissatisfaction.³⁷ The dichotomy of the NAACP's structure, where branches were, on the one hand, encouraged to closely follow policy set by the national office, while also remaining relatively autonomous, was a continuing source of difficulty throughout the NAACP's history, and one which Wilkins would have to learn to navigate more carefully as his power within the organization increased.

Wilkins spent much of his first year on the road, meeting members at branches across the country. He also looked for cases of discrimination that the Association could use as part of its litigation and lobbying strategy. For example, in March 1932 he asked William Pickens to investigate reports of discriminatory hiring practices in the construction of the Hoover Dam: "It is a peach of a case for us and we should be able to arouse a good deal of sentiment and also correct the condition in this year of

³⁶ Ross, *J.E. Spingarn*, 136.

³⁷ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Daisy Lampkin, April 20, 1936, NAACP Papers, Part II, Box 230, LOC. Lampkin was one of Wilkins' closest confidantes until her death. Their letters offer convincing glimpses of life at the NAACP's national office not least because Wilkins was more honest in his exchanges with Lampkin than he frequently was in most other correspondence.

politics.”³⁸ However, a less successful component of Wilkins’ role in his early years at the NAACP was managing the Association’s position in the Scottsboro case. The ‘Scottsboro boys’ were nine black youths who had been charged with the rape of two white women while all were hopping rides on a freight train traveling through Alabama in March 1931. All but one of the youths was quickly sentenced to death despite scant evidence of sexual attack and the fact that one of the youths was physically incapable of rape. The sentences proved to be just the beginning of a lengthy, and at times grotesque, chapter of events.³⁹

Given such a blatant and egregious miscarriage of justice, the Scottsboro case should have been an obvious candidate for the Association’s attentions. The nearest NAACP branch was almost defunct, and some miles away in Chattanooga, but it immediately secured the services of a local white lawyer to defend the boys. Unfortunately, the man was a drunk who met with his clients for a mere thirty minutes before the trial. White, partly out of reluctance to tie the NAACP to a seemingly hopeless case, asked for copies of the trial transcripts to be sent to head office for examination by the organization’s legal committee. The committee then took one month to consider the case. Thanks to this hesitation, the International Labor Defense (ILD), a communist-controlled legal organization, stepped in and took command of the case. The Communist Party had made a concerted effort to attract black Americans for some years and had developed a program of self-determination for American blacks which, taken to its logical albeit unlikely, conclusion would create a separate black state. The Scottsboro case was a heaven-sent opportunity to establish the CPUSA in the South, and to mobilize a broad working class base from which to attack capitalism.

Despite the NAACP’s attempts to intervene, the ILD maintained a highly visible and effective campaign that attracted widespread attention across the world.

³⁸ Letter, Roy Wilkin to William Pickens, March 9, 1932. NAACP Papers, Part I, Reel 13, LOC.

³⁹ Over the next two decades, the defendants endured several more trials – Haywood Patterson, for example, was sentenced to death four times. Two US Supreme Court decisions overturned the sentences. Ruby Bates, one of the accusers, dramatically recanted her accusation during the second trial and, in an almost inexplicable act by the Alabama government, four of the ‘boys’ were released in 1943 and 1944 on the same evidence, while the remaining five remained incarcerated. The last ‘Scottsboro Boy’, Andy Wright, finally left prison in 1950.

Moreover, according to one historian, “struck a chord with a population the NAACP had not been able to reach.”⁴⁰ The CPUSA had bombarded prison, court and state officials, and the judge in charge of the trial, with telegrams from across the United States - indeed, across the world - demanding that the boys be freed. The governor of Alabama was said to have received twenty-five thousand telegrams of protest by 1933⁴¹. In 1932, the mother of two of the boys toured Europe visiting over a dozen countries in six months. According to one report, nearly half a million people took part in demonstrations of support.

Although Wilkins was still in salary negotiations with the NAACP, he publicly took White and the Association to task for their caution in the case. Once he joined the staff, he continued to prod White about why the NAACP was not doing more to counteract the ILD’s campaign. In the absence of any word from the NAACP, Wilkins berated White for having to rewrite ILD press releases and distribute them as NAACP press releases to deflect the increasing criticism from the black press about the organization’s silence. In response, when Wilkins arrived at the NAACP, White quickly handed over the Scottsboro case to him. But it was too late. By that time, Wilkins said, the Communist party had “beaten us [the NAACP] out of the starting gates”.⁴²

The very fact that the death sentences of the boys were overturned by the Supreme Court, and eventually commuted, was an extraordinary testament to the power of mass protest. That this action was carried out under the auspices of a group other than the NAACP should have been a cause for concern, regardless of the political persuasion of that group. Charles Houston, the NAACP’s chief counsel, acknowledged as much in 1935: “Through its activity in the Scottsboro case the ILD has made it impossible for the Negro bourgeoisie in the future to be as complacent and supine before racial injustices as it was prior to Scottsboro. It has introduced the Negro to the possibilities and tactics of mass pressure. It has changed the

⁴⁰ Beth Tompkins Bates. “A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941.” *American Historical Review*, 2 (April, 1997), 343.

⁴¹ F. Raymond Daniell, “Flood of Telegrams Assail the Prosecution and Demand Release of Negroes”, *New York Times*, November 19, 1933.

⁴² Janken, *White*, 152; Wilkins with Matthews. *Standing Fast*, 158.

emphasis of the Negro question from a race issue to a class issue."⁴³ Unfortunately, the Association focused on the potential threat from Communism, rather than asking how the Communists had succeeded in mobilizing what should have been the NAACP's natural constituency.⁴⁴ However, the ILD left the case in 1935, leaving the NAACP – and Wilkins – to pick up the pieces.

If Scottsboro was an almost intractable situation, Wilkins secured more success when, at the end of 1932, he was asked carry out an investigation in the heart of the Deep South. Some months earlier, the NAACP had been told that blacks working on federally funded programs to build flood control dams and levees of Mississippi were being paid less than white workers. The board of directors initially commissioned a white woman, Helen Boardman, to investigate the allegations. Boardman reported that black workers were working for much lower pay than whites, without holidays or overtime, and were sometimes even being charged for water they used. According to Boardman, the overseers at the camps treated the black workers little better than slaves.⁴⁵ In one Louisiana camp, thirty black workers were housed in tents the same size as those that accommodated twelve white workers at another camp. No beds were provided so many slept either on straw, in the open air or in nearby barns. At another camp, black workers barely received any pay at all as the charges for tents, cooks and other expenses often equaled more than the pay they were due.⁴⁶

⁴³ Genna Rae McNeil. *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983), 120; Minutes, Board of Directors meeting, January 4, 1932, Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 36, LOC; Letter, William L. Patterson, National Secretary, International Labor Defense, June 1, 1933, NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C402, LOC; Letter, Roy Wilkins to William L. Patterson, June 13, 1933, NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C402, LOC; Letter, Roy Wilkins to William L. Patterson, July 13th, 1933, NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C402, LOC; Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to unnamed recipient (s), November, 3 1933, NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C402, LOC;

⁴⁴ Scottsboro was also notable for highlighting the leftward shift of black Americans, which in turn forced the NAACP to forge new alliances. As historians August Meier and John Bracey argue, the move to the left was emphasized by the migration of blacks from the rural south to the urban north, where the Democratic Party machinery invariably controlled political life. Several organizations on the left, including the Communist party and the Congress of Industrial Organizations, were also taking up the cause of black Americans August Meier and John H Bracey. "The NAACP as a Reform Movement, 1909-1965: 'To Reach the Conscience of America.'" *Journal of Southern History* 1 (February, 1993), 16.

⁴⁵ Charles, 317.

⁴⁶ Report, Investigation of Labor Camps in Federal Flood Control Operations by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. August, 1932. NAACP Papers, Part 1, Box C438. LOC.

Boardman's findings confirmed the NAACP's board's worst suspicions but, having obtained as much information as a white woman could, the board decided that a black male investigator could better fit into the camps and thereby obtain a more detailed and accurate picture of the situation.⁴⁷ In December 1932 Wilkins was dispatched with black journalist George Schuyler to Mississippi; the pair posed as itinerant laborers looking for work. Once at the levee camps, the two separated and walked from camp to camp through the delta trying to find work. The pair claimed to come from Virginia, but Wilkins' disguise was almost uncovered when a landlady in one of the rooming houses in which he stayed pointed out that his soft hands did not look like those of a manual laborer. Wilkins simply told her he'd been "running an elevator".⁴⁸

Schuyler and Wilkins failed to find employment, but they did discover how poverty was forcing blacks in the region into accepting a government-sponsored peonage system. Workers told Wilkins of long hours and low pay, wages of \$1 or \$2 per day depending on the kind of work, and eighteen-hour days or more. Most worked six days a week — spared only a seventh day of labor by religious restrictions that prevented work on Sundays — and all for a payday that may or may not come. A shocked Wilkins reported "Eight months of the year they work for 'Mistuh Somebody' on his plantation, either as a sharecropper or tenant. They are lucky if, with 'Mistuh Somebody's' bookkeeping, they come out even. Everywhere you meet the same grumble: "Nossuh, you cain't make anything. You gets a little somethin' to eat and yo' seed and a place to sleep. No clothes. No cash money, nossuh!"⁴⁹

Wilkins went further: "It is no exaggeration to state that the conditions under which Negroes work in the federally-funded Mississippi levee construction camps approximate virtual slavery."⁵⁰ He laid the blame for the situation firmly with the government. "The War Department knows all about this exploitation on the river. It

⁴⁷ Wilkins, Columbia oral history transcript, 46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴⁹ Roy Wilkins, "Mississippi Slavery in 1933," *The Crisis*, April 1933. Reprinted in *The Crisis*, June/July 1977, 213-214. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 68. LOC.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

knows all about the long hours, the low pay, the commissaries, the beatings, the living conditions in the camps. In every camp there lives a War Department engineer. The flag of the United States floats above his tent and over the sweating backs of the 'free' black citizens who swear allegiance to it."⁵¹ He accused Major General Lytle Brown, the chief of engineers, of becoming outraged not at the conditions described in the NAACP's report but "because Negroes had presumed to poke their noses into the War Department's pet flood control project."⁵²

As a result of Wilkins and Schuyler's investigation, the NAACP proposed a series of measures: a Senate investigation into levee conditions; a limitation on work hours; and the "prevailing rate" of wages for black workers. The Senate decided to reopen its investigation, prompted by a resolution introduced by Senator Robert Wagner (D-NY), a friend of the NAACP. Wilkins urged NAACP members to support Wagner, "The Delta folk are helpless. You are not. You can help put million of dollars in the hands of black workmen on the Mississippi and at the same time wipe out slavery in what is called fondly 'the land of the free.' The investigations eventually bore fruit. In October 1933, the War Department announced that contract workers in the levee camps would receive a guaranteed minimum wage and reduced working hours."⁵³

Although the legislation did not eradicate discriminatory practices in the flood control projects, conditions for black workers did improve, illustrating that putting pressure on the government could bring about social change. More specifically, it was a first step in forcing the federal government to recognize that it bore some responsibility in ensuring its contractors did not operate discriminatory labor practices. On a personal level, the investigation gave Wilkins an opportunity to apply his appetite for campaigning in a tangible way. He rarely became involved in grassroots activity – a point on which Wilkins would be roundly criticized in later years — and the NAACP would frequently cite this episode to refute accusations that Wilkins had done little 'in the trenches.'

⁵¹ Ibid.; Press Release, "NAACP Levee Camp Investigators Jailed and Threatened in Mississippi," January 13, 1933, NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C38, LOC.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Press release, "Levee Camp Workers to Get Higher Pay, Shorter Hours," October 8, 1933. NAACP Papers, Part I, C438, LOC.

Wilkins' work in Mississippi prompted further thought about the limitations, in his opinion, of the Association's legal strategy. If the NAACP was to win "allegiance for our organization among the masses," Wilkins concluded that it needed a broader, more pragmatic approach. In a letter to Arthur Spingarn, Joel Spingarn's brother and, at the time, chairman of the NAACP's legal committee, Wilkins suggested that the Association should become more catholic in its legal strategy, recommending that the Association take on the cases of any black person who needed legal assistance, not simply those where constitutional rights had clearly been violated, although in many cases involving black defendants, particularly in the South, sentencing and civil rights violations went hand in hand. "An organization which is supposed to fight for a square deal and for justice for the Negro is not judged in their minds by the great abstract victories which it wins. It is judged by whether or not it actually can come down to their town and do something to make the law there give them a fair deal."⁵⁴

Wilkins displayed no particular ideological predisposition toward one economic system or

Another; rather, his primary economic concern was to ensure that any economic benefits were equally shared among black and white, his intense patriotism leading him to believe that America's capitalist system offered the best hope of achieving that ambition. However, an interview Wilkins gave for the Ralph Bunche Oral History Project in 1970 gives an indication of his priorities. When asked why the NAACP had not put as much effort into employment or housing issues, Wilkins argued that mechanization was making many of unskilled jobs obsolete:

"Education is the basic problem...you cannot have top employment without top education."⁵⁵ But the continued depression drove some to examine other economic systems, including Socialism and Communism. In addition, some black intellectuals criticized President Roosevelt's New Deal program for failing to address economic disfranchisement.⁵⁶ Influenced by the ideas of Marx, these young intellectuals advocated progress through organized labor. They attacked the

⁵⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Arthur Spingarn, January 16, 1933. NAACP Papers, Part I, Reel 8, LOC.

⁵⁵ Roy Wilkins, interview by Robert Wright, April 29, 1970, New York City, MSRC, 19.

⁵⁶ Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 56.

NAACP's program by arguing that economic deprivation was as much, if not more, of a barrier to black empowerment than a lack of civil rights.

To address the growing ideological divide between young black intellectuals such as Bunche, E. Franklin Frazier and Abram Harris, a faculty colleague of Bunche's at Howard University, and more traditional members of the NAACP's board of directors, Joel Spingarn called for a second Amenia Conference at Troutbeck, his estate in New York.⁵⁷ After much delay and procrastination, which Spingarn's biographer suggests exasperated the NAACP chairman so much it contributed to his resignation as president and board chairman in 1933, the conference finally took place in August of that year.⁵⁸ Although the conference was of minor significance in Wilkins' career at the NAACP, it is worth a brief examination as one of the more illuminating examples of his philosophical position and his thinking about the Association's future role.

Unusually for one so committed to racial integration, Wilkins suggested that no white people be invited to the conference, arguing that the gathering "is for the purpose of determining the restrictions of young colored people to world conditions and United States conditions. We want their reactions. We do not want the reactions of white people who, no matter how intelligent upon the Negro problem, offer their views in rather academic fashion."⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the conference attracted the brightest and best of black intelligentsia. Among those invited to spend three days under canvas on Spingarn's estate were Bunche, Harris and Frazier, Baltimore activist Juanita Jackson, historian Rayford Logan and lawyer Charles Houston.⁶⁰

Although the conference was arranged by the NAACP, Spingarn made it clear to participants that the Association would not govern the agenda. However, that was not the case when the conference was originally planned to take place in the

⁵⁷ The first Amenia Conference took place at Troutbeck in 1916.

⁵⁸ Ross, *J.E. Spingarn*, 174-178. Spingarn withdrew his resignation following pressure from the NAACP's board. He retained these roles until his death in 1939.

⁵⁹ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, June 16 1932. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C229. LOC.

⁶⁰ List, Persons invited to the Amenia Conference, August 18-21, 1933. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C229. LOC.

previous year, when Wilkins asked George Schuyler and others to thinking about the NAACP's program. "In 1910," Wilkins wrote, "the Association's program was regarded as radical, as being a generation head of its time. How is the program regarded today? How should the program be changed or enlarged or shifted or concentrated towards certain ends?"⁶¹ When the conference finally did take place, the NAACP's program was not discussed. Instead, the main conclusion that emerged from Amenia was that the primary problem for black Americans was economic; new cooperation between white and black workers was required that would propel both political and economic change to advance the cause of all workers by lobbying *en masse* for social legislation that had the potential to motivate change in the political structure of the country.⁶²

Abstract discussions on issues such as those heard at Troutbeck were soon pushed aside however as the tensions that had been simmering between the Du Bois and White factions at the NAACP's national office erupted. Du Bois had become an increasingly vociferous critic of the Association, and more particularly Walter White. When he told the Board that he was taking a leave of absence to teach at Atlanta University in September 1933, Du Bois was granted a year's sabbatical and required to do no more than write such editorials and articles as he wished. Du Bois had attempted to circumvent any attempt to allow White any power over the *Crisis* by announcing that George Streater, the magazine's managing editor, would run the magazine as its business manager. The Board however, insisted that Wilkins become joint managing editor with Streater.

The combination was not a happy one. The removal of one of the protagonists in the White-Du Bois battle should have brought some respite from the bickering, but far from bringing peace the fight simply devolved to their seconds-in-command. Wilkins was reluctant to take on any further responsibilities in addition to his role as Assistant Secretary and the work he had acquired following the dismissal of

⁶¹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to George Schuyler, July 15 1932. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C229. LOC.

⁶² Draft press release, From the Publicity Committee, Second Amenia Conference comprising W.E.B. Du Bois, Elmer Carter, Roy Wilkins. Undated. NAACP Papers, Part I, C229. LOC; Report, Findings: Second Amenia (NY) Conference, August 18-21, 1933. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C229. LOC. See also Youth and Age at Amenia, *The Crisis*, October 1933, 226-227. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C229, LOC.

some executive staff during the stringent economy campaign of the previous year. Wilkins made clear his reluctance to take on the additional responsibilities of the *Crisis* as the budget for 1934 was drawn up. He noted it included an additional \$240 to be paid to him "in return for the work which I am expected to perform on the *Crisis*." Wilkins pointed out to members of the budget committee and board of directors that, as he was now "performing the duties of three salaried executives" he had no wish to take on a further role. Leaving the board in no doubt of his position, he wrote: "The \$20 monthly which was allowed for this work I consider merely an honorarium and in no sense a return for the skill, time and hard work involved in the various publicity duties." Wilkins had no intention of putting that skill and time to work at the publication. "Although I am deeply interested in the *Crisis* and its future, I feel that I am now doing about as much work as one man can do. I am not doing that work to my own satisfaction and I feel certain that if I should take on any more, all of my work would suffer."⁶³

Fuelling Wilkins' resentment even further was the fact that his duties on the *Crisis* were undefined. Meanwhile, Streater resented Wilkins' access to board meetings and was particularly incensed when, in January 1934, an editorial committee was created that included Du Bois, Walter White, Wilkins and board members Arthur Spingarn, Lillian Alexander and Louis Wright, but not Streater. He was also dismissive of Wilkins' contribution to the magazine describing it has nothing but "advice and hot air."⁶⁴ Streater's opinions may have been exaggerated, but Wilkins was certainly keen to restore his role on the *Crisis*: "I am simply assisting temporarily, and, in reality, my work is confined to advising."⁶⁵

The friction between the Du Bois and White factions was untenable. Using the *Crisis* as his main platform, Du Bois engaged in a very public power struggle with

⁶³ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to members of the Budget committee, Members of the board present at the November meeting; Mr White, Dr DuBois and Mr Pickens, December 8, 1933. NAACP Papers, Part 1, Box F4, LOC; Wilkins had been paid an additional \$20 per month since March 1933 for the publicity work he had undertaken following the resignation of Herbert Seligmann.

⁶⁴ Ross, *J.E Spingarn*, 199-201; Ross also describes in detail the internecine bickering and political fighting that took place between Du Bois, White, Spingarn and, to a lesser degree Wilkins and Streater, 198-216.

⁶⁵ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Jose H. Sherwood, March 1, 1934. NAACP Papers, Part I, Reel 13, LOC.

Walter White, which ended only when Du Bois wrote a deliberately provocative editorial in the January 1934 issue of the *Crisis*, in which he suggested that segregation could be positive, and even turned to the advantage of black Americans. Du Bois' inflammatory conclusion was that only by uniting in voluntarily segregated collective enterprises would blacks advance.⁶⁶ This of course was in direct opposition to the fundamental philosophy of the NAACP. Du Bois' comments forced the Board to issue a resolution endorsing the NAACP's commitment to ending segregation, and, in an attempt to forestall similar episodes in the future, prohibited officials of the NAACP from criticizing the Association in public. Du Bois promptly made his criticism very public, and very clear, by offering his resignation in July 1934.

During his early years as an editor, Wilkins had taken both Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. Du Bois to task in the pages of the *St Paul Appeal* for their separatist ideas. Wilkins had further rejected Du Bois' Pan-African proposals, arguing that the fight against discrimination should take place within the United States so his views on Du Bois' 1934 polemic were therefore hardly surprising.⁶⁷ Wilkins believed that segregation was an issue of control rather than discrimination. His argument against self-segregation was that it exacerbated the lack of control that affected black Americans by dint of their minority position in American society. He believed that, "a segregated group can always be cut off, be deprived, be denied equality, be denied opportunity and be fed by eyedropper into the general mainstream."⁶⁸ This belief not only anticipated Wilkins' later attitude to the black power movement of the late 1960s, but also informed his skepticism about the efficacy of using techniques like economic boycotts on a large scale.

With Du Bois now removed from the battlefield, the Board initially decided that Wilkins and Streater would continue as co-managing editors. But Streater had had enough. In his resignation letter, he complained that "The peculiar character of the dual managership of *The Crisis* created by the Board places me in a position of 'proving my loyalty' to the Association, while at the same time bearing the major

⁶⁶ The row that waged between White and Du Bois in the pages of the *Crisis* is examined in more detail in Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois*, 337-348.

⁶⁷ Wilkins, *Standing Fast*, 52-53.

⁶⁸ Roy Wilkins, interview by Robert Wright, April 29, 1970, New York City, MSRC, 12

responsibility of the work on *The Crisis*. There is no more impossible task than this especially when the suspicion of disloyalty has already been established.”⁶⁹ The Board appointed Wilkins temporary managing editor until the September board meeting could take a decision.⁷⁰ In the meantime, White proposed that an editor be appointed but only after a selection process that should be conducted with care and caution.⁷¹ Such a process never took place because Wilkins acted as editor, alongside his role as assistant secretary, for a further fifteen years before stepping down in 1949.

Unfortunately, when Wilkins took over the magazine was in a dire condition. “You have no idea of what a task *The Crisis* is at present,” Wilkins wrote to Daisy Lampkin, the NAACP’s field secretary in Pittsburgh. “I do not wish to reflect on anyone because the whole situation has been in the air without any definite plan or any concrete assurance of continuance for more than a year and so some confusion is understandable. However, I had to start from absolute scratch as no plan or outline had been made for the September issue and not a scrap of material had been solicited.”⁷² Wilkins discovered that bills had gone unpaid for up to three months with the effect that “it has slowed up the launching of any ambitious plan for rejuvenating the magazine. I simply have to mark time and do the best I can with the resources at hand.”⁷³

Under Du Bois’ direction the magazine had had a strong literary and intellectual bias. Wilkins was keen to broaden its appeal by shifting the emphasis to include stories of NAACP activities, human interest stories and “editorial comment written for a much larger public than intellectuals.”⁷⁴ Ultimately, if the magazine were to appeal to a much broader audience, Wilkins argued, it might be possible to become

⁶⁹ Letter, George Streater to the Members of the Board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, July 11, 1934. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C287, LOC.

⁷⁰ George Streater left the NAACP shortly after Du Bois and became a union activist in New York City.

⁷¹ Memorandum, Walter White to the Board of Directors, July 9 1934. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box A29. LOC.

⁷² Letter, Roy Wilkins to Daisy Lampkin, August 8, 1934, NAACP Papers, Part 1, Box A29, LOC.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Dr Abram L Harris, Chairman, Committee on Program and Policy of the NAACP, September 6, 1934. James Weldon Johnson Papers, Box 24, Folder 544. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.

a self-supporting publication rather than relying on NAACP subsidies – an attractive prospect in view of its dire financial condition.⁷⁵ Profiles of black entertainers and artists such as musician Fats Waller and sculptor Richmond Barthé were early examples of Wilkins' new editorial strategy. This approach quickly bore fruit. Within a year, he had increased the magazine's circulation [check] and reduced its debt by about twenty-seven per cent.⁷⁶

Du Bois' departure brought only temporary respite to the NAACP. The weight of criticism directed at the Association by participants at the Amenia conference, Du Bois' stinging rebuke of what he viewed as the NAACP's outmoded structure, and the economic impact of the Depression finally prompted the NAACP to undertake a serious review of its program. The Association approached the task in typical fashion by forming a committee. The Committee on Future Plans and Program led by Abram Harris and composed of Rachel Davis Du Bois (no relation to the inestimable W.E.B.), Louis Wright, James Weldon Johnson, Sterling Brown and Mary White Ovington, with Joel Spingarn and Walter White as ex-officio members.

The committee was charged with considering "the future program of the Association in the light of changing national and world conditions."⁷⁷ As a foundation for its work, the committee examined the ideas that had come out of the Amenia conference and from suggestions proposed by participants at the NAACP's annual convention in July 1934. Much of the committee's work was based on an exhaustive study of the Association carried out by Abram Harris. Within three months, the committee submitted its findings and recommendations to the Board. They challenged the NAACP's leadership to either defend its program or change it. The committee's main conclusion was that the NAACP's primary goal of achieving civil rights was redundant if the black masses were still excluded from economic advancement. Representing the committee, Harris argued that the Association had to refashion its structure and rethink its broader objectives.

⁷⁵ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Dr Abram L Harris, Chairman, Committee on Program and Policy of the NAACP, September 6, 1934. James Weldon Johnson Papers, Box 24, Folder 544. Yale.

⁷⁶ Letter, Daisy Lampkin to Roy Wilkins, July 29, 1935, NAACP Papers, Part I, A29. LOC.

⁷⁷ Letter, Walter White to Charles Houston, Aug 7, 1934, NAACP papers, Part I, Box A29, LOC.

Most controversially, the committee proposed that the Association devolve power to local workers and farmers' councils. This would help to build an integrated labor movement where the authority to press for legislative reform would be through local branches rather than an executive office. Such changes would, in effect, transform the Association's head office into little more than a titular administrative centre servicing a national network of workers groups that advocated a purely economic program.⁷⁸ The most effective way to achieve such a structure, Harris suggested, was for the NAACP to use direct action tactics such as strikes, lockouts and other demonstrations carried out by local labor councils to implement his plan.

Wilkins was clearly reluctant to see the intrinsic structure of the Association changed. In a memorandum to Harris prior to the final report, Wilkins questioned "whether there is the need for as sweeping an action as is demanded in some quarters." Instead, he suggested that there should be an opening up of the process of electing board members that would allow ordinary NAACP members to participate.⁷⁹ Preempting future criticism that the Association failed to mobilize its younger members, Wilkins also proposed that the NAACP create a youth program that included college chapters and activities for high school children. He reiterated a similar argument he made earlier to Johnson, that the organization's financial situation was hampering its ability to develop college branches. "A golden opportunity to organize and enlist the colored young people who are keen to be doing something in these changing times is slipping through our fingers" – an opportunity that the Association did not fully embrace until events forced its hand in the 1950s.⁸⁰

Wilkins was less convinced about the Association's litigation strategy. Although he supported the idea of using its legal program as a means of broadening the organization's appeal, Wilkins rejected the idea of defending "every Tom, Dick or Harry just because he happens to be colored." He nevertheless acknowledged that

⁷⁸ The Harris report is discussed in detail in Ross, *J.E. Spingarn*, 218-242; Janken, White, 192-197; Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, 253-256; Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2005); Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Abram Harris, September 6, 1934; Part I, Box A29. LOC.

⁷⁹ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Abram Harris, September 6, 1934. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box 24, JWW Papers, Yale.

⁸⁰ Letter, Roy Wilkins to J.E. Spingarn, February 14, 1934. NAACP Papers, Part 1, Box 287. LOC.

“the masses value an organization for advancement in proportion to the amount of trouble it is able to rescue them from.” Rather than advocate a broad defense strategy, Wilkins proposed: “the strongest mass appeal this organization could have would be its actual defense of flagrant cases, not only of discrimination and color prejudice, but of injustice, of exploitation of the poor.”⁸¹

Unsurprisingly, the Association balked at carrying out most of the proposals contained in the Harris report. Wilkins dismissed the Committee’s findings primarily on financial grounds. For example, the Committee recommended that the NAACP take over the work of the Joint Committee on National Recovery, a coalition of several religious and civic groups including the Association formed in 1933 to collate statistical data as a means of monitoring New Deal programs, which it assessed it could do for \$2500 per year. Wilkins put the figure at nearer \$5000, and argued that it could cost as much as \$12,000 in total to put the various proposals into operation.⁸²

Wilkins was particularly scornful of the committee’s fundraising proposals. Funds could be raised in large part, the committee suggested, by launching a membership drive – an idea that was met with particular scorn by Wilkins. Past experience had shown, Wilkins claimed, that “the only occasions upon which it was possible to raise large sums of money were those occasions involving emotional upheaval over a specific injustice.” Most black Americans, according to Wilkins, were more concerned with “lynching, discrimination, segregation, insult, and denial of opportunities in schools, businesses, and taxation without representation. Only a small minority is at all concerned with the question of integrating the race into the economic and political pattern of the day.” By following a “theoretical social and political program,” the NAACP risked alienating the majority of its supporters and certainly would not “catch the emotional fancy of the people to such an extent that thousands of dollars can be raised or thousands of members induced suddenly to join.”⁸³

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, September 19 1934. Box 24, Folder, 544, James Weldon Johnson papers, Yale.

⁸³ Ibid.

It is hard to agree with Wilkins' contention that most black Americans were more concerned with discrimination than economic issues. Such concerns were more likely to be the preoccupation of the NAACP's head office. Without a doubt the two issues were inextricably linked. However, even when one allows that litigation and lobbying was essential if blacks were to have any hope of equal access to decent housing, jobs and education, Wilkins' argument not only underestimated the desperate need for a means of alleviating the immediate hardship caused by the Depression, but also ignored the necessity of ensuring an economic process by which black Americans could prosper when the Depression was finally over. Wilkins' was never entirely comfortable with programs designed to appeal to the masses.

In the months between the submission of the Committee's report in September 1934 and the NAACP's annual convention in July the following year, the Board of Directors worked hard to dilute most of the proposals. Its fate was sealed when the denuded report was finally brought to the convention delegates approved it with little debate: The Association maintained its existing structure. White's own position was strengthened when he was put in charge of implementing the new program. Wilkins and the other executive officers remained firmly in place.

Despite the reluctance of the national office to implement many of the more far-reaching changes Harris recommended, the confluence of forces was powerful enough that, by the latter half of the 1930s, the organization was directing an economic program alongside its pursuit of civil rights. As with most instances where the NAACP revised its priorities, this decision was based more on pragmatism rather than on philosophy. Howard Sitkoff suggests that simply surviving was a major challenge for most civil rights groups. At 69 Fifth Avenue funds from wealthy patrons became scarce while membership dues from grassroots members disappeared almost completely.⁸⁴

It is certainly true that pressure from other groups, notably the Communist Party, forced the NAACP to accelerate its activities. Moreover, despite Wilkins' conviction that the majority of black Americans were more concerned with discrimination, it

⁸⁴ Sitkoff. *A New Deal*, 247; The number of members fell from 90,000 in 1920 to 50,556 by 1940. Undated profile of NAACP, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A232, LOC.

was also becoming obvious that economic issues were of primary concern to its membership. However, the NAACP's limited changes to its programs did little to quell dissent among the black elite, who continued to argue that economic deprivation was as much, if not more, of a barrier to black empowerment than a lack of civil rights. Du Bois, who was frequently eager to denigrate the Association, and more particularly White and Wilkins, issued a statement in 1934 that damned the national office: "This organization, which has been great and effective for nearly a quarter of a century, finds itself in a time of crisis and change, without a program, without effective organization, without executive officers who have either the ability or disposition to guide the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in the right direction."⁸⁵

Ralph Bunche, one of the organization's most vociferous critics, speculated about how effective the organization could really be, accused the organization of having to 'tone down its militancy' to conform to 'genteel programs of interracial conciliation.' In a particularly stinging indictment, published at the end of the decade, Bunche wrote that the NAACP had to 'bargain, compromise, and even capitulate in order to win petty gains or hollow victories.'⁸⁶ The lack of a broad, grassroots membership base also continued to provoke Bunche. In Gunnar Myrdal's exhaustive study of race in America, in which the NAACP chapter was largely based on an earlier memorandum of Bunche's, the Association's lack of mass support was cited as an "indisputable weakness." Wilkins acknowledged this but added that "I believe we are on the way to doing something about it."⁸⁷

Wilkins appears to have shared the reluctance of his colleagues at the national office to pursue an agenda that would transform the NAACP into a mass organization. Although he was eager to highlight the Association's forays into direct action protests, and was keen to publicly support demonstrations and boycotts, Wilkins viewed such activities primarily as useful tools with which to

⁸⁵ Press Release, "WEB Du Bois to the Board of Directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People," July 1, 1934. NAACP Papers, Part I, C287. LOC.

⁸⁶ Ralph J Bunche, "The Programs of Organizations Devoted to the Improvement of the Status of the American Negro," *Journal of Negro Education*, 8:3 (July, 1939): 546.

⁸⁷ The NAACP's strategy and structure are examined in Gunnar Myrdal. *An American Dilemma* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 819-836; Wilkins cited in Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, 836.

prod lawmakers into passing civil rights legislation. His training as a newspaperman also suggests that he recognized the publicity value in direct action. An episode in December 1934 illustrates this approach. The US Attorney General, Homer Cummings, had convened a conference in Washington, DC on crime but refused, despite the NAACP's prompting, to place a discussion of lynching on the conference agenda. Wilkins suggested to Walter White that the Association's local branch picket the conference venue as a means of highlighting the issue. White not only agreed with the idea he encouraged Wilkins to take part in the demonstration, something Wilkins appeared extremely reluctant to do, claiming that speaking engagements prevented him from participating. White, not to be deflected, replied by telegram. "Picketing is one of most important tasks now before us and should take precedence over any speaking engagements. If picketing flops or is inadequately publicized Association prestige and Costigan-Wagner bill fight will undoubtedly suffer. Your aid and presence may mark margin between failure and success."⁸⁸

Wilkins eventually complied and was promptly arrested alongside three other NAACP picketers and charged with violating an obscure law that prohibited the carrying of signs for advertising purposes. The arrests, followed by a larger demonstration of sixty people, led the Attorney General to allow members of the Washington Bar Association, an organization for black lawyers, to attend the closing sessions of the conference, although the final outcome was an "almost meaningless resolution" condemning lynching. Nevertheless, the Association made full use of Wilkins' arrest, releasing a press statement and displaying a photograph of Wilkins and the other picketers on the cover of the January 1935 issue of *The Crisis*.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Telegram, Walter White to Roy Wilkins, December 7, 1934; Telegram, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, December 7, 1934; Telegram, Walter White to Roy Wilkins, December 8, 1934; Telegram, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, December 8, 1934. NAACP Papers, Part 1, C230. LOC.

⁸⁹ Press Release, "Police Arrest NAACP Pickets at National Crime Conference," December 14, 1934. NAACP Papers, Part 1, C230, LOC; *The Crisis*, January 1935, cover, 26. NAACP Papers, Part 1, C431. LOC.

One of Wilkins' other motives in suggesting the picket was to give the Washington branch "something definite to do."⁹⁰ While Wilkins and his colleagues may have been wary of a mass organization and direct action, motivating existing branches and members was an essential component in achieving their objectives. He was often dismissive of the NAACP's constituency, accusing them of, among other sins, complaisance and lethargy. Bemoaning the attitude of blacks to the legal work of the Association, he complained, "People behind jail bars usually manage to loose a healthy "Help!" to 69 Fifth Avenue, New York; but they are deaf as a post when 69 Fifth Avenue sends out the same cry."⁹¹

In later years, this translated into a frustration at what Wilkins perceived to be ingratitude on the part of blacks about the NAACP's achievements, particularly when the Association was criticized for lagging behind more militant groups. He explained to Charles Houston following the picketing demonstration that the Washington, DC branch had been very timid in response to his suggestion, leading him to fear the worst. Wilkins argued that the fact the branch was able to recruit another sixty demonstrators after the pickets were arrested was an indication, "that there are tremendous sources of interest and activity that we are not tapping because of the lack of vision of some of the people in power in our branches."⁹²

Despite the lethargy of some NAACP branches, the effect of the depression increased political awareness among others, particularly those branches in northern manufacturing cities who were beginning to find common ground with some labor organizations. Unions had been given a boost by the passing of the National Labor Relations Act in 1935, known as the Wagner Act, which protected the rights of workers in the private sector to organize unions, strike and participate in collective bargaining thus greatly strengthening the unions. However, in spite of this new *rapprochement*, the relationship between labor organizations and blacks – and indeed the NAACP – had never been comfortable. The main federation of unions, the American Federation of Labor (AFL) operated an openly racist policy. Its

⁹⁰ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, November 21, 1934; NAACP Papers, Part I, C230. LOC.

⁹¹ Cited in Charles, 763.

⁹² Letter, Roy Wilkins to Charles Houston, December 19, 1934. NAACP Papers, Part 1, C230. LOC.

member unions confined blacks to segregated chapters or excluded them altogether. Employers frequently manipulated blacks into acting as strikebreakers, much to the fury of unions and white workers.

The NAACP received numerous complaints from black workers in all industries and regions about discriminatory pay and conditions. For example, in New York City, black motion picture operators, working within a union, were restricted to working in cinemas in Harlem, not paid overtime, and paid less than their white peers. In the construction industry, black workers reported that union officials colluded with contractors to restrict employment opportunities for blacks. Wilkins also cited one instance of a small clothing manufacturer whose workforce was primarily composed of black workers. As soon as his factory was unionized, the union attempted, unsuccessfully, to have all the black workers dismissed in order to employ white women.⁹³

Wilkins was as aware as his peers at the Amenia conference that black Americans could not enjoy economic empowerment until unions had been desegregated and discriminatory practices abolished. An editorial in the October 1934 issue of *The Crisis* pointed out the greater implications inherent in union-sanctioned discrimination. Some companies in Georgia and Alabama, with the very vocal support of politicians and judges, not only refused to comply with minimum wage levels stipulated by the National Recovery Administration (NRA) but also resisted paying black workers the same as white. One Alabama Judge, Max L. McRae, summed up the prevailing resistance: "There will be no Negroes pushing wheelbarrows and boys driving trucks getting forty cents an hour when the good white men and white women working in the fields alongside these roads, can hardly earn forty cents a day."⁹⁴ Questioning whether the administrators of the NRA would recognize and therefore deal with egregious examples of discrimination sanctioned by state governments, legislatures and judiciary, the editorial asked, "If the nine million Negroes in the thirteen southern states out of a

⁹³ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Charles Houston, July 8, 1935. NAACP Papers, Part 1, Reel 13. LOC.

⁹⁴ Editorial, "The Cats Come Out of the Bag", *The Crisis*, October 1934, 300-301, NAACP Papers, Part 1, C436. LOC. It should be noted that editorials published in *The Crisis* were unsigned and were often written by members of the NAACP's board and national officers as well as Wilkins. However, given Wilkins' role as editor, it can be reasonably assumed that these articles were a close approximation of his own philosophy and beliefs.

total population of thirty-four millions are to be shut out of the Recovery program, can there be any recovery for Dixie?"⁹⁵

In the same editorial Wilkins expressed his frustration over discriminating labor unions. Citing a recent strike organized by steel workers in Milwaukee with the specific aim of forcing out black workers using the powers granted by the recent Wagner Act, he argued that "union labor strategy seems to be to form a union in a given plant, strike to obtain the right to bargain with the employers as the sole representative of labor, and then to close the union to black workers, effectively cutting them off from employment." The solution, he suggested, would arrive when, "sooner than most people think, the rank and file workers are going to scrap the craft union structure, dump the A.F. of L. overboard, and organize industrial unions without a color line. Then we will have a real labor movement in this country."⁹⁶

The editorial proved to be prescient when, in 1935, the Committee for Industrial Organization (CIO), another federation of unions that was far more militant than the AFL, was formed.⁹⁷ Most importantly, the CIO was open to black workers. Offering its approval at this turn of events, the NAACP at the Association's 1936 convention officially endorsed the CIO. By the late 1930s, union activists were now leading some of the NAACP's branches and were pushing the organization leftwards. White, the ever-watchful guardian of the NAACP's position, also recognized the value of attracting black workers. Deeds followed words in 1941 when White helped shore up black support for a strike called by the United Automobile Workers (UAW) union in Detroit. The precise effects of his intervention are debatable, but there is no doubt that in encouraging the local

⁹⁵ Editorial, "The Cats Come Out of the Bag", *The Crisis*, October 1934, 300-301, NAACP Papers, Part 1, C436. LOC.

⁹⁶ Editorial, "Union Labor Again", *The Crisis*, October 1934, 300. NAACP Papers, Part I, C436. LOC. The craft structure was the organization of a labor union on the basis of the specific skills of its members for example, carpenters, electricians or engineers. Such a structure allowed for the easy exclusion of less skilled workers from becoming members. A relatively contemporary examination of the racial policies of the major unions towards black workers can be found in Herbert R. Northrup. "Organized Labor and Negro Workers," *Journal of Political Economy*, (June 1943), 206-221. Reprinted in Ed. Bernard Sternsher, *The Negro in Depression and War* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1969), 127-149

⁹⁷ The CIO was renamed the Congress of Industrial Organizations in 1938 when it became a fully-fledged independent rival to the AFL. The CIO followed a philosophy of industrial unionsim whereby a union was open all workers in an industry regardless of skills.

branch to support the UAW the NAACP gained a powerful ally in the labor movement. It also cemented a mutually beneficial alliance with the CIO that would last for another two decades.⁹⁸

The benefits of collaborating with labor groups were not confined to political power. Several historians have pointed to a correlation between the increased militancy of branches that was a result of rising political awareness and a growth in memberships.⁹⁹ The expansion was dramatic. Membership in Detroit for example doubled between 1939 and 1942, in Houston, membership grew from one hundred in 1937 to five thousand six years later, and New Orleans rose from a moribund one hundred or so in 1938 to six thousand in four years.¹⁰⁰ Korstad and Lichtenstein cite the Winston-Salem branch in North Carolina, which only became a mass organization when the local CIO union became involved in a membership drive.¹⁰¹ To some extent, the NAACP's association with the CIO allowed it to fend off one of the strongest criticisms of the organization: its reluctance to involve itself with the masses and mass action.

By 1940 the composition of many urban NAACP branches had changed beyond recognition. An increasingly youthful and militant presence, driven primarily by labor activists, had replaced the middle class leaders of previous years. The influence of a generation was also reflected in the NAACP's head office where new additions to the staff were eager to move the organization forward with an ambitious legal strategy. Helping Houston lead the NAACP's litigation program was Thurgood Marshall who joined the Association in 1936. Marshall was a *protégé* of Houston at Howard Law School and had been handling cases for the NAACP through his own practice in Baltimore.

⁹⁸ White's biographer, Kenneth Janken, disputes the efficacy of White's intervention as told by White himself in a self-aggrandizing chapter of his autobiography. Janken, *White*, 252.

⁹⁹ Bates, 369; Ray Marshall, "The Negro and Organized Labor," *Journal of Negro Education* 32:4 (Autumn 1963): 381; Korstad and Lichtenstein. "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement", *Journal of American History* 75:3 (December 1988): 792.

¹⁰⁰ Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890-2000* (Penguin, London, 2002), 184.

¹⁰¹ Korstad and Lichtenstein, 792.

The two men were temperamentally very different: Wilkins was cautious, measured and bureaucratic, while Marshall was charismatic but disorganized and whose usual expression made him look like “a skeptical house detective listening to the alibi of a philandering husband caught *in flagrante* with a lady of the night.”¹⁰² Wilkins and Marshall were of similar ages, lived in the same neighborhood and often traveled to work together. Their different managerial styles sometimes led to minor clashes, but on the whole Wilkins appears to have been professionally closer to Marshall than to any other colleague at the national office. Wilkins’ caustic tone, particularly in inter-office memoranda, was notorious, and Marshall was occasionally a recipient; however, most exchanges depict a harmonious and humorous working relationship — something unusual among the NAACP’s senior officers.

Although Wilkins was not closely involved with the development of the legal strategy, given the importance of the NAACP’s legal strategy to its activities and programs, a brief overview is warranted to illustrate the shifting emphasis within the national office during this period. The Association had relied on litigation to win several important battles since its foundation. Legal campaigns to fight white primaries, restrictive covenants and discrimination in public transport were fundamental components of this strategy. In 1935, however, the NAACP’s chief counsel, Charles Houston, decided that the heart of its legal program should be an attack on inequalities in education. Houston and his legal team continued to fight employment discrimination, restrictive housing covenants and tactics that prevented blacks from voting but he focused his attention on discrimination in public education. It was an ambitious program. Initially filing lawsuits on behalf of black individuals who had been refused admission to graduate schools, the Association’s lawyers secured a series of precedents that culminated in the *Brown v Board of Education* ruling almost twenty years later that would dismantle the legal framework of segregation. At the same time, the Association took on the challenge of equalizing black teachers’ pay and school facilities for black children.

Against this backdrop, the rumblings of war in Europe grew louder. “All America,” said Wilkins in a December 1939 radio talk, “is watching the drama of

¹⁰² Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 162.

the great world war now in progress overseas." No group watched more closely he added "than Negro citizens."¹⁰³ Wilkins questioned how America could be appalled by the Nazis' treatment of Jews in Europe but not be equally appalled by the treatment of black Americans at home. "If it is a disgrace to make one race scrub a sidewalk in Vienna, is it not equally a disgrace to issue passes without which Negro Americans cannot even walk certain streets of a large southern city?"¹⁰⁴ Wilkins summed up the dilemma thus, "Until a Negro can study medicine at the University of Michigan, we cannot make a convincing argument why Jews should be permitted to study at Heidelberg."¹⁰⁵ By the time the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Wilkins was already in the midst of war preparations. At thirty-nine, he was too old to qualify for conscription. Instead, Fiorello La Guardia, New York City's mayor, asked Wilkins to serve on a local draft board. There is no record of his activities in either his own collection of papers or in the NAACP's archives, but the inequality he came across — based on class as well as race — led him to say later, "I never had a harder job."¹⁰⁶

Demand for equal participation was even stronger in 1941 than it had been during the First World War, and the flimsy offering of segregated units with limited roles was highly unpopular. Black leaders and the black press faced a dilemma between patriotism and protest. On the one hand, the blatant discrimination evident in the Jim Crow military, segregated blood supplies, iniquities in war industries, and city housing projects, to cite just a few examples, made a mockery of Roosevelt's call for a protection of the 'Four Freedoms'¹⁰⁷. On the other hand, many blacks, despite the injustices they experienced every day, felt a patriotic duty to fight for their country. This dilemma was not new. Frederick Douglass urged blacks to fight with union troops during the civil war, and Du Bois famously called for blacks to 'close ranks'

¹⁰³ Transcript, Roy Wilkins address on WPEN, Philadelphia, PA. December 10, 1939. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C191. LOC.

¹⁰⁴ Transcript, December 10, 1939. NAACP Papers, LOC.

¹⁰⁵ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 98.

¹⁰⁶ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 176.

¹⁰⁷ The Four Freedoms were: freedom of speech and expression, freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear. Transcript, Franklin D Roosevelt, Annual Address to Congress, January 6, 1941. Franklin D. Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/4free.html>.

and support the war effort during the First World War.¹⁰⁸ The paradox of fighting for democracy abroad while facing rampant discrimination at home, however, was no more lost on the blacks of 1941 than on those who faced the same quandary in 1917. This dilemma was brought home vividly and personally to Wilkins in January 1941 when his brother Earl died after battling tuberculosis for many years and was buried in a segregated cemetery.

The *Pittsburgh Courier*, one of the leading black newspapers, attempted to address the dilemma between patriotism and protest, by creating the 'Double V' campaign, which called for 'victory abroad and victory at home', within which it framed its opinions, editorials and news reporting.¹⁰⁹ The day after the Pearl Harbor attack, Wilkins was part of a group of twenty black editors to confer with the War Department on the policies the department was putting in place around the more effective use of black soldiers. Of that group, only three identified segregation of the military as "the main trouble with the army." It seemed nonsensical to Wilkins that no matter how many superficial measures the War Department put in place, black volunteers were still being turned away, simply because the four black regiments were full. This self-defeating policy, he noted meant that "the Army never would secure maximum use of Negro manpower or maximum morale."¹¹⁰ But for the intensely patriotic Wilkins the fundamental question was, "will we be permitted to give everything we are so anxious to give?"¹¹¹

As a shortage of jobs became a shortage of labor, training schemes were established to re-train workers. Blacks were frequently refused entry. Egregious discrimination in the military and the defense industries was rife, and anger at the evident economic discrepancies grew. Roosevelt's 'Arsenal for Democracy' program was

¹⁰⁸ Lee Finkle. *Forum for Protest*. (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1975), 110.

¹⁰⁹ In 1942, another black newspaper, the *Chicago Defender*, carried a similar campaign: "Remember Pearl Harbor but don't forget Sikeston," in commemoration of a lynching that took place in Sikeston, Missouri on January 25, 1942, the month following the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

¹¹⁰ Roy Wilkins, Oral History interview, Columbia, 83-86.

¹¹¹ Transcript, C.A. Franklin, editor of the *Kansas City Call*, a panelist on the subject of Functions of a Minority Press in War Time, which was moderated by Roy Wilkins. WHAS, Louisville, Kentucky, June 12 1943. NAACP Papers, Part II, A564. LOC.

unlikely to offer much alleviation for black workers.¹¹² As Wilkins later said, "It was pretty obvious we would have a problem. There were many indications of this - just ordinary applications for work were being turned down, - Factory after factory, industry after industry, and it all accumulated into this."¹¹³ As a result, new organizations emerged as pressure groups to lobby for an end to discrimination within the armed forces, and for equality of employment opportunity.¹¹⁴

Although these new groups lacked the organizational structure of the NAACP they proved to be the first real challengers to the NAACP. A shift had taken place in black communities during the Depression. African-Americans who had moved to northern cities during the twenties and thirties were now more prosperous, better educated and politically engaged than their southern or rural counterparts and they were indeed ready to fight - but not necessarily the armies of the Axis powers. Wilkins recognized the change in mood and the need for the Association to engage with a far broader constituency than its existing membership, but that recognition did not easily translate into action. Prompted by a relatively unsuccessful finance campaign, in March 1939 he urged Walter White to consider a restructuring of the NAACP's organization of branches. Wilkins advocated establishing multiple NAACP branches in cities where the population was large enough, arguing that "no other organization that attempts to organize the masses and to get mass support for a program entrusts its program and activities in one city to one group." He also reiterated his belief that the Association needed to popularize its program if it was to attract more members and more revenue. "It seems to me that we should explore every possibility of increasing the membership, and that the greater part of our ingenuity should be expended in that direction."¹¹⁵

¹¹² The 'Arsenal for Democracy' program was first proposed by President Roosevelt in a fireside chat broadcast on December 29, 1940. Roosevelt proposed that the United States support Britain in its fight against Nazi Germany with armaments and that American manufacturers should turn over their plants to the production of armaments and other supplies for war.

¹¹³ Ibid., 78.

¹¹⁴ Groups included the National Committee on Negroes in Defense Industries and the Conference of National Organizations.

¹¹⁵ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, March 11, 1939. NAACP Papers, Part I, Box C191. LOC.

Some attempts had already been made to expand and energize the NAACP's membership, most notably by the introduction of youth councils in March 1934. The youth councils were established to involve young people in supporting the Association's national program but also "to develop an intelligent, militant youth leadership."¹¹⁶ However, the program did not proceed with any haste, for which Wilkins blamed the Board of Directors. When, for example, Gloster Current, chairman of the Association's central youth council committee, proposed the organization of multiple youth councils in 1938, Wilkins complained to White that the Board had failed to discuss the proposals for many months and warned that by taking no action, "the young people will lose interest and we will lose that many members."¹¹⁷

It is difficult to ascertain whether this inaction can be attributed to philosophical disagreements about tactics or simply bureaucratic inertia, but Wilkins certainly believed that the organization's conservative approach in a more militant climate was damaging both to the organization's finances and its reputation. Pointing out the increase in available funds for left-wing causes, Wilkins wrote to White, "Our cautious conservatism has kept us standing still while a great many persons who were sympathetic with us years ago have become more and more progressive. In the meantime, of course, our conservative and respectable friends have not backed up their supposed esteem of the association and their advice on procedure with money."¹¹⁸

In May 1941 A. Philip Randolph, leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, called for one hundred thousand blacks to participate in a March on Washington to protest against discrimination in factories producing military hardware. Randolph made such efficient use of the NAACP's branch network to mobilize the public that the threat of tens of thousands of angry blacks on the streets of Washington was enough to propel the president into issuing Executive Order 8802, which created

¹¹⁶ Report, Tentative Plan of Organization of the Youth Councils of the NAACP, 1936. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 56. LOC.

¹¹⁷ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, March 11, 1939. NAACP Papers, Part I, Reel 14, LOC.

¹¹⁸ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, March 22, 1939. NAACP Papers, Part 1, Reel 4, LOC.

the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) to combat discrimination in the defense industry.¹¹⁹ The order stated explicitly that “there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or government because of race, creed, color or national origin.”¹²⁰

Strong words, but despite suggestions from some quarters that this was the most important federal mandates since the Emancipation Proclamation it was mostly a symbolic victory. However, that symbolism should not be underestimated, and the FEPC is notable for several reasons. For the first time since the Civil Rights Act of 1875, the federal government issued a mandate against discrimination, which in itself provided an impetus for both black leaders and the black community to renew their efforts to obtain equal rights. The cooperation between blacks and a government office was also unique. In addition, the provisions that instructed employers and government agencies to ensure ‘equitable participation’ were forerunners of affirmative action programs. Nevertheless, the FEPC occupied a precarious position throughout its history. Roosevelt refused to give the commission the power to prosecute violations. This impotence was exacerbated by the absence of congressional approval and funding, thanks to continued southern political objections.

Although the organization that arose out of Randolph’s initial call, the March on Washington Movement (MOWM), was short-lived, its proposals on the use of non-violent direct action anticipated the modern civil rights movement.¹²¹ As Harvard Sitkoff argues, despite the underlying philosophy of non-violence, Randolph’s strident rhetoric was a departure from the more conciliatory approach of more traditional organizations such as the NAACP. “His readiness to threaten rather than implore, to demonstrate rather than confer, became the model for others to

¹¹⁹ The committee was known as COFEP for the first two years of its existence but when the old committee was abolished and the FEPC was created in its place. The history of the FEPC is examined most extensively in Merl E Reed, *Seedtime for the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991).

¹²⁰ Albert P Blaustein and Robert L Zangrando, eds., “*Civil Rights and the American Negro*” (New York, Washington Square Press, 1968), 358.

¹²¹ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto*, revised edition (New York: Hill and Wang, 1970) 252.

follow," and in doing so, forced the NAACP along with him.¹²² Randolph's movement inspired the NAACP to mobilize those groups that had a vested interest in the FEPC, the continued existence of which had become a priority for the Association.¹²³ Therefore, the NAACP joined forces with Randolph despite fears that the activities of his organization would overlap, or even overtake, those of local NAACP branches. Despite Wilkins' later claims that the MOWM posed no threat to the NAACP's identity, he admitted that the objectives and ideas of the two groups were very similar.¹²⁴ Even with the FEPC in place, Randolph continued to agitate for greater federal action to end discrimination. Using the MOWM as a national pressure group, he employed the threat of mass black protest until the organization finally expired in 1946.¹²⁵

Wilkins' frustration with the Association's structure may have caused him to contemplate leaving the NAACP for greener pastures elsewhere. When he was offered the editorship of the *Amsterdam News*, a New York-based black weekly newspaper, in 1941, Wilkins took the offer very seriously. As he wrote to White, "I frankly am concerned about the future of the NAACP and my place in it. I have been disturbed because no effort has been made at some sort of financial stabilization which would give some years of security to the persons who work hard over a period of years." He also grumbled about the "muddling of the vitally necessary reorganization of our branch structure." He asked White: "If I am to choose the NAACP as a career I would want to have some more assurance than I have now that a sincere effort will be made towards stabilizing the Association and that some attempt at insuring a measure of financial security will be made."¹²⁶ To keep Wilkins in place, White appealed to his not insubstantial ego, "As editor of the *Crisis*, and a top ranking official of the NAACP you occupy a place in American life of prestige greater than you possibly could do as editor of one of a number of papers. Prestige and honor butter no carrots nor pay any rent, I know, but they are

¹²² Sitkoff. *A New Deal*, 316.

¹²³ The FEPC expired in 1946.

¹²⁴ Transcript, Roy Wilkins Oral History interview, Columbia, 82.

¹²⁵ *Why Should We March?* Leaflet published by the March on Washington Movement, 1943. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 37, LOC.

¹²⁶ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, September 25, 1941, NAACP Papers, Part 17, Reel 29, University of Cambridge Library (UCL).

intangible which are not valueless.”¹²⁷ The editorship of a newspaper such as the *Amsterdam News* would have given him a powerful platform within the black community, but the reach of the black press was narrow, and the very discrimination that the NAACP was working to abolish would likely have prevented him from taking up a position in government or the white media. Despite the possible lack of alternative opportunities, Wilkins appears to have stayed at the Association out of a conviction that it was the best organization to fulfill the dream of equal citizenship.

A study commissioned by the Committee on Administration in 1941 confirmed Wilkins’ worst fears when it found that the structure of the national office was not conducive to either closer involvement with branches or even acting as a simple conduit of information. The report also found that the national office’s tendency to view branches simply as moneymaking operations led to intermittent activity rather than sustained and effective support of the Association’s program.¹²⁸ But it did little to address this problem. Despite being an organization based on grassroots membership, the NAACP appeared to be uncomfortable with an idea of giving the membership a more active role in the organization.

The war years began to show a dramatic increase in membership, and Wilkins recognized that although “we have the largest organization in our history, we have not worked out a program of activity for the local branches which will make our membership an organized group all working towards a common objective.”¹²⁹ In May 1942, the Association’s national officers attended a weekend conference to discuss the problems the NAACP was facing. Wilkins’ proposals suggest several common themes: an apathy that hindered the creation of a more dynamic activity program, a lack of coherent planning and, most importantly, a confusion not only

¹²⁷ Letter, Walter White to Roy Wilkins, September 27, 1941, NAACP Papers, Part 17, Reel 29, UCL.

¹²⁸ An appraisal of branch work and methods, Ella Baker, Daisy Lampkin, Madison Jones and Frederic Morrow, Undated but approximately Autumn 1941, NAACP papers, Reel 40, UCL.

¹²⁹ Minutes, Suggestions in Reference to the Week-End Staff Conference Submitted to the Secretary by the Various Executives of the National Office, May, 1942. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A579. LOC

on the part of its branches and departments but also within its own national office about the NAACP's methods and aims.¹³⁰

Wilkins main fear was that other groups, particularly the Communists, would step into the vacuum. He cited, as an example, the Veterans Committee Against Discrimination, which the NAACP had allowed to "take the play away" from the organization when it picketed the Senate in protest at the possible closure of the FEPC. Branch members needed work to do, Wilkins argued, and "If the NAACP does not give them work, they turn to other organizations that do offer activity in the cause."¹³¹ Wilkins took a keen interest in the Association's branch network and in 1942 it was even proposed that he fill the vacant role of Director of Branches, a position eventually given to Ella Baker. Although he turned down the proposal on the basis that he was not convinced in his own ability to do what was a highly important job, he nevertheless had several ideas on how the branch organization could be improved. In particular, he argued that the NAACP's existing branch structure did not allow its branches to reach as many people as they could. To remedy this, Wilkins proposed breaking up larger branches into smaller neighborhood units to encourage a more diverse base and local leadership. The suggestion prompted much discussion but, as was often the case with the NAACP's more introspective exercises, nothing was implemented. In this instance, Wilkins was asked to prepare a memorandum listing the details of the plan, which would then be distributed among committee members for further discussion with the aim of producing a final proposal to present to the NAACP's board.¹³² It is hardly surprising that such a bureaucratic process thwarted many attempts to reorganize the NAACP and subdued the enthusiasm of some of its more energetic officers.

Problems at the Association's head office were not confined to its relationship with the branches. Ella Baker, who would become a pivotal member of the civil rights

¹³⁰ Minutes, Suggestions in Reference to the Weekend Staff Conference Submitted to the Secretary by the Various Executives of the National Office, May, 1942. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A579. LOC.

¹³¹ Memorandum from Roy Wilkins to Walter White, March 7, 1946. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 36, LOC.

¹³² Minutes, Meeting for the Committee on Program, Analysis and Planning, August 28, 1942. NAACP Papers, Part II, A128. LOC.

movement, joined the NAACP in 1940 as field secretary and became Director of Branches in 1943. Her tenure was short-lived. When she resigned in 1946 her resignation letter painted a picture of a confused, demoralized and discouraged staff. Baker directed most of her many stinging criticisms at White, pointing to a culture where “an almost complete lack of appreciation for the collective thinking of the staff seems to prevail.” She complained about the absence of any full staff meetings to discuss the Association’s future plans for two years, bureaucracy that hindered the smooth running of the office, the lack of consultation with staff members, and an atmosphere of suspicion and duplicity that caused “a disproportionate amount of staff energy [was] consumed in fighting a sense of futility and frustration.” As a final, damning indictment of the Association’s national office, she closed by saying “I came to the Association because I felt that I could make a contribution to the struggle for human justice and equality. I am leaving because I feel that there must be some way to do this without further jeopardizing one’s integrity and sense of fair play.”¹³³ Wilkins responded with great regret at Baker’s resignation, “I cannot let your resignation take effect on July 15 without telling you how very much I have appreciated many of the things you have tried to do.”¹³⁴

Baker’s depressing portrait of an organizational culture steeped in suspicion, personal intrigue, and obfuscation had been festering for some years. An odd, but not isolated, incident that began in September 1943 and continued for some weeks, illustrates not only the ambiguous relations between White and Wilkins but also the politics at work between some board members and the assistant secretary. It began when one of the Association’s directors, John Hammond, reported that Wilkins had complained loudly and drunkenly to him about White’s leadership while at a party. Eighteen months later, during a Committee on Administration meeting at which White had left the room and Wilkins was not in attendance, Hammond was alleged to have told other board members that Wilkins “cordially disliked” White, that “the whole trouble is a split between Walter and Roy” and

¹³³ Letter, Ella Baker to Walter White, May 14, 1946, NAACP papers, Part II, Box A573. LOC.

¹³⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Ella Baker, July 3, 1946. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A573. LOC. Ella Baker’s tenure at the NAACP is examined in detail in Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2003), 105-146.

"Roy is jealous of Walter and his position and prestige and this is the root of the problem."¹³⁵

Wilkins immediately sent Hammond an outraged letter asking for proof of his contentions. Fuelling Wilkins' further outrage, he discovered that Hammond continued to make similar remarks once White returned to the room. Hammond's comments met with a resounding silence from White, which Wilkins took as an indication that White believed the accusations. In an indignant memorandum to White defending himself against Hammond's allegations, Wilkins not only denied making these particular remarks but, disingenuously, claimed to have supported and defended White throughout his time at the NAACP, including during the Du Bois-led revolt against White in which Wilkins took part shortly after joining the Association.¹³⁶ "The more I think back, the more incomprehensible the present development seems. I could have imagined that we might have differed so sharply on policy that I would have had to bow out. But to be accused of disloyalty, jealousy, and underhand work in the face of this record is something I could never have imagined could happen. And to have you sit silent while such an attack was being made – well, I never would have believed it."¹³⁷

Wilkins was unable to let the episode pass. He argued to Hubert Delaney, another board member, that Hammond's remarks and White's silence could only have a detrimental effect on staff morale. However, despite his claims to support White unconditionally, Wilkins then went on to reveal a litany of complaints against the Secretary of which the principal was that White resisted any attempt to disperse his power or authority, and that all suggestions to reorganize the Association to make it more effective had drifted or stalled.¹³⁸ Hammond eventually conceded that he had told the committee members that Wilkins disliked White and that he had said that he would make a better secretary but repeated his assertion that Wilkins had

¹³⁵ Letter, Roy Wilkins to John Hammond, September 25, 1943. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A613. LOC.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, September 27, 1943. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A613. LOC.

¹³⁸ Roy Wilkins to Hubert Delaney, September 28, 1943. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A613. LOC.

made those very comments.¹³⁹ In response, unlike his complaints to Delaney, Wilkins was unctuous in his praise of White.¹⁴⁰ The matter was only resolved when Hammond was drafted. In the final letter of the exchange, Hammond told Wilkins that he was “certain that you are sincere when you say that you do not believe you have ever done anything to hurt Walter in the Association. I am sure that is your belief but I am also fairly certain that an outsider might think differently.”¹⁴¹

Similar incidents involving Wilkins punctuate his career and each episode follows the same pattern: An accusation is made against Wilkins that usually involve a caustic remark or opinion, Wilkins denies the charge with vehemence and moral outrage, and the episode eventually fades away. Although the Hammond incident in itself was minor, it, along with similar episodes before and after, including one involving Eleanor Roosevelt, illustrated the frequently petty politics at work at the Association.¹⁴² More seriously, such incidents also indicated a dislike of Wilkins among some board members that, regardless of the rights and wrongs of specific issues, frequently erupted in public spats, played out in the press, that served the Association badly over the years. In a melodramatic and self-serving letter to Daisy Lampkin, Wilkins, explaining recent events, cited the Hammond controversy as evidence that White, “apparently seeks to eliminate me through the device of charging disloyalty and untrustworthiness.” This episode, it seems, had shaken Wilkins’ faith in human beings and left him in a state of confusion about what to do next. “All of this adds up to my feeling on the one hand,” he wrote, “I will be very uncomfortable here and on the other that the work is so great that I do not feel I ought to leave if it is possible to stay with self respect.”¹⁴³

¹³⁹ Letter John Hammond to Roy Wilkins, October 8, 1943, NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A613. LOC

¹⁴⁰ Letter, Roy Wilkins to John Hammond, October 14, 1943. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A613. LOC.

¹⁴¹ Letter, John Hammond to Roy Wilkins, October 18, 1943; NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A613. LOC.

¹⁴² In this incident, which took place in March 1950, Eleanor Roosevelt was alleged to have received a letter from Wilkins criticizing White’s marriage to Poppy Cannon. Wilkins denied sending such a letter and Mrs. Roosevelt was unable to find such a letter in her files.

¹⁴³ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Daisy Lampkin, September 28, 1943, NAACP papers, part II, Box A613. LOC.

While relations between White and Wilkins always remained publicly cordial and loyal, it is clear that by the early 1940s, suspicion and jealousy governed their working relationship.

Even while Wilkins vehemently denied any discord, he was frustrated; he resented at White's extensive travels, lobbying and self-publicizing. In 1943, another study was commissioned, this time led by board member William Hastie, who issued a series of recommendations including the creation of an executive director position to oversee administrative tasks. White ignored the proposal, showing his obvious reluctance - or so Wilkins thought - to extend the powers of the Assistant Secretary.

Such conviction did not prevent him from complaining loudly about White to Lampkin. "There have been several incidents in the past year which have seemed to indicate that Walter is very reluctant to have anyone assume the power of what we have chosen to call an executive director, a person who could keep his hands on the whole Association's program and push it along on all fronts with appropriate authority granted by the Board."¹⁴⁴ If White planned to spend two or three days in the new Washington, DC office, for example, he should have enlarged Wilkins' responsibilities, he argued. "Instead we limped along for a brief period then Walter promoted his secretary to the post of administrative assistant with the explanation that she could handle his correspondence while he was in Washington." Referring to the staff conference of 1942 during which the idea of creating an executive director was made, Wilkins complained that the "recommendations were adopted by the October board meeting and filed away." Further attempts to find "someone to get a grip on the organizational program of the NAACP" also met with malaise. As Wilkins said: "it is not a very pretty story and has a very smelly ending."¹⁴⁵

After thirteen years of increasingly frustrating service to the Association, Wilkins finally got his chance to lead the NAACP in December 1944, when Walter White left on a tour of the South Pacific to examine the conditions of black soldiers. Although White was absent for only a few months, Wilkins did what he could to impose his authority on the organization. He was particularly tough on those he

¹⁴⁴ Letter, September 28, 1943. NAACP Papers, LOC.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. Wilkins made similar complaints directly to White, citing in particular the Secretary's frequent travels and his reluctance to give Wilkins more responsibility. Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, July 19, 1943. NAACP Papers, Part 17, Reel 25. UCL.

saw as dangerously autonomous such as Leslie Perry, the administrative assistant in the NAACP's Washington office, who was castigated for sending out correspondence without consultation with the National Office.¹⁴⁶ For the most part, however, Wilkins acted as caretaker, carrying out his usual administrative duties while also overseeing some of the Association's legislative priorities, especially the prospective federal and state Fair Employment Practice Commission (FEPC) bills.

As the end of the war approached the NAACP anticipated the possibilities that the post-war world might bring for equal rights. Wilkins fired the warning shots that indicated black Americans would no longer be satisfied with a gradual approach to equality in a magazine article for a woman's magazine. Answering the question "What does the Negro want?" Wilkins wrote: "He wants precisely what every other American wants, and he wants it without discrimination. He wants an equal chance to achieve and enjoy the fruits of his talent without the hobbling and crushing discouragement and disillusionment of race and color prejudice. He wants equality in the body politic."¹⁴⁷ The route to achieving this, according to Wilkins, was an FEPC to ensure equal employment opportunities, the right to vote unfettered by discriminatory practices, integrated schools to guarantee equal educational opportunities, greatly improved health facilities, and access to integrated, decent housing. As if to emphasize that the war had created a new world, whether America was ready or not, Wilkins warned: "If we are to have a free world, a new Charter of the Nations for peace and progress, he wants to be included. He has more allies than he had at the end of the last war, not least among whom are young white southerners who want no truck with the traditions that have retarded both blacks and whites, salving the latter with a vain and increasingly useless something called whiteness."¹⁴⁸

Wilkins was concerned that the NAACP should not lose its prime position either by alienating its powerful white friends or losing the support of its black members, some of whom were lured by the prospect of the kind of direct-action protest

¹⁴⁶ Letter, Roy Wilkins to William Hastie, February 8 1945; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Lester Perry, February 8, 1945. Both Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 2. LOC.

¹⁴⁷ Draft, "Postwar Race Relations" by Roy Wilkins, for *Womans Press*. Undated.. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 36. LOC.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

advocated by Randolph. But the war years had transformed the NAACP into a mass organization almost in spite of itself. By 1945 the NAACP was the pre-eminent race advancement in the United States. By 1946 it had 1,073 branches and almost four hundred and fifty thousand members, a remarkable increase of over two hundred thousand during the preceding three years.¹⁴⁹ Southern branches, in particular, showed a surprising vigor. In South Carolina, for example, membership grew from eight hundred in 1939 to fourteen thousand in 1948. On the way, through its alliance with labor groups, it had broadened its base to include blue-collar workers, thereby moving away from its traditionally middle-class roots and establishing itself as the principal voice for black interests.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁹ Report, NAACP Annual Report, 1946. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A60, LOC; NAACP Annual Report, 1943, NAACP Papers, Part II, Box K1, LOC.

¹⁵⁰ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 184.

Chapter Two

Treading Water

As Wilkins recognized, the NAACP was unprepared for such dramatic growth. “We had a big membership — five hundred thousand members and twelve hundred branches — and a large income, but we didn’t know how to use them.”¹ He began to display clear signs of frustration at the slow pace of progress during this period. Over the course of a year, following the end of the war, Wilkins sent several memoranda to White with suggestions to clarify the Association’s strategy and, more importantly, introduce a more dynamic approach. “Other organizations smaller than ours are attracting attention because they act, rather than issue statements. Some of my personal friends have a habit of asking in a joking tone, ‘What letter of protest did you write today?’”² According to Wilkins there were three areas in particular that were in need of urgent repair: the branch department, youth work, and memberships. He argued that the administration of memberships was inefficient, that the youth department “continues to be a mystery,” and that the branch department was battling against the Association’s lack of direction. Compounding the problem was the dramatic rise in members without a concurrent increase in resources and, as Wilkins saw it, the absence of a clear program.

Wilkins recognized the threat posed by the NAACP’s complacency and conservatism. “The Communists, as I have mentioned, are active. The Urban League has been quietly hiring better prepared staff members than we. They are doing a good job and the League is opening new offices and expanding in other ways. Some Interracial Committees are attracting the support of people who ordinarily would be with us - your friend from Media, PA, told me the other day when she was in the office that the Media Interracial Committee has completely taken the play away from the Media branch.” He issued a stark warning to White,

¹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 189. Although Wilkins doesn’t specify a year when citing these membership figures, in 1948, the NAACP’s total membership had reached almost half a million and it had 1575 branches, youth councils and college chapters. NAACP Annual Report, 1948. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box K1, LOC.

² Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, September 8, 1945, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 2, LOC; Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, November 13, 1945. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 2. LOC; Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, March 7, 1946. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 2. LOC.

"We have to be about the business of perfecting a militant action membership or we may wake up some fine morning to discover that we are but a shell with a few score thousand faithful dues-paying members."³

Despite his dire predictions however, Wilkins' remedies were invariably bureaucratic, involving processes and procedures rather than a dynamic program that would engage mass action. By 1945 the tensions between Wilkins and White had become obvious, based in part on Wilkins' frustrated ambitions. However, there was also a more insidious, and arguably much more damaging, tension between White's lack of interest in what appeared to him to be routine administrative tasks and Wilkins inability to look beyond process. In principle, the combination of White's grand ambition and Wilkins' meticulous attention to the detail of the organization should have been ideal. In reality, however, White's egocentric leadership style meant that little was delegated to his deputy. While the Executive Secretary was happy to be the standard bearer for black rights on a global stage, he was less happy when asked to define how those rights could be obtained. Wilkins equally large ego was constantly thwarted by having to defer to White with little power to effect some of the more pressing changes that needed to be made.

When, in September 1945, White proposed a series of new departments including a church secretary, labor secretary, medical secretary, and the opening of a Hollywood bureau, Wilkins rebelled – by memorandum. "I do not assert that these departments of themselves are undesirable; I believe merely that no clear program has been worked out for any of them and that if they are added we will be building a top-heavy super-structure on a weak foundation." He argued that the required funds would be better spent in strengthening the Association's floundering department of branches, which was ill equipped to deal with the rise in members. "For the first time in many years we have a large membership in the state of Texas alone, to say nothing of the other South Western states... We have the largest state conference of branches in the Association in the state of Virginia and, for the first time in history, a large and tremendously alert membership in South Carolina, with

³ Ibid.

a greatly increased number of branches in Florida, yet we are doing nothing to establish a regional office to tie these people into the national program.”⁴

Such discord suddenly became a moot point, at least temporarily, when in June 1946 Wilkins was diagnosed with colon cancer. He was immediately admitted for surgery and required several months of recuperation. As a result of the surgery, Wilkins had to have a colostomy and, while there is no record in the NAACP, Wilkins or Spingarn archives about any illness other than the cancer, Carolyn Wedin makes a brief reference in her biography of Mary White Ovington to a mental breakdown suffered by Wilkins around 1945-1946. If Wilkins’ schedule can be taken as evidence to support the assertion, it seems unlikely to have been in 1945 as he was frequently in attendance at board meetings throughout the year.⁵ However, even writing in his autobiography many years later, his fear at the diagnosis, and possibly even more at the treatment, is still vividly recalled. “The news shocked and frightened me. For the first time in my life I felt hopeless and helpless and I couldn’t help wondering if I wouldn’t be better off dead. I had never heard of this particular operation, and the details seemed horrible. I was forty-five at the time, I had been married seventeen years, and I wondered what Minnie would think about having a freak for a husband.”⁶ It is highly possible that the intense atmosphere at 20 West 40th Street, the NAACP’s national headquarters, and Wilkins’ first brush with his own mortality may have combined to prompt a nervous collapse. Whether that was the case or not, he returned to duty on October 1 only to have to deal with White’s own ill health.

While on vacation in February 1947, White suffered a serious heart attack and was forced to recuperate for three months. He returned to the office in April but agreed to a reduced workload, with Wilkins taking on the oversight of some of White’s responsibilities. Unexpectedly, despite the uncertainty about White’s health and his future plans, 1947 turned out to be an “exhilarating” year. Even more unexpectedly,

⁴ Draft memorandum, unsent, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, September 8, 1945. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 2. LOC.

⁵ Wedin’s reference is in connection with support offered by Mary White Ovington in helping Wilkins recover from a breakdown in *Inheritors of the Spirit: Mary White Ovington and the Founding of the NAACP* (New York: John Wiley, 1998), 290.

⁶ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 191.

international politics played a large part in that exhilaration. The Second World War had drawn a clear line between east and west. In an address to Congress in March of that year, President Truman explicitly stated what he saw as America's role in the new order. The Truman Doctrine, as the speech became known, was a response to increased tension in Greece and Turkey both of whom were facing a Communist threat. Several references in the speech were unintentionally laden with meaning for America's racial situation,

At the present moment in world history nearly every nation must choose between alternative ways of life. The choice is too often not a free one. One way of life is based upon the will of the majority, and is distinguished by free institutions, representative government, free elections, guarantees of individual liberty, freedom of speech and religion, and freedom from political oppression. The second way of life is based upon the will of a minority forcibly imposed upon the majority. It relies upon terror and oppression, a controlled press and radio; fixed elections, and the suppression of personal freedoms. I believe that it must be the policy of the United States to support free peoples who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures. I believe that we must assist free peoples to work out their own destinies in their own way.⁷

The Truman Doctrine established the United States as the guardian of democracy, committing it to supporting those that fought against or labored under subjugation, terror and oppression – at least outside its borders. While there was little thought that such support should apply to those living under those conditions in the president's own backyard, it contributed to a growing body of statements that the NAACP could use as ammunition in its struggle for equal rights.

It was particularly galling to Wilkins to see the eradication of imperialism in many African and Asian countries while black Americans were still treated as second-

⁷ Transcript, President Harry S. Truman's Address Before a Joint Session of Congress, March 12, 1947, *Truman Doctrine*, Avalon Project, Yale University: http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/trudoc.asp

class citizens.⁸ Wilkins attended the UN founding conference in San Francisco in April 1945 as part of a NAACP delegation that included Du Bois and Mary McLeod Bethune (who had held several roles within the Roosevelt administration and was attending the conference as a consultant on interracial affairs).⁹ White had initially led the delegation but asked Wilkins to replace him when he had to return to New York. White, in his element with the great and the good of the international community, had attempted to promote the issue of independence for the colonies but had little influence and even less effect. It would be another decade before the Cold War pushed geopolitics and the civil rights agenda together.

Since taking office in 1945, Truman had been surprisingly active, if inconsistent, in matters of civil rights.¹⁰ Relations between the White House and the NAACP were relatively good although any contact with the administration was primarily between White and the chairman of the board of directors rather than with Wilkins.¹¹ In 1946 Truman established a presidential committee to investigate the state of race relations in the United States. When the final report was published in 1947, *To Secure These Rights*, made some far-reaching conclusions. The report explicitly condemned segregation and made a series of recommendations. Those proposals, which Wilkins said were “more than I had dreamed possible” included calls for a permanent FEPC, anti-lynching legislation, federal protection of voting rights and, ultimately, the eradication of Jim Crow.¹²

The report identified three key reasons to dismantle segregation: moral, economic, and international.¹³ It stated in no uncertain terms that the country’s policy on civil rights was “a serious obstacle” if the United States’ was to be an “enormous,

⁸ Transcript, Roy Wilkins, Talk for Voice of Freedom program, WMCA Radio, New York City, April 8, 1943. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A564, LOC.

⁹ Du Bois returned to the NAACP in September 1944 as director of special research.

¹⁰ Truman’s evolving attitude to civil rights is explored in detail by David McCullough in *Truman* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

¹¹ Roy Wilkins, Oral History interview, Columbia, 93.

¹² Wilkins with Mathews, *Standing Fast*, 200.

¹³ Report, *To Secure These Rights: The Report Of The President’s Committee On Civil Rights*. Truman Library, <http://www.trumanlibrary.org/civilrights/srights1.htm>. The relationship between cold war politics and civil rights is explored at length by Mary L. Dudziak in *Cold War and Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

positive influence for peace and progress throughout the world¹⁴ If that was the case, an obvious solution would be to put civil rights near the top of the country's domestic policy agenda to aid its ambitious foreign policy. Rather than sweeping the suggestions under the carpet Truman sent the legislative program up to Congress. Unfortunately Truman failed to tackle the obstacles put in the path of progress by 'Dixiecrat' politicians and the reforms recommended in the report fell victim to the politics of pragmatism during the contentious presidential elections of 1948. Nevertheless, Wilkins later credited Truman's actions with forcing civil rights onto the legislative agenda. "That action projected the civil rights question squarely and officially into the national party picture. Theretofore it had been on the periphery at national conventions. It was there, but not a factor out on the table to be considered seriously in platform making, choosing of nominees. Etc...in my book he did a service to the cause of Negro rights that cannot be wiped out by any fly remarks he may make from here on in."¹⁵

The Association had acquired plenty of enemies through its litigation and lobbying work; it could not risk the penalties attached to any red taint. White, in an attempt to emphasize the NAACP's patriotism and use its support as a bargaining chip for civil rights legislation, aligned the organization with President Truman in the face of internal dissension.¹⁶ Obediently, the NAACP backed the Marshall Plan to aid a devastated Europe in 1949. It also supported the Korean War, despite the military's reluctance to desegregate its troops, and it approved the formation of NATO despite the colonialist histories of Britain, Holland and other signatories. Although there were some important achievements, most notably the order to desegregate the armed forces, ultimately the support of Truman provided some political gains but cost the NAACP a certain amount of political capital when its allies, particularly with white groups, collapsed as the Cold War rearranged the political map. The liberal centre, including the NAACP, had been pushed to the right leaving a void that would be later filled by vociferous, agile and impatient civil rights groups.

¹⁴ Dudziak, *Cold War and Civil Rights*, 200.

¹⁵ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Carter Wesley, September 8, 1960, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A246, LOC.

¹⁶ Janken, *White*, 315.

White's faith in Truman was repaid in July 1948 when the president signed Executive Order 9981. The order declared simply: "There shall be equality of treatment and opportunity for all persons in the armed services without regard to race, color, religion or national origin."¹⁷ The order, which accompanied a further instruction that abolished discrimination in the federal civil service, helped persuade black voters that Truman was sincere about civil rights, and he won enough of the black vote in the North to sway the extremely close 1948 presidential election in Truman's favor. "Truman had sort of caught their imagination," Wilkins suggested later in an oral history interview. "He was a fighter, a little guy from Missouri, and he initiated the Army desegregation policy in July of 1948...Of course, this made him the darling of the Negroes" even if political reality meant that any euphoria was short lived.¹⁸

In May 1949, White suffered another severe heart attack but he was also tiring of the Association. He had been offered an opportunity to participate in a series of radio discussions to be broadcast from various locations including Europe and Asia. White not only asked for leave to take part in the tour but also that the NAACP bear the cost, which amounted to \$3750, on the dubious basis that it would be excellent publicity for the NAACP. Unsurprisingly, the board rejected White's proposal and he promptly submitted his resignation effective June 1, 1949, citing ill health. After much debate, White's resignation was rejected and Wilkins argued that White's permanent departure would damage the morale of NAACP members, while Alfred Baker Lewis, the Association's treasurer, suggested that "since we are under the hammer of the Communists with their fellow travelers and dupes entirely unjustifiedly, and since we are of course always under the hammer of bigots, there is always the danger that a resignation at the present time can be represented to those who do not know you as resigning under fire." Instead, Lewis suggested a year's leave of absence after which, if he should return, he do so as Executive Secretary but almost as a figurehead rather than having day-to-day

¹⁷ Executive Order 9981, Establishing the President's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services July 26 1948. The American Presidency Project: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=60737>.

¹⁸ Roy Wilkins, Oral History interview, Columbia, 94.

control of the Association. This solution suited no one and left both White and Wilkins in limbo.¹⁹

In the meantime, at long last, Wilkins became Acting Secretary “with all power and authority of that position.”²⁰ From the beginning of White’s leave, speculation was rife about how Wilkins would fare in his new position, whether White would return to the Association at all, and if he did, whether a leadership battle would ensue upon that return. Unlike previous instances where Wilkins had acted in White’s place, this time White would be absent for a significant length of time. Bolstering Wilkins’ position was a growing dissent among the NAACP’s members about White’s judgment. Already angry with his maneuvering Du Bois out of the NAACP in 1948 the Association’s members, and much of the black press, were outraged when, in June 1949, White divorced his black wife of many years to marry Poppy Cannon, a white journalist.²¹

White compounded the controversy surrounding his wedding with an article for *Look* magazine in which he argued that a new chemical that could lighten skin color could be the way for black Americans to “get the fair treatment” they had always wanted.²² White’s article, with its implicit suggestion that ‘passing’ would be the only way to achieve equality for blacks unleashed a torrent of criticism much of which focused on White’s own ambiguous racial identity. Many found the Executive Secretary’s actions inexplicable, and the public furor surrounding White did little to enhance the standing of the Association and exacerbated speculation about the state of relations at the top of the NAACP.²³

¹⁹ Letter, Alfred Baker Lewis to Walter White, May 10, 1949. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A610. LOC. See also Janken, *White*, 335-337.

²⁰ Minutes from Board of Directors meeting, June 13, 1949, NAACP papers Part 1, Reel 3, UCL.

²¹ According to documents within the NAACP papers, the majority of letters from NAACP branches and individual members protested White’s marriage to Poppy Cannon, however some, such as the Minnesota State Conference felt that such objections was “contrary to NAACP policy” and that White should be judged on his professional, not private, actions. Letter, Ashby Gaskins to Louis T Wright, April 9, 1950, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 34, LOC.

²² Janken, *White*, 341.

²³ “NAACP in Dilemma,” *The American*, September 24, 1949; “The NAACP Board Should Get Over its Timidity,” *The Afro-American*, September 24, 1949; John Jasper, “Does Leave Mean Leave?” *The American*, September, 24 1949. All NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A610, LOC.

During White's leave, the political machinations that characterized life at the Association's head office became even more intense. Much of the infighting was reported in the black press, which was often keen to find ammunition to use against the NAACP. Even the *New York Times* speculated about the internal politics at work in 20 West 40th Street. As early as July 1949, just a month after White's leave of absence began, George Streater, Wilkins' old adversary from the *Crisis* days of the 1930s, reported that White's ill health and workload meant he was likely not to return to the Association, and suggested that factions were developing between left and right wings within the organization. Those on the left, who were considered anti-Wilkins forces, according to Streater, accused Wilkins of 'red baiting' and of "keeping power obtained through a campaign of misrepresentation of the aims and purposes of all 'progressives and militants inside the organization.'" William Hastie, by now Governor of the Virgin Islands, attempted to bring those on the left into the fold as long as they agreed with the Association's primary aims of ending segregation and discrimination.²⁴

Three months after taking the helm, Wilkins set out a series of proposals to the Board of Directors. Although many of the proposals simply extended its existing program or repeated some of Wilkins' old suggestions, some of the recommendations were more prescient. Identifying a problem where young members were not becoming adult members, Wilkins suggested that the youth section be expanded with a "dynamic program of action geared to the energies, enthusiasms and intelligence of the young people of today. We must find the money and manpower for the job or the NAACP will wither away."²⁵ Ultimately, however, Wilkins was able to do little in the year of White's absence. As he explained to White in a forlorn letter six months into his new role: "I started out in September with high hopes that I could put in a year of satisfying work, not attempting to blast the world wide open, but doing something on the many projects crying out for attention. It has been disappointing to discover that instead of giving

²⁴ Negro Group Hints White May Resign, George Streater, *New York Times*, July 17, 1949.

²⁵ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Board of Directors, September 12, 1949, NAACP Papers, Part II, Box 611, LOC.

all my energies to the constructive work necessary, I have to spend a great deal of time sparring on side issues."²⁶

One of those side issues turned out to be a spat with Hubert Delaney, a member of the NAACP's board of directors who was closely aligned with the New York branch. On the face of it, the dispute appeared to be a repetition of the episode between Wilkins and John Hammond in 1943, and provides further evidence that the critics that would shadow Wilkins' leadership were already set in place at this stage in his career. The Delaney episode is also notable because it involved White and Wilkins but White's wife, various journalists, allies of White, and other board members. The dispute was carried on through an exchange of letters that passed between Wilkins and Delaney in which accusations of duplicity, vindictiveness and other nefarious behavior were tossed back and forth.²⁷

Among the more serious accusations made of Wilkins was the assertion that the Association had lost almost three hundred and fifty thousand members over the course of a year, some of which was during Wilkins' watch.²⁸ Although Delaney's figures were not accurate, the decline in membership had been precipitous, from around half a million in 1947 to approximately three hundred and eighty-three thousand in 1948, a decline the NAACP attributed in the rise of basic membership dues from \$1 to \$2 applied when an economic slump affected the United States.²⁹ While those factors may have contributed to the decline, it can also be argued that the Association's lack of a clear program also played a part. Membership during the war years of the early 1940s rose exponentially alongside the battle for equal participation in both industry and the military. Clearly, the goals of the NAACP were as elusive in 1949 as they had been in 1943 but the urgency of the war effort

²⁶ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, December 7, 1949, NAACP papers, Part 17, Reel 25, UCL.

²⁷ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Hubert Delaney, November 18, 1949; Letter, Hubert Delaney to Roy Wilkins, November 22, 1949; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Hubert Delaney, November 29, 1949; Letter, Hubert Delaney to Roy Wilkins, November 30, 1949. All Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 17. LOC.

²⁸ Letter, Hubert Delaney to Roy Wilkins, November 22, 1949, Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 17. LOC.

²⁹ Annual Report, NAACP Annual Report for 1949. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box K1. Statement, Prepared but not given by Roy Wilkins to the Board of Directors Meeting, January 3, 1950. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 15. LOC.

gave the Association's program an imperative it lacked until the civil rights movement accelerated in the latter half of the 1950s.

Unfortunately, many of the more unsavory details about the dispute between Wilkins and some of the board reached the ears of eager journalists. Even before the antipathy emerged between Wilkins and Delaney, another board member, Jane Bolin, a New York district court judge and also a member of the executive committee of the New York branch, questioned the Acting Secretary about the administration of the Association's annual conference. Always keen to spot any signs of animosity towards him, at a staff meeting in October Wilkins accused an anonymous staff member of encouraging Bolin to question his motives so publicly. Even Thurgood Marshall, usually more pragmatic than his colleagues, was not immune from the suspicions at work within the national office, claiming that papers had been stolen from his office. "Nothing can destroy this Association like gossip, lies, distortion, etc. While we are worrying about Communists boring from within," Marshall suggested, "we should start looking for others."³⁰

Relations between Wilkins, Delaney, Hammond and the New York branch worsened dramatically in January 1950 during the National Emergency Civil Rights Mobilization, when approximately four thousand delegates from the Association, labor organizations and civic groups were brought together in Washington DC to support pending FEPC legislation.³¹ Wilkins was chairman of the steering committee and as such was responsible for accreditation to the event. Wilkins rejected applications from some delegates, including some from New York area branches, because their applications were not in order although the underlying reason was because Communists were alleged to have infiltrated the branches

³⁰ Minutes, Staff meeting, October 7, 1949. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 21. LOC.

³¹ Although the Civil Rights Mobilization failed in its goal to secure a permanent FEPC,, according to August Meier and John Bracey, the collaboration with such a broad range of groups marked a significant turning point in the NAACP's lobbying tactics, moving away from a reliance on personal contact with a small group to mobilizing a large and seemingly disparate group who shared similar goals. It contributed to the creation of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), which Wilkins chaired for two decades and whose diversity and organizational strength proved to be an essential bulwark in lobbying for civil rights legislation in the 1960s.

concerned.³² These branches however, protested that white members of the credentials committee had refused to give accreditation to some black delegates, including NAACP branch officials. They also accused members of the steering committee of giving erroneous statements to the press about the veracity of the applications of some of the New York delegates.³³

Questions were raised at several board meetings following the Mobilization about Wilkins' administration of the event, which prompted one board member, Rabbi Judah Cahn, to conclude: "John Hammond and Judge Delaney feel they do not trust [the] motivation of the executive staff of this organization. When Judge Delaney and John Hammond do not trust Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary, then there is no sense talking about detail."³⁴ Wilkins drafted a lengthy written statement to the board citing a number of episodes that he claimed combined to undermine, either deliberately or inadvertently, the reputation of both the NAACP and himself. Before submitting the statement, Wilkins canvassed the opinion of Henry Lee Moon, who had joined the NAACP as director of public relations in 1948, for his opinion. Moon was blunt: "If the dissemination of information is its sole objective, it is altogether adequate. If the creation of an unbridgeable cleavage is desired, it is masterful. If, however, the development of a climate in which the association can be preserved as a strong and unified whole is the purpose, it is as dangerous as the H-bomb, and potentially as capable of destroying the initiator as the intended victim."³⁵ Wilkins appears to have paid little attention to Moon's recommendations and sent the letter almost unchanged.

In his statement, the Acting Secretary blamed Communist supporters and press in part for deliberately orchestrating some of the episodes as part of a Communist

³² Report, Acting Secretary for the February, 1950 meeting of the NAACP Board of Directors. NAACP Papers, Part I, Reel 7. UCL.

³³ Letter, Lindsay White, President of the New York Branch of the NAACP, to Louis T Wright, February 7, 1949. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 21. LOC.

³⁴ Statement – supplement to the monthly report, Acting Secretary to the Board of Directors, February 14, 1950. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 21. LOC.

³⁵ Memorandum, Henry Lee Moon to Roy Wilkins, February 8, 1950. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A616. LOC. In the memorandum, which is a draft, Moon had originally written that he believed the prime objective of the statement should be to salvage the Association, indicating how serious he considered the situation to be. The sentence was later changed to "halt the Association's present loss of membership."

plan to destroy the NAACP's national leadership.³⁶ Wilkins had already done battle with the Communist party during the NAACP's annual convention in Los Angeles in June 1949, when delegates from the Long Island (Jamaica) and New York branches, said to be Communist supporters, proposed several resolutions, including disapproval of Marshall Plan aid to non-Communist countries and allowing local branches to form alliances with other organizations if they are dissatisfied with the administration of the Association's relationship with its branches.³⁷ Wilkins was able to fend off that particular challenge by threatening to expose their supporters if the proposals reached the convention floor. But he was clearly in no mood to allow further damage, and he issued a warning to those who would attempt to damage or destroy the Association.³⁸ "Until the members indicate otherwise it is the intention of the staff to use every resource to beat off and defeat all attempts throughout the Association to infiltrate and take over. This will require energy, and smooth talkers will say it will be misplaced, but unless we expend it we will wake up one day to find our Association merely a mouthpiece for Moscow."³⁹ Arguing that the tide of opinion was moving in favor of equal rights, Wilkins issued a challenge to the Board: "Are we to be sidetracked and even wrecked by schemers and slanderers from without, and by lack of understanding from within? Surely not. Surely we can see these things for what they so plainly are. And if we translate that recognition into action, nothing on earth can keep us from continuing to build the greatest machine the world has ever seen for achieving human dignity under a democratic government."⁴⁰

This tiresome maelstrom of intrigue, internal politics and bickering took its toll on Wilkins. In the fall of 1949 he wrote to Edward Dudley, the NAACP's Assistant Special Counsel who was on leave at the time, that "certain elements in New York City, in the Board of Directors, and in the country at large have brought out their 'axes' which they sharpened many years ago but never had a chance to use with any effect, and seem determined to tear the Association apart." Wilkins clearly

³⁶ Statement – supplement to the monthly report, Acting Secretary to the Board of Directors, February 14, 1950. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 21. LOC.

³⁷ Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1964), 158.

³⁸ Record. *Race and Radicalism*, 160.

³⁹ Statement, February 14, 1950. Roy Wilkins Papers, LOC.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

believed that behind this discussion lay Communist machinations or masked Communist Party efforts to extend its influence. "A certain political philosophy which has been nibbling away for years now is trying to move in on the theory that 'now is the time to make the NAACP a people's organization instead of a one-man outfit.' This element is receiving some aid, wittingly or unwittingly, from high up in the organization itself."⁴¹

The one-man outfit clearly referred to White, but Wilkins also felt under pressure himself. "I am in the middle, and at the moment am getting a pretty good pushing around. I don't know how it is all going to turn out, but I do not believe the NAACP is going to suffer all the things that some people are trying to bring about. We are being embarrassed and harassed by headlines, inaccurate news stories, half truths, gossip etc., but I think the organization is too solid for those kind of tactics to damage it seriously." Nevertheless, Wilkins was ready should the attacks become even stronger. "So far, I have behaved in the gentlemanly and diplomatic tradition of the NAACP," he told Edward Dudley, "but if these people push me too far, I will revert to my slugging days back in the newspaper business when we didn't count to ten before we called the man an 's.o.b,' nor did we put it in velvet language. I don't think anyone knows as much about the ins and outs about the organization as I do, and if I should start 'popping off' somebody had better duck."⁴²

Fortunately, he had no need to 'pop off' at his detractors. While Wilkins may have had vociferous detractors on the board, and in the press, he also had powerful allies. Arthur Spingarn, chairman of the board of directors, spoke in his favor at the February 1950 board meeting, and another great ally of Wilkins, Daisy Lampkin, successfully proposed a motion rejecting the request by the New York branch for an investigation or reprimand of Wilkins following the Mobilization in Washington, thus drawing this particular episode to a welcome close.⁴³ With evident relief, Wilkins wrote Spingarn the following day: "I was getting pretty despondent over the developing situation which seemed to me to be closing in from all sides with no evidence of an awareness and of the necessity of counter action. But all my

⁴¹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Edward Dudley, October 24, 1949, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 2, LOC.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Minutes, Board of Directors meeting, February 14, 1950. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 38. LOC.

apprehensions were laid to rest yesterday. Your remarks were tremendously effective not only in demolishing the straw men that have been set up, but in giving me the encouragement and support I needed so badly.”⁴⁴

The black press leapt on the fracas. In an editorial entitled “Civil War in the NAACP” the *Pittsburgh Courier* painted a melodramatic picture of an organization at war with the dark forces of Communism. “There are key people in several of the larger NAACP branches who must continue this fight to capture or destroy the association because they are prisoners of the subversive network in this country by virtue of identification with various Red-front organizations listed by the United States government.”⁴⁵ Wilkins attempted to deflect unwelcome criticism by writing a series of discursive features for the *Amsterdam News* in which he attempted to paint a more optimistic vision of the NAACP. After listing successes in California, Texas, the Midwest and the South, Wilkins tackled the dissent on the Association’s doorstep. “The NAACP, even in the front yard of the nastiest newspaper publicity, does not appear to be ‘crumbling’ in the East. These regional conferences only proved what the honest, informed, sincere, hard-working members and officers of the NAACP knew all along: that the dissensions, divisions, name-calling, charges and counter-charges, gossip, sniping, whispering and rumors on top of rumors are specially manufactured for personal and political reasons. They have been concocted in an extremely localized area, involving not more than a half-dozen key actors, a mimeograph machine, and a few gullible reporters.”⁴⁶

Standing in the wings, but by no means idle spectators, were White’s supporters. While White was traveling, his wife Poppy kept him fully updated on events at the national office and was equally keen to fan the flames of dissent: “Louie called quite a little while ago. He’s very upset about the attempt to smear Herbert. He agrees with Lillian S that the story is [influenced] by Roy but he has a further thought - that by smearing and silencing Herbert, Roy hopes to [hush] the voice of

⁴⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Arthur Spingarn, February 15, 1950. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 17. LOC.

⁴⁵ “Civil War in the NAACP,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 25, 1950, Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 58. LOC.

⁴⁶ Draft, Article for the *Amsterdam News* by Roy Wilkins, April 11, 1950. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 36. LOC.

one of his most voluble detractors as well as one of your powerful friends."⁴⁷ White had, by spring 1950, realized that his ambitions to build a life outside of the Association were likely to fail, and he withdrew his resignation in March 1950. Claiming his health was now strong enough, he offered to step into the breach and rescue the Association from its current troubles. "For some time and in many parts of the country I have encountered reports of dissension and disruption in the NAACP which convinces me that in this most critical period the NAACP's enemies are attempting to 'divide and conquer' us."⁴⁸

In January 1950, the board of directors commissioned William Hastie to make a study of the executive secretary's office. White's imminent return made the results of Hastie's report all the more pressing and fed the heated debate about who should lead the NAACP, and how they should lead it, being waged in the press and among the Association's members across the country. As White's return loomed, the *Afro-American* argued that the board, White and Wilkins had all become too far removed from "the masses of colored people." The paper also accused White of continuing to lead by stealth and therefore not allowing Wilkins to implement any changes or programs of his own.⁴⁹ In an attempt to stem the flow of speculation, the NAACP's board resorted to a favorite tactic: it set up a committee. But there was little the Official Committee to Investigate Newspaper Articles could do other than condemn the news stories and issue an impotent call upon whichever anonymous internal sources has supplied information to resign.⁵⁰

The question about whether to accept White's resignation still hung over the Association and a decision was to be taken at the May board meeting. As that time approached, Wilkins became increasingly reluctant to hand back power. In public,

⁴⁷ Letter, Poppy Cannon White to Walter White, undated but attached to an envelope dated February 21, 1950. Walter and Poppy Cannon White Papers, Box 8, Folder 230, Yale. Herbert is possibly a misspelling of Hubert Delaney. Louie may refer to Louis Wright, White's personal physician and member of the NAACP board of directors. Lillian S refers to Lillian Scott, a journalist at the *Chicago Defender*.

⁴⁸ Minutes, Board meeting of the NAACP Board of Directors, March 13, 1950. NAACP Papers, Part 17, Reel 24. UCL.

⁴⁹ James L. Hicks, "NAACP Crisis Set?" *The Afro-American*, May 6, 1950. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A610, LOC.

⁵⁰ Minutes of Official Committee to Investigate Newspaper Articles, April 10, 1950, Papers of the NAACP, Part 1, Reel 7, UCL.

he distanced himself from any discord between White and himself, telling one newspaper editor that the idea of any competition between the two men was simply an invention by the press, while at the same time trying to reassure White that there was no truth in the press speculation.⁵¹ However, he struck a different note in his personal correspondence. Despite protestations to Maceo Smith, president of the Texas state conference of branches, that “if those plans are deemed best for the NAACP as a whole, then personal preferences must stand to one side,” he admitted that he was scarred by the battles of the preceding months. “One aspect of this whole situation that has been most distasteful to me and has caused me (for the first time) to become actually angry has been the campaign to discredit me personally, to belittle my hard work and my actual accomplishments, to say that I am not trustworthy etc...If anybody comes up with a slick plan which aims to oust me, then I say to all and sundry: ‘Look out!’”⁵²

The vote on whether to accept White’s resignation was closer and far more fraught than either White or Wilkins had probably imagined. Hubert Delaney and Eleanor Roosevelt, a close ally of White’s, led the forces for bringing back White, while Arthur Spingarn, Alfred Baker Lewis and Kelly Alexander, president of the North Carolina state conference of branches, lined up in Wilkins’ corner. The final outcome was 16-10 in favor of rejecting White’s resignation and allowing him to return as secretary — mainly on the grounds that Eleanor Roosevelt may have resigned if Wilkins was appointed secretary.⁵³ With the leadership issue resolved, tensions should have dissipated. At the same meeting, however, Hastie delivered his recommendations on the restructuring of the secretary’s office.

In a clear attempt to dilute the power inherent in the secretary’s role, the board unanimously agreed with Hastie that responsibilities that had historically fallen under the secretary’s remit should be divided between the secretary and his deputy with both roles now reporting directly to the board. The secretary, to be renamed

⁵¹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to William Walker, April 28, 1950. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A610. LOC; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, April 28, 1950. Walter and Poppy Cannon White Papers, Box 8, Folder 25, Yale; Hicks, May 6, 1950. NAACP Papers, LOC; Editorial, “Civil War in the NAACP,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 25, 1960. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 58, LOC.

⁵² Letter, May 2, 1950. NAACP Papers, LOC.

⁵³ Janken, *White*, 352-353.

executive secretary, would be responsible for public relations and the appointment of junior executives – but not the deputy – and any senior executive not appointed directly by the board. The assistant secretary position was to be renamed Administrator and would be responsible for the day-to-day management of the Association as a whole, including the national office and oversight of the budget. Pointed reference was also made to distractions from professional commitments outside the Association and so executive officers would be prohibited from regular work outside of the NAACP. The report was particularly disapproving of regular newspaper columns, an activity beloved of both White and Wilkins.⁵⁴

As Cold War rhetoric intensified, civil liberties fell victim, and any criticism of American policy at home or abroad was almost commensurate with treason. A spotlight was turned on liberals of all persuasions and, given the antipathy to the notion of equality from many quarters, those who were active in or even sympathetic towards civil rights, became easy targets. The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) monitored dozens of black workers and civil rights leaders including Paul Robeson and Du Bois himself, who, by now having embraced Marxism, stood well to the left of the major civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League. The Association itself was not immune and was subject to FBI surveillance into the 1960s.

Despite Wilkins' swift dispatch of the Communist threat at the 1949 annual convention, he felt that the threat posed by left-wing groups was still acute. The Association was in a difficult position. August Meier and John Bracey describe, with some accuracy, the period between the end of the war and the 1954 *Brown* decision on school segregation as contradictory.⁵⁵ On the one hand, the Soviet Union and other Communist countries used the appalling state of race relations in

⁵⁴ Report of the Special Committee on Top Level Staff Organization, Undated. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A610. LOC; Janken, *White*, 353; Minutes, Board of Directors meeting, May 8, 1950. NAACP Papers, Part 17, Reel 23. UCL.

⁵⁵ Meier and Bracey, "NAACP as a Reform Movement," 22; The impact of the cold war on civil rights is also explored in Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and US Foreign Affairs, 1935-1960* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) and Mary L. Dudziak, "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative," *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 41 (1988). Social Science Research Network: <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1137993>.

the United States as a persuasive propaganda tool. This in turn could be used as a weapon by organizations such as the NAACP to fight for improvements in the domestic situation. On the other hand, conservatives and racists exploited the Cold War to equate the struggle for civil rights with Communism, a tactic they also used to discredit the NAACP.

Those branches that were supposedly infiltrated by communists were few, and in fact the distinction of what constituted communist appears to have been hazy at best. In a statement to the board of directors, Wilkins said that the Richmond, California, branch had been almost completely taken over, the San Francisco branch had been heavily infiltrated “for years,” and that members of several other branches in Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Long Island had previously been connected with the communist party or other left wing or labor groups, an accusation that could be leveled at many who sympathized with the left during the Depression.⁵⁶ It is not clear to what extent infiltration had really occurred however. In some cases, it was obvious. For example, the secretary of the Richmond branch was also the publicity director for the local Communist Party, prompting the city council to spurn a meeting with delegations from the NAACP. The Boston branch, too, had shared members with the Communists. In Jamaica however, the most severe accusation Wilkins could make was that it had been infiltrated by left wingers, many of whom belonged to the American Labor Party, which had its roots in the socialist party but was by no means a Communist group.⁵⁷ The NAACP’s difficulty in defining what constituted a left-wing threat outside of an overtly Communist group meant it was equally difficult to establish how many branches had been infiltrated. Despite his list of infiltrated groups, when Wilkins warned the board that “a substantial number” of its college chapters had been infiltrated he admitted that he had no figures.⁵⁸

It was all too easy to become caught up in the hunt for ‘reds under the beds’ that marked the early years of the 1950s and Wilkins did warn against waging a “witch hunt.” Nevertheless, delegates at the NAACP’s annual convention in June 1950,

⁵⁶ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to the Board of Directors, June 22, 1950, Roy Wilkins papers, Box 22, LOC.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

called upon the Association's board of directors not only to investigate branches where infiltration by communists was suspected, but also to confiscate the charter of branches under suspicion and expel members who are found to be "under Communist or other political control and domination."⁵⁹ Wilkins suggested that White direct branches not to make hysterical or wild accusations. "Because a man or woman is a critic of the National office or of the NAACP is not in itself reason under the Boston resolution for elimination The criticism must be in line with the Communist party philosophy, and must be consistent," he suggested in guidance that was likely to add to the confusion rather than calm fears.⁶⁰

This assertion was relatively circumspect in comparison with the remainder of his suggestions. In keeping with Wilkins' rather broad description of what constituted a Communist sympathizer, he warned White: "It is easy to recognize these people by what they say, they way they say it, the motions they make from the floor, the resolutions they propose to be passed, the phraseology of their writings and speeches, and by their conduct as a bloc in committee and branch meetings." Although it seemed that some sympathizers made identification somewhat easier. "Some of them are openly identified with Left-wing organizations in your locality," he wrote.⁶¹ Board member Hubert Delaney disagreed with some of Wilkins' assertions, particularly his claim that delegates from the Association's youth branches made up a large part of dissenters from the 1950 resolution. He also argued with Wilkins' instruction that the NAACP must "clean out our organization." Implying that the Association had been infiltrated, Delaney said with some prescience, could lead to the NAACP itself being declared a subversive organization.⁶²

The philosophy of Communism went against the sense of self-reliance instilled in Wilkins by his Uncle Sam and, even more, it offended his innate patriotism. He had taken a fervent anti-communist stance since the 1930s, when the American

⁵⁹ Resolutions adopted by the 41st Annual convention of the NAACP, Boston, Mass, June 23, 1950. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box K2. LOC.

⁶⁰ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Walter White, July 21, 1950. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 22. LOC.

⁶¹ *ibid.* See also Memorandum, Walter White to NAAP Branches, August 29, 1950. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A127. LOC.

⁶² Letter, Hubert Delaney to Walter White, August 3, 1950. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 22. LOC.

Communist party competed with the Association to defend the Scottsboro boys, and his attitude had not softened in the intervening years. For Wilkins, change for black Americans would come about through the law not riots. On the surface, Communism, with its promise of a more egalitarian society, might have been an attractive proposition for beleaguered black Americans. However, Wilkins was unconvinced by such an argument. As he pointed out in an article for *American* magazine in which he defended the loyalty of the average black citizen: "All evidence points to his desire for reform, not revolution under Kremlin leadership. He wants to become a fully integrated American, not a segregated segment of a Soviet Promised Land."⁶³

Wilkins' rejection of Communism was also based on pragmatism. Articles like the *American* piece were designed to reassure white allies that they had nothing to fear from civil rights groups. In his view, it was in the NAACP's best interests to distance itself from any left-wing influence. Branches that were associated with the left wing had lost thousands of members, Wilkins argued, and some of the Association's allies refused to deal with those branches.⁶⁴ The NAACP's frequent battles with the white power structure, particularly in the South, attracted many enemies who were only too happy to use the slightest hint of Communist infiltration to dent the organization's reputation. However, the Association's attempt to distance itself from the red taint was not without risk. If the NAACP imposed too many ideological strictures upon its members, and if it waged a thorough witch-hunt, it would be in danger of practicing the very practices it campaigned against.

The NAACP membership was in no mood for a witch-hunt; the sentiment that motivated the passage of the 1950 resolution appeared less fervent the following year despite a further resolution that allowed the right of appeal for any members excluded from branches for not agreeing to the principles and program of the Association. This arose from an amendment put forward by the board whereby membership was restricted to those who agreed to support the NAACP's program.

⁶³ Roy Wilkins, "Stalin's Greatest Defeat," *The American*, December 1951. Reprinted by the NAACP. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box K1. LOC.

⁶⁴ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 210.

The resolution also allowed that “mere criticism of the local or national officials of the NAACP is not alone and of itself ground for exclusion or rejection.”⁶⁵

A significant factor in establishing the NAACP as a threat to the racial *status quo* was the success of its sister organization, the Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Led by Marshall, the Inc. Fund was originally the NAACP’s legal arm but became the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund when it separated from the Association for tax purposes in 1940.⁶⁶ The NAACP’s legal team had developed a long-term strategy led and implemented by the NAACP’s first counsel, Charles Houston, who had been Dean of Howard Law School. Driving the NAACP’s legal strategy was the destruction of the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in *Plessey v. Ferguson* that established the precedent of ‘separate but equal.’ The NAACP’s legal team concentrated on eradicating discrimination initially in graduate schools, then undergraduate institutions, with the ultimate aim of abolishing segregation in public high schools. If that goal could be reached, the legal framework supporting segregation would have to be demolished.

This strategy secured a succession of increasingly important victories between the mid-1930s and early 1950s. The graduate school challenge culminated in 1950 when, in *Sweatt v. Painter* and *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, the Supreme Court upheld the NAACP’s contention that separate graduate school facilities were inherently unequal. On the same day, the Court also ruled that segregated dining facilities on interstate transport violated the constitution and criticized the markers of segregation such as partitions, signs and curtains that highlighted the racial

⁶⁵ Resolution adopted by the 42nd Annual convention of the NAACP, Atlanta, Georgia, June 26-July 1, 1951. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box K2. LOC.

⁶⁶ The NAACP’s lobbying activities meant it could not apply for tax-exempt status and therefore any contributions would also not be tax exempt. To avoid this, the Legal Defense and Educational Fund (more popularly known as the Inc. Fund) was formed in March 1940 as a separate charitable organization to the NAACP for taxation purposes. The Inc. Fund would focus on legal issues while coordinating with the NAACP’s program and sharing board members. Mark Tushnet. *Making Civil Rights Law: Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court, 1936-61* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 27. However, until the early 1960s, the activities of the LDF were intertwined with the NAACP and for the purposes of clarity in this chapter, will be treated as one organization.

classification of passengers.⁶⁷ The latter case, *Henderson v. United States*, was particularly significant because the Truman administration filed an *amicus curiae* brief in support of the plaintiff, a sign that the government was ready to challenge segregation in the courts if not in Congress. Thurgood Marshall considered all three decisions to be “replete with road markings telling us where to go next.”⁶⁸ That next stage would lead to what Wilkins would call “one of life’s sweetest days.” On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court effectively dismantled the legal framework supporting segregation in *Brown v Board of Education*, when it declared that racially segregated public schools were inherently unequal, violating the 14th Amendment.⁶⁹

Although the *Brown* ruling dealt specifically with segregation in public education, behind the unanimous opinion was a tacit understanding that ‘Jim Crow’ was dead. However, the absence of any political support to implement the decision, particularly from the Eisenhower White House, demonstrated that this was just a beginning rather than the culmination of a long struggle. Those states in which segregation was most deeply rooted vehemently opposed the Court ruling. *Brown II*, the Court ruling that followed a year later, should have given clear instructions for compliance. Instead it simply ordered that states should comply with ‘all deliberate speed,’ a vague instruction that unleashed a wave of what would become known as massive resistance across the South.

The *Brown* decision has become a convenient starting point for much of the early historiography of the movement, ignoring many of the protest activities that took place during the 1930s and 1940s. However, its importance of the *Brown* decision in instigating the civil rights protests that followed has been questioned in recent years. Michael Klarman has been one of the most provocative proponents of the argument that *Brown* was not as important a step in dismantling segregation, as its advocates would suggest. On the contrary, Klarman has argued that rather than hastening the end of segregation *Brown* was simply one of many factors that illustrated a shift in America’s attitude to race that had been evolving for some

⁶⁷ *Sweatt v Painter*, 339 U.S. 629 (1950), *McLaurin v Oklahoma State Regents*, 339 U.S. 637 (1950), *Henderson v United States* 339 U.S. 816 (1950); Jack Greenberg, *Race Relations and American Law* (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1962), 121.

⁶⁸ Tushnet, NAACP’s Legal Strategy, 135.

⁶⁹ Wilkins with Matthews. *Standing Fast*, 214.

decades.⁷⁰ Further, he argues that the white backlash prompted by *Brown* damaged the progress that was already underway in race relations.⁷¹ For example, black teachers, who had unwillingly been placed in the eye of the storm created by the *Brown* decision, were hesitant in offering their support for complex social and economic reasons not least of which was the fear of reprisals by the white communities in which they worked. Nevertheless, many continued to support the campaign for integration with donations to the Inc. Fund channeled through conduits to circumvent the repercussions.⁷²

Whatever its effect on the broader civil rights movement, *Brown* had a profound impact on the NAACP. Wilkins acknowledged at a congressional hearing several years later that the decision shifted the Association's emphasis from defensive to offensive in that, with no legal basis for segregation left, the NAACP had to fight public attitudes, emotions and traditions to win support for equal rights legislation and litigation.⁷³ The Director of Branches, Gloster Current, also recognized the changes *Brown* imposed on the fight for freedom telling branches that the battleground had now moved from a national level to local communities where activities must be focused to solidify recent legal gains.⁷⁴

In the midst of this turmoil, Walter White's heart finally gave out. In March 1955 he died of a heart attack. Although two other contenders for the position of Executive Secretary emerged, Clarence Mitchell and Thurgood Marshall, it would have been almost impossible to appoint anyone other than Wilkins to the position without risking great internal turmoil. One recent historian of the NAACP claimed that competition between Marshall and Wilkins for the position of Executive Secretary led to an escalation of tension between the two men, but there is little evidence to

⁷⁰ Michael Klarman, "Brown, Radical Change and the Civil Rights Movement," *Virginia Law Review*, 80 (1994); Michael J Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

⁷¹ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 467.

⁷² Adam Fairclough, *In a Class of their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 374-375.

⁷³ Brief History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1909 – 1959 to be included in the Subcommittee Hearing minutes, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A73, LOC.

⁷⁴ Memorandum, Gloster Current to branch and budget committees, October 8, 1954, NAACP; Part III, Box A613, LOC.

support this assertion.⁷⁵ On the contrary, in his initial reorganization plan presented to the NAACP's board in September 1955, Wilkins requested that Marshall "with whom the Secretary frequently confers," be named Assistant Executive Secretary.⁷⁶ When Marshall married Cecile Suyat in December 1955, Wilkins gave the bride away, and was named godfather to Marshall's first son the following year.⁷⁷

It was almost a formality when the board unanimously voted that Wilkins be appointed Executive Secretary with immediate effect. No doubt as a result of the difficulties surrounding White's leave of absence in 1949-1950, the Board went to great lengths to present a united front. Hubert Delaney, who acted as secretary for the board meeting, even went so far as to say: "there has seldom been an instance where the Board acted with greater dignity and with more unanimity based upon their desire to see the Association close ranks and move forward under the leadership of an Executive Secretary who would not be handicapped by factional strife within the Board."⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle Against Racism in America 1909 - 1969* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 305.

⁷⁶ Memorandum from Roy Wilkins to the NAACP board of directors, September 12, 1955, Roy Wilkins papers, Box 29, LOC.

⁷⁷ Juan Williams. *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary*. (New York: Times Books, 1998), 244-250.

⁷⁸ Board of Directors meeting in Executive Session, April 11, 1955, NAACP papers, Part II, Box A611, LOC.

Chapter Three

Master of Power

Wilkins was now finally at the helm of the Association he had spent almost a quarter of a century serving. As Executive Secretary he regarded himself as one of the leading voices of black America, the first point of contact for presidents, politicians and civic leaders. And with the Brown ruling still fresh, it must have seemed to Wilkins that the long battle to secure equal rights was almost won. The Association was, by now, according to Wilkins, the “the oldest, wiliest, and best-organized civil rights group in the country.”¹ Its membership, while much less than its post-war peak of half a million, was still significant at over 305,500, and its finances were healthy. In short, it appeared to be unassailable.

The usually critical black press also warmly welcomed the new Executive Secretary. During the heady but brief honeymoon period Wilkins was described as astute, scholarly, courageous, diplomatic and, all in all, more than qualified to lead the Association into what was sure to be a period of challenges.² The *St. Petersburg Times* called Wilkins “A quiet fighter” while the *Pittsburgh Courier* was voluble in its praise, claiming him to be “the most qualified man who has ever been chosen to this exalted position.” The *Chester (PA) Times* was more circumspect: “Wilkins will bring to his new position the resilient tact of a polished diplomat.” Wilkins’ old employer, the *Kansas City Call*, congratulated the board, which “would not have found a more seasoned NAACP man to run its national organization than Wilkins.”³ An extravagant photographic spread in *Ebony* magazine showed an energetic and dynamic Wilkins striding purposefully to high-level meetings, consulting with NAACP staff at the office, and relaxing with his wife Minnie at home.⁴

Wilkins would have to lead a new generation of black Americans shaped by their experiences in the Second World War. The shift could be seen by the increase in

¹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 221.

² Press release, “Press Hails Choice of Wilkins as Wise, Logical, Appropriate,” April 21, 1955, NAACP papers, Part II, Box A611, LOC.

³ Ibid.; Roy Wilkins: New NAACP Chief a Quiet Fighter, *St Petersburg Times*, May 29, 1955, NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A611, LOC.

⁴ “NAACP’s Top Man,” *Ebony*, July 1955. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box A611, LOC.

NAACP memberships and activity. During 1955, described as “one of the most active on the community level in NAACP history,” the Association’s annual report claimed that “Branches, youth councils and college chapters, particularly in the South, carried on effective action programs seeking to implement the Supreme Court’s decision of May 31.”⁵ Wilkins’ main objective was to “smash” what he called the “political strangulation,” a confluence of prohibitions on voter registration in the South and a rejection of any civil rights action in Congress.⁶ He promised to prod the three branches of government to work together, although he had little faith in either the Executive or congressional branches. Shortly after becoming Secretary, Wilkins laid out his goals for the NAACP in the press. In what was even then a hopelessly optimistic statement, Wilkins said: “By 1963 [the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation proclamation] we definitely expect that segregation in education will be completely out in most areas, and on its way out in the die-hard areas.” The new Secretary also said he expected all public housing to be desegregated, and segregation in private housing to be largely dismantled.⁷ Using the desegregation of the armed forces and the *Brown* ruling as examples, Wilkins also said the Association anticipated “very much less discrimination” in the labour market, publicly financed leisure, and transport facilities.⁸

White’s death had done little to relieve Wilkins of the factional politics within the organization. As had been demonstrated all too clearly in earlier battles, fault lines between the White and Wilkins camps were well established not just among the staff but also within the board of directors and the black press. James Farmer, one of the founders of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), spent almost two years working with the NAACP as program director between 1959 and 1960, and he described a bleak picture of the forces at work at the national office. Wilkins told Farmer that his wife, Minnie, had warned him to “clean house” because “they’re all Walter White’s people, loyal to him. If you don’t do it, you won’t be able to do

⁵ Annual Report, NAACP Annual Report for 1955. NAACP Papers, Part II, Box K1. LOC.

⁶ Address, Roy Wilkins to the NAACP annual convention, Atlantic City, June 26, 1955. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 54, LOC.

⁷ “Roy Wilkins: New NAACP Chief A Quiet Fighter,” *St Petersburg Times*, May 29, 1955.

⁸ Ibid.

anything.”⁹ Board members Hubert Delaney, Earl Dickerson and Eleanor Roosevelt had been firm supporters of White during his lifetime and bore no small amount of hostility towards Wilkins even before White’s death. Wilkins’ allies on the board were primarily Arthur Spingarn, the NAACP’s president, Daisy Lampkin, and Kelly Alexander, the Association’s state president for North Carolina.

Among the senior staff, public relations director Henry Lee Moon, with whom Wilkins had numerous disagreements, had been an ally of White’s since the reorganization of top-level staff in 1950. Wilkins’ relationship with Gloster Current was more distant, although less confrontational, than that with Moon. Wilkins had been interested in the branch department for many years and recognized that the branches were the lifeblood of the organization so a good working relationship with Current was essential to an effective program. On the whole, Wilkins’ opinion of those working at head office was not high. In a letter to board member Barbee William Durham shortly after becoming Executive Secretary, he suggested that while there was no one he would fire for incompetence “they are just not competent enough.” While there were some “fine men” who were “heart and soul interested in the work” some “lack initiative. Others see one part of a problem, but pass over other parts. Some, let us say, believe in the minimum of actual work.”¹⁰

All of Wilkins’ predecessors had had an assistant who provided essential administrative support and if he was to be an effective Executive Secretary, Wilkins had to overcome his reluctance to delegate. He could not, however, overcome his low opinion of many of his colleagues, and in 1956 went outside the NAACP to hire John Morsell as his executive assistant. Morsell arrived at the Association with a distinguished academic record: a Masters degree in social legislation from Columbia University in New York, a doctorate in sociology, which he obtained while working for the New York City welfare department, and valuable expertise in social science research. Wilkins knew Morsell from his work with Minnie Wilkins at the welfare department, but his prospective assistant was surprised when Wilkins approached him in November 1955 initially to discuss possible

⁹ James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press: 1985), 195.

¹⁰ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Barbee William Durham, May 2, 1955, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 3; General correspondence folder, 1955, LOC.

candidates for the position. Instead, Morsell suggested himself for the position because, he told Wilkins: "I had never been very active but I had always revered it [the NAACP]. I was brought up with the *Crisis* magazine in my house as a kid and that I would consider the chance to work for the NAACP as an unparalleled opportunity if there were any way in which I could help."¹¹ Securing Morsell was an astute move on Wilkins' part. Never an easy man to please, it was a mark of Wilkins' obvious respect for Morsell's intelligence and diligence that he delegated increasingly important projects to his deputy, most notably the LCCR, at whose meetings Morsell increasingly represented the NAACP in Wilkins' place.

While Morsell quickly became Wilkins' most trusted colleague, forging good ties with Clarence Mitchell was equally crucial. According to his biographer, Mitchell had managed to keep a distance from the politics of head office, despite being an ally of Walter White, who had at one point suggested that Mitchell be named Wilkins' assistant during his tenure as Acting Secretary in 1949, an idea Wilkins rejected.¹² Although relations had never been cordial between the Washington DC office and Wilkins, his fervent belief in the power of legislation to help dismantle segregation obliged him to work closely with Mitchell, who was highly regarded on Capitol Hill. Despite earlier difficulties, by 1957 the two men, according to Mitchell's biographer, "displayed considerable respect for each other and worked closely as a team."¹³

Unlike White, who immediately imposed his authority on the Association when he became Secretary, Wilkins was initially tentative in making any organizational changes. In a brief, two-page memorandum to the NAACP's board of directors six months after taking up his new role, Wilkins argued that the branch, public relations and accounting departments were "functioning below their potential" and needed to be improved, but offered few specific recommendations. More

¹¹ Oral history transcript, John Morsell, Interview by John H Britton, Director, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Nov 1, 1967, 4-5. MSRC

¹² Denton Watson, *The Lion in the Lobby: Clarence Mitchell Jr.'s Struggle for the Passage of Civil Rights Laws* (New York: Morrow, 1990), 184-185.

¹³ Mitchell's biographer, Denton Watson, cites several instances during White's leave of absence in 1950 where Wilkins disregarded Mitchell and instead deferred to Leslie Perry, the administrative assistant for the Washington Bureau, as his representative in the capital, Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 184-185, 273-274.

importantly, Wilkins proposed that the pre-1950 organizational structure, where responsibility for administration and staff fell under the Secretary's rule, be restored.¹⁴ This would simply combine the responsibilities that Wilkins had as Assistant Secretary with his new position, arguably an indication of his reluctance to delegate, particularly given his low opinion of many of the staff at the national office.

Citing a summer of "above-normal activity", Wilkins asked the board for additional time to confer with department heads, and promised to present more detailed recommendations at the January 1956 board meeting.¹⁵ Wilkins' plans were thwarted, however, by what one commentator calls the meeting of massive resistance and passive resistance.¹⁶ The first battle between these two forces began on December 1, 1955, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama bus. Mrs. Parks was closely connected with the NAACP and at the time of her rebellious action was secretary of the Montgomery branch – a link the Association would make much of in subsequent years.¹⁷ Hers was not the first such act of defiance on Montgomery's buses, but the quiet dignity of Mrs. Parks during her arrest and arraignment provided the perfect catalyst for a grassroots movement that transformed the struggle for equal rights.¹⁸

¹⁴ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to NAACP Board of Directors, September 12, 1955. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 29, LOC.

¹⁵ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to the Board of Directors, September 12, 1955, Roy Wilkins papers, Box 29, LOC.

¹⁶ Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, The Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006) 109; Massive resistance to integration was given some legal credence by an old Virginia resolution. In November, 1955, the editor of the Richmond News Leader resurrected the pre-civil war doctrine of 'interposition,' by which a state could 'interpose' itself between the federal government and the citizens of a state in the face of action that appeared to encroach upon state sovereignty. 16

¹⁷ Montgomery buses operated a policy of segregation whereby blacks could enter and sit at the rear of the bus, whites entered and sat at the front. As a bus filled, blacks were expected to vacate seats to allow whites to sit down.

¹⁸ In March 1955, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year old schoolgirl, was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white man. Colvin was a member of the local NAACP youth council and it is likely that her arrest was an attempt to challenge the segregation of public transport in the courts. However, during the preparations for Colvin's defense it was discovered that she was pregnant. Charges against Colvin were dropped. In October 1955, 18-year old Mary Louise Smith also refused to give up her seat to a white passenger and was arrested. However, her father paid the fine and the case was dropped.

Mrs. Parks' arrest galvanized the local black community. Immediately following her arrest, E.D. Nixon, a former president of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP, requested help from the NAACP's national office but, after some debate, support was refused on the grounds that the protesters did not demand an end to segregated transport but simply more courteous drivers, 'first come, first served' seating that would not necessarily violate segregation laws, and black drivers on primarily black routes. Undaunted, Nixon quickly gathered a number of the city's black leaders and called for a boycott of the city's buses. Within days, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) had been formed to organize the protest, which had escalated from an initial one-day boycott. While there had been numerous instances of black protest in the preceding decades, the scale of the Montgomery boycott was unprecedented. Around fifty thousand people stayed off the city's buses for over a year, walking through rain, snow and searing heat, or organizing alternative means of transport to get to work and school. When the question arose about who was to lead the boycott, bickering among the various actors within Montgomery's black community led to the election of the young Atlanta pastor, Martin Luther King. King's oratorical gifts and his charisma soon propelled him onto the national stage.¹⁹

The Montgomery bus boycott took the NAACP completely by surprise. During the summer of 1955 the NAACP was focusing its efforts on forcing states to comply with the *Brown* ruling. Branches, particularly in the South, had been instructed to file petitions to local boards of education demanding schools be desegregated. Unfortunately, the immediate result was the firing of dozens of signatories.²⁰ Rosa Parks' arrest paved the way for a legal challenge to the segregated public transport system in the city, an outcome that should, ordinarily, have been a perfect opportunity for the Association. However, the speed with which the local black community banded together to arrange the boycott and elect a leader, without any direction from the Association, was a departure from its preferred order of finding suitable plaintiffs to challenge discriminatory statutes. Mrs Parks and some of the

¹⁹ The history and implications of the Montgomery Bus Boycott are examined in detail in J. Mills Thornton, *Challenge and Response in the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955-1956, The Alabama Review*, 33:3, (July, 1980): 163-235 and also in J. Mills Thornton, *Dividing Lines: Municipal Politics and the Struggle for Civil Rights in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002), 53-96.

²⁰ Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 56-57; Fairclough, *Class of their Own*, 372-373.

boycott's organisers had had long connections with the NAACP and were familiar with the Association's policy on litigation. The NAACP, however, was unable to dictate the pace of events.

The speed with which the boycott took hold highlighted the extent to which black Americans were ready for action. Compliance with Supreme Court rulings on desegregation was as far away as it had ever been, particularly in the most belligerently racist of southern states. The experience of many black Americans during the Second World War, either through industry or the military, had raised expectations of equality beyond the rate at which the white power structure was willing to acquiesce. In February 1956, after negotiations between city and company officials failed, the MIA sought the assistance of the NAACP in attacking Alabama's bus segregation laws. Robert Carter, Thurgood Marshall's deputy, was despatched to assist the black lawyers in filing suit in federal court. Undaunted, the white citizens of Montgomery had other means of fighting back. Two days prior to the filing of the lawsuit, Martin Luther King's house was bombed, and shortly after almost all the boycott leaders, including King, were indicted for violating an anti-boycott statute dating from 1921.²¹

Wilkins had strong misgivings about the use of boycotts as a weapon, but, he could nevertheless see that the Montgomery activists had quickly captured national attention. The NAACP, already committed to helping the boycott leaders, had to play a more prominent role in events. He sent a telegram to branch leaders across the South urging them to cooperate with local ministers and groups to raise funds that should be sent either to Rev. King or to the NAACP's national office. The latter would use such funds to support the "legal action now pending in court challenging segregation statutes."²² Wilkins also reassured King that the Association would continue to support the protest by taking on all the legal costs for those arrested, including Mrs Parks, and put the NAACP's legal staff at their disposal. In addition, Wilkins promised that the Association would assume the majority of costs associated with the legal challenge against Montgomery's segregated buses and if necessary extend emergency financial aid for weekly

²¹ Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 302-303; Thornton, *Dividing Lines*, 80-84.

²² Telegram, Roy Wilkins to branch leaders, February 23, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III; Box A 175, LOC.

expenses.²³ When confusion began to arise about how funds raised during NAACP meetings to defray MIA legal costs were being allocated, Wilkins warned King: "I do not need to stress that at this time it would be fatal for there to develop any hint of disagreement as to the raising and allocating of funds."²⁴

Wilkins' discomfort with non-violent direct action tactics was in part a pragmatic response to the realities of life for black Americans. He frequently argued that Gandhi's use of similar tactics against the British was so successful in India because Indians were in the vast majority and therefore could wield enormous economic power. Boycotts such as that in Montgomery could only work on a local scale, where the black population was numerous enough to have an impact. Wilkins' great fear was that the tactics used in Montgomery would encourage similar but much less successful protests that would deflect the Association from its strategy of litigation and lobbying, and fuel white resistance even further.²⁵ He also argued that the NAACP's participation in boycotts could leave the Association "in such a vulnerable position that we would be damaged to the point of ineffectiveness in carrying out our general program," reiterating to one respondent his belief that the Montgomery protest was successful only because it was a purely local protest motivated by purely local conditions. "Montgomery is the shining example of success, but Montgomery is a strictly local effort brought on by conditions which wring sympathy and support from all over the nation."²⁶

Nevertheless, inspired by Montgomery, some other NAACP branches proposed holding bus boycotts in their cities to support the Alabama protesters. When the Stockton, California branch suggested boycotting National City Lines, the company that owed the Montgomery bus system, Wilkins quickly put a stop to the idea with a telegram: "National office definitely not encouraging boycotts of subsidiary transit lines of national corporate which owns Montgomery line. Please advise

²³ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Martin Luther King, March 8, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A273; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Martin Luther King, April 12, 1956, NAACP Papers, Box A273. LOC

²⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Martin Luther King, March 8, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A273, LOC.

²⁵ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 237-8.

²⁶ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Alex Bradford, March 27, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A275, LOC.

Stockton group at once."²⁷ Wilkins nevertheless encouraged cooperation between the Association's members and the MIA, despite the threat that the newer organization was beginning to pose to the NAACP's finances. In a telegram to Franklin Williams, the Association's West Coast representative, Wilkins warned that if branches in the region managed to raise funds for the national office: "there must be no quarrel over funds for legal defence in Lucy case and other activity which must be taken to win University of Alabama case and to combat entire Southern situation but we will not quarrel with Montgomery Improvement Association over who gets funds. It must not conflict with Montgomery effort or confuse public or antagonize church leaders. Repeat not antagonize church leaders."²⁸

Whatever his private reservations, Wilkins was diligent in recognizing the significance of the boycott publicly. Shortly before the protest ended, Wilkins told *Liberation* magazine that the "Montgomery protest is an historic development. It demonstrates before all the world that Negroes have the capacity for sustained collective action. It refutes that white supremacist's false charge that Negroes are content with discrimination and segregation. It validates the role of local leadership in social action programs. It reveals the economic strength of the Negro. It affirms the value of a calm approach to potentially explosive issues. And finally, it demonstrates that 50,000 persons can work together as a unit without military discipline and without degenerating into a mob."²⁹

Legal action eventually brought the boycott to a close. In November 1956, the Supreme Court, in answer to a petition filed by the NAACP, upheld an earlier verdict from a lower federal court that city and state bus segregation was unconstitutional.³⁰ The boycott finally ended on December 20, 1956, 382 days from Mrs Parks' arrest, when King, the first passenger of the day, took his seat toward the front of the bus. For Wilkins the legal victory was a vindication of the

²⁷ Telegram, Roy Wilkins to Lester Bailey, March 22, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A273, LOC.

²⁸ Telegram, Roy Wilkins to Franklin Williams, March 8, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A273, LOC.

²⁹ Statement, Roy Wilkins for *Liberation* magazine, November 15, 1956. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A304. LOC.

³⁰ *Browder v. Gayle*, 142 F. Supp. 707 (1956).

NAACP's belief in the process of law, and he reminded King frequently in later years that it was litigation that secured the victory in Montgomery, not direct action. Nevertheless, a grudging acknowledgement of the boycott's success was given in the NAACP's annual report of 1956: "Although the actual desegregation of Montgomery bus seating pattern came through a Supreme Court decision in response to an NAACP suit, the Montgomery protest was an event of the greatest significance in the struggle of the Negro toward dignity and full citizenship."³¹

The legal ruling removed the final barrier against integrated public transport in the city, and provided a satisfactory conclusion for the protesters. But the success of the Montgomery protest also challenged Wilkins' rationale about the efficacy of boycotts generally. He debated the point with James Peck, a civil rights activist, in an exchange of letters two years after the boycott. Peck argued that, contrary to Wilkins' opinion, the court case was "certainly was not the major [factor] in the Montgomery situation. Without the peoples' protest action, the buses would still be segregated, despite the court case – just as interstate buses in the South remain segregated despite the Supreme Court."³² Wilkins rejected Peck's argument. "It must not be forgotten that Montgomery had a happy combination of elements that would make a boycott successful, and that such a combination does not exist everywhere."³³ Furthermore, he defended the Association's reliance on legal action as one of its primary means of agitation. "Legal victories rooted in the law form the basis on which other methods can proceed toward accomplishment."³⁴

Montgomery was a sign of a new order where, even if the legal action were carefully plotted, it had been instigated outside of the NAACP's dominion. As Thurgood Marshall's biographer Mark Tushnet argue the contribution of litigation to the civil rights movement was changing. Historically, NAACP lawyers had concentrated on finding suitable plaintiffs and cases to challenge discriminatory statutes, with varying degrees of success, but as the pace of change escalated,

³¹ NAACP Annual Report, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box I14, LOC.

³² Letter, James Peck to Roy Wilkins, January 26, 1958; Letter, Roy Wilkins to James Peck, February 4, 1958; Letter, Roy Wilkins to James Peck, December 16, 1957. All NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A317, LOC; Thornton, 163-235.

³³ Letter, Roy Wilkins to James Peck, February 4, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A317, LOC.

³⁴ Letter, February 4, 1958, LOC.

driven primarily from the grassroots level, the Association had to become reactive, attempting to secure a legal precedent following a protest or providing legal support for protesters.³⁵ The success of the Montgomery boycott posed several serious challenges for Wilkins and his organization: mass action instigated at a grassroots level began to shift the locus of power; the popularity of Martin Luther King deflected the attention of the media, politicians and black Americans away from the NAACP; the boycott's success fed the growing criticism of the NAACP's reliance on legalism; and, most seriously, the emergence of new groups such as King's SCLC heightened competition for funds and power.

Wilkins viewed the Montgomery protest as a vivid illustration of what he called "the problem of the South."³⁶ That problem was the complicity between the various strands of the white power structure that perpetuated violence and reprisals against black citizens. Wilkins noted the extent of that collusion in a speech to the Southeast Regional Convention of the NAACP in February 1956. "The police state has come out in the open in Montgomery. The grand jury has indicted one hundred and fifteen persons under a state anti-boycott law. This is the Soviet communism method. Here we have the police knocking on doors and taking men away. Here we have mass arrests. Here we have a grand jury delivering a general lecture on observance of the segregation line. Precisely like the Communists."³⁷

The reference to Communism was only slightly exaggerated. Montgomery's rejection of federal law and the instructions of the Supreme Court, the attack by a mob on Autherine Lucy, a black student attempting to enrol at the University of Alabama, and the vicious murder of Emmett Till, a 14-year old boy from Chicago, who was brutally beaten to death for allegedly whistling at a white woman while staying with relatives in Mississippi were clear indications that a different rule of law applied in the South. The blatant inversion of law in these most recent cases

³⁵ Tushnet. *Making Civil Rights Law*, 305-306.

³⁶ Transcript, Address by Roy Wilkins to the Southeast Regional Convention of the NAACP, Charleston, NC, February 24, 1956. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 53, LOC; The classic examination of the extent of massive resistance is Numan V. Bartley's, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997). More recent studies include George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006).

³⁷ Transcript, Address by Roy Wilkins to the Southeast Regional Convention of the NAACP, Charleston, NC, February 24, 1956. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 53, LOC.

was anathema to Wilkins' sense of order. In the Cold War, however, there were international as well as domestic repercussions to this climate of intimidation and terror. Wilkins argued, in an attempt to appeal to the federal government's sense of self-interest, that the situation posed a threat to America's reputation as "the leader of the free world and will thereby serve the purposes of our enemy, international communism."³⁸

Till's murder, in particular, attracted international attention. When an all-white jury acquitted his murderers in just an hour, reporters from as far afield as Germany and India, as well as domestic newspapers, condemned the verdict with an "outcry that reached a frenzied pitch" when *Jet* magazine published the shocking photographs of Till's mutilated corpse.³⁹ The NAACP was criticised in some quarters for not doing enough to protest either the murder or the subsequent acquittal; there were calls for boycotts, demonstrations and other forms of action as black outrage grew. At one meeting at a church in New York, attended by Wilkins, Till's mother and Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Powell stoked the ten thousand-strong crowd to a fevered mob wildly demanding a march on Washington. Wilkins, according to one report, took the stage and talked the crowd down from its tumult saying: "There's not going to be any march - to Washington or anywhere else. The minute we get down to 125th Street, we'll lose half of you because it's almost dinnertime and you all will want to get some of that good Sunday dinner waiting for you. Get down to 116th Street and half of the rest of you will drop out cause your feet hurt. By Ninety-sixth Street almost all of the rest will be remembering something else you were supposed to do and that'll be the last of that crowd."⁴⁰

How to address the issue of violence against blacks in the absence of any federal relief presented a difficult challenge. Wilkins proposed that the solution to this state of anarchy was to secure civil rights legislation: "unless we wish mob rule to take

³⁸ Transcript, Address by Roy Wilkins to the National Delegate Assembly for Civil Rights, Washington DC, March 4, 1956, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A76, LOC; Wilkins made a similar point in a speech at Boston University the following week: Transcript, Address by Roy Wilkins, Boston University Founder's Day Institute, Boston, MA, March 13, 1956 Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 53. LOC.

³⁹ Stephen J Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1988), back cover.

⁴⁰ Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*, 320.

over our governmental functions, our Federal Government must have the power to protect the lives of its citizens."⁴¹ Sadly, as Wilkins recognized, the resistance so violently displayed in the southern states was also evident in Congress, albeit with much less overt aggression. The Eisenhower administration, through Attorney General Herbert Brownell, was more supportive of civil rights, although President Eisenhower's own position was more ambiguous. Wilkins had initially been convinced of the president's sincerity, but Eisenhower's lukewarm support for the *Brown* decision, his even more muted support for *Brown II*, and his promise not to interfere with the governor of Alabama's actions when Autherine Lucy tried to enrol at the University of Alabama, left the NAACP leader sceptical about the president's commitment to civil rights.

Still, Wilkins' faith in the legislative and legal processes remained intact. This faith was further tested when, in March 1956, as a response to *Brown*, nineteen senators and eighty-one representatives from the eleven ex-confederate states signed the "Southern Manifesto," pledged to reverse the ruling and "prevent the use of force in its implementation."⁴² That same month, in his capacity as chairman of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), Wilkins hosted a three-day National Delegate Assembly for Civil Rights in Washington, DC. The conference brought together fifty national organizations and two thousand delegates to discuss, publicise and promote some of the civil rights issues that had stalled in Congress.⁴³ As a result, an eight-point legislative program was developed that called for an effective FEPC, withholding federal funds from any institution defying constitutional prohibitions against racial segregation, an anti-lynching law, protection of the right to vote, creation of a Federal Commission on Civil Rights, elimination of remaining segregation in interstate travel, and provision for majority rule in the Senate and House of Representatives.⁴⁴ The latter proposal was a clear attempt to eliminate the filibuster, by which a senator could block a vote on a bill "reduced to their simplest terms," Wilkins explained, "our proposals are merely

⁴¹ Transcript, Address by Roy Wilkins to the National Delegate Assembly for Civil Rights, Washington DC, March 4, 1956, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A76, LOC.

⁴² Robert Caro, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson: Master of the Senate* (New York: Vintage, 2002), 785-786. Three southern senators declined to sign the manifesto: Estes Kefauver and Albert Gore from Tennessee and Lyndon Johnson.

⁴³ Circular from Arnold Aronson, May 11 1956, NAACP papers, Box A205, LOC.

⁴⁴ NAACP Annual report, 1956. NAACP papers, Part III, Box I14, LOC.

proposals to utilize constitutional government against the rule of the mob - the mob of men and the mob of mind."⁴⁵

Eisenhower was not completely indifferent to civil rights. During the presidential campaign in 1952, he had proclaimed that, if president, he would not allow federal funds to be used in projects that operated in a discriminatory way. Once in the White House, despite his reticence about a permanent FEPC, Eisenhower established the President's Committee on Government Contracts (PCGC), which was set up to persuade, educate and negotiate and was known as the 'little FEPC'. Another Eisenhower structure, the President's Committee on Government Employment Policy (PCGE) was established to secure another of the president's stated objectives: to eradicate employment discrimination within the federal government. The PCGE operated along similar lines as the FEPC in that it had no powers of enforcement but could investigate complaints and pursue solutions.⁴⁶

To Wilkins' frustration, despite initiatives such as the PCGE Eisenhower's philosophy on civil rights was marked by a firm belief in gradualism, particularly when challenging established social customs.

The plan of the Supreme Court to accomplish integration gradually and sensibly seems to me to provide the only possible answer if we are to consider on the one hand the customs and fears of a great section of our population, and on the other the binding effect that Supreme Court decisions must have on all of us if our form of government is to survive and prosper. Consequently the plan that I have advanced for Congressional consideration on this touchy matter was conceived in the thought that only moderation in legal compulsions, accompanied by a stepped-up program of education, could bring about the result that every loyal American should seek.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Paul Sampson, "Civil Rights Leader Asks for Action," *New York Times*, March 5, 1956.

⁴⁶ Eisenhower's view of civil rights has recently been reassessed. The traditional view is that he was indifferent, at best, to the problems of African-Americans. This perception is challenged by David A Nichols in *A Matter of Justice: Eisenhower and the Beginning of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

⁴⁷ Letter, President Eisenhower to Swede Hazlett, July 22, 1957. The Dwight D Eisenhower Library:

In spite of hesitant support from the executive and judicial branches of government, and almost no support from the legislative branch, Wilkins maintained his faith that political action, rather than direct action, was the most effective route to securing equal rights. In an attempt to persuade presumably sceptical delegates at the NAACP's annual convention in July 1956, he noted:

We must intensify the use of political action in the final surge to full equality. The use of purely political action against us by certain southern states is ample evidence that we, too, should resort to this activity on our behalf...If politics can be used for increasing corporation profits, there is nothing wrong with using politics to secure human rights. Everyone tries to use politics for his benefit; you can use it for yours. Don't stammer and don't apologize. Use your vote in behalf of civil rights.⁴⁸

Wilkins' emphasis on political action repeated his belief that the presidential election campaign gave blacks the opportunity to influence the platforms of both political parties. Such political pressure could not only move the process of integration forward but also to vindicate the NAACP's strategy of pursuing change through the courts and Congress in the face of the seemingly more successful, and certainly more dramatic, actions of the Montgomery Improvement Association.

The actions of Montgomery's black citizens were the main talking point in the convention halls and the issue of mass action was brought to the floor. A resolution was passed to "broaden the NAACP's program by all lawful means and recommend that the board of directors give careful consideration to the Montgomery model." Wilkins, however, remained firmly convinced that the Association should remain focused on pressing the three pillars of government on desegregation, and leave direct action protest to King, albeit with financial and rhetorical support from the NAACP.⁴⁹ His unshakable belief in the power of law and the ultimate relief promised by the democratic process is hardly surprising. It was an approach firmly aligned to Wilkins' personality. However, Montgomery

http://eisenhower.archives.gov/Research/Digital_Documents/Civil_Rights_Civil_Rights_Act/CivilRightsActfiles.html;

⁴⁸ Address, Roy Wilkins to the NAACP annual convention, San Francisco, CA, July 1, 1956. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 53. LOC.

⁴⁹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 238.

offered alternative methods of protest that appeared to be as successful as the NAACP's more sedate tactics, and they also allowed anyone to participate.

As well as demonstrating the efficacy of mass action protest, Montgomery also provided a competitor for the mantle of preeminent black leader, in as much as any one leader could claim to lead such a diverse population group. Although King's popularity made little difference to the Association's program, it had a very real effect on the public perception of the NAACP. The differences between King and Wilkins were most pronounced in their joint public appearances, when the power of King's oratory compared starkly with Wilkins' far more restrained delivery. When King addressed the NAACP's annual convention in San Francisco at the end of June 1956, he electrified the audience with a call to protest: "even if it means going to jail. If such is the case we must honorably fill up the jailhouses of the South. It might even lead to physical death."⁵⁰ In his speech, in sharp contrast, Wilkins challenged President Eisenhower and Congress to act more directly in support of desegregation, suggesting a conference to discuss the problem of non-compliance with the Brown ruling.⁵¹ King was able to make full use of his Baptist traditions and move an audience simply with his words, while his actions as leader of the Montgomery bus boycott gave additional weight to his rhetoric. On the other hand, Wilkins most often spoke of legislation, law and the political process, all of which was vitally important but rarely inspiring.

There are very few recordings of Wilkins' speeches, so the researcher has to rely heavily on contemporary accounts of his oratory. James Hicks, editor of the *Amsterdam News*, and a frequent critic of Wilkins, suggested that Wilkins' rhetorical style had been honed by his long connection with the NAACP. He described it as that of a "young man in a family who went away, made good, and based on his intimate knowledge of the family has dropped in to tell the other members of the family, including papa and mama, just what procedure to follow in their efforts to be successful."⁵² Other commentators noted Wilkins' ability to appeal to logic

⁵⁰ Paul Jacobs, "The NAACP's New Direction," *The New Republic*, July 16, 1956.

⁵¹ "NAACP Opens 47th Meeting," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, June 27, 1956.

⁵² Cited in Marcus H Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders: 1900-1968* (Westport, CT: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 93-94.

rather than emotion.⁵³ Wilkins also suffered by comparison with his predecessor. The *Amsterdam News*, a frequent critic of Wilkins, damned him with faint praise in an article questioning why all was not well for the new leader: "Wilkins, unlike the late Walter White, is not the take-charge type of leader, who within himself would be a dynamic figure. He has been the methodic kind of workman who handles the administrative details, and has done an excellent job at this."⁵⁴ Unfortunately, the paper said, rising domestic tensions had placed him in a position that forced him into the spotlight where "his every word and action in public are a matter of national concern."⁵⁵

Television became a ubiquitous presence in American homes at the same time that civil rights became a national preoccupation.⁵⁶ While Wilkins may not have been a great or inspiring orator, his analytical skills were well suited to the new medium. He became a frequent spokesman for the civil rights movement on television shows such as *Meet the Press*, a program of political discussion, and the *Today Show*, a morning news program, an environment more suited to his pragmatic, detached personality. He also occasionally appeared on news programs outside of the United States, most notably on the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) in London. The growing importance of television helped shape national opinion about civil rights and therefore made it a crucial platform for the NAACP.

The Association took any media attention very seriously. When Chet Huntley, a television commentator, argued in an NBC broadcast in February 1959, that desegregation would be best served if the 'militant' NAACP withdrew from the fight and left the field clear for "moderate" black organizations, Wilkins immediately demanded equal airtime to respond to Huntley's assertions, backed by two hundred and twenty five calls to NBC in support of the NAACP. The television

⁵³ Boulware, *The Oratory of Negro Leaders*, 92-97.

⁵⁴ Uptown Lowdown with Jimmy Booker, *New York Amsterdam News*, May 12, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A317, LOC.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ The percentage of households owning a television in the United States grew dramatically between 1950 and 1965. In 1950, 9% of US households owned a television. By 1955 that number had risen to 64.5% and by 1965 the number of households with a television had reached 92.6%. Source: Television Bureau of Advertising. The number of authorized television stations in the United States showed an equally dramatic increase: six television stations were on air in 1945 rising to 430 by 1955. Source: Statistical Abstract of the United States 1955, 76th Annual Edition, US Department of Commerce.

company refused to give the NAACP an hour, but offered half an hour during which Wilkins would appear with Huntley and Thomas Waring, the editor of the *Charleston News and Courier*, who represented those opposed to desegregation. Given the national platform of the Huntley show, the manner of Wilkins' response would form the first impression of the NAACP for many viewers. It was imperative that Wilkins not only dispelled the idea that the Association was a militant organization, which equated in the minds of most Americans with Communism, but also, in refuting the allegations of militancy, did not align the Association with those moderates who argued for a gradualist approach in securing equal rights. Wilkins recognized the importance of a platform such as the Huntley broadcast: "With so much on the line, I had to measure my every sentence, my every word for image arousal, related associations, color, accuracy, impact, collateral connotations, and all the other bizarre new angles of the medium. I worked on my answer feverishly, praying that all the hopping and skipping I had done would be accurate enough to keep me from delivering my last words at breakneck speed or being cut off."⁵⁷

Wilkins' concerns were unnecessary. During the ten minutes or so allocated to Wilkins, he described the instructions for "calm reasonableness" given to branches following the *Brown* ruling, gave a brief history of civil rights litigation, and went on to question which other organization was as capable of providing the leadership offered by the NAACP. He rebutted Huntley's argument that society had never been changed by law. "Does anyone seriously maintain that the Magna Carta did not change society, or that the Code of Hammurabi had no effect on mankind? It cannot be denied that even the 1896 decision profoundly affected society in America." Wilkins ended with a firm denial that the Association's desegregation fight had been responsible for the closure of schools. "The NAACP is uncompromisingly opposed to closing any schools. We regard this as disastrous in the face of the Soviet challenge. But this has been a condition which white citizens have imposed upon themselves. We did not thrust it upon them, nor upon their

⁵⁷ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 263.

bewildered young people. No colored man sits in any southern state legislature. No vote of ours decreed the closing of schools.”⁵⁸

The Huntley program demonstrated how valuable television could be as a means of reaching a wide audience that would not otherwise come into contact with the Association. It was therefore a constant thorn for Wilkins, particularly once other groups with new, more eye-catching tactics and charismatic leaders began to dominate the civil rights field, that the Association was poorly represented in the press. For this, he frequently blamed Henry Lee Moon, the NAACP’s beleaguered public relations director. Moon had joined the NAACP after a career in journalism and union organizing and had written the definitive textbook on the black vote, *Balance of Power*. Wilkins, with his journalistic background, had a poor opinion of the publicity director’s abilities and he often treated Moon like an incompetent sub-editor. One of Wilkins’ most frequent complaints was that Moon did not respond quickly enough to negative articles. “I continue to be sure that you do not want NAACP public relations to deteriorate through default, but I am more and more puzzled over recurring instances of items in the weekly press definitely prejudicial to good NAACP public relations about which you do nothing, and which are seldom ever noted for my attention.”⁵⁹

The hapless Moon also had to service Wilkins’ ego when the latter frequently complained that his efforts were going unnoticed by the press. Even before Wilkins became Secretary, he was conscious of how he was represented by the media. In one example that is illustrative of many similar exchanges in the NAACP and Wilkins archives, he berated Moon for the rash of negative press reports while he was acting secretary. In a furious two-page memorandum, he claimed to Moon that the reports “have not reflected fairly, the activities or statements of the Administrator [Wilkins] who has been, for all practical operating purposes, the

⁵⁸ Pamphlet, Transcript of the Chet Huntley Report, February 8 1959. The transcript is undated but was reprinted by the NAACP shortly after the broadcast. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I15. LOC. The decision referred to by Wilkins in his rebuttal was given in *Plessey v Ferguson* 163 U.S. 537 (1896) in which the Supreme Court decided that segregated facilities were constitutional as long as such facilities were of equal standards. The ‘separate but equal’ doctrine provided a legal ballast for discriminatory facilities and policies until it was repudiated by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

⁵⁹ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Henry Lee Moon, June 5, 1957, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 5. LOC.

Acting Secretary since October 1954 ... I do want, and will insist upon, what is due to me and my activities at the NAACP." He also accused Moon of using various dirty tricks of the trade to undermine him. Moon however was more than capable of defending himself. He replied in this instance with a list of forty articles in which Wilkins had been mentioned and twenty-one in which he had been cited in the lead paragraph.⁶⁰

Although Wilkins claimed to Moon that this anger did not stem from personal injury, there is no doubt part of this frustration arose from Wilkins' ego. He jealously guarded his position as head of the Association and, once the Montgomery boycott had pushed its leader into the spotlight, resented the public admiration given to Martin Luther King. However, Wilkins' resentment of King was not simply about ego. As the media devoted more attention to civil rights, the appalling photographs of Emmet Till's crushed body and scenes of the vicious baying of white crowds outside the University of Alabama sparked embarrassment and outrage among the viewing public.⁶¹ Harnessing that outrage and transforming it into support for the NAACP was made even more difficult by the sudden emergence of a popular new leader who had the potential to lure both established and prospective NAACP members away like a character in a child's fairy story.

What made the situation still more dangerous for the NAACP was a threat to its very existence in the South. The governments of Alabama, South Carolina and Louisiana unearthed a number of archaic statutes to prohibit or curtail the Association from operating in their states. Robert Carter, Marshall's assistant counsel at the Inc. Fund, thought the states' tactics most ingenious. He suggested that if the states had used violence the federal government would have been forced to step in but by demanding members' names and by making it difficult for NAACP lawyers to operate in the states where plaintiffs were prevented from

⁶⁰ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Henry Lee Moon, March 14, 1955; Memorandum, Henry Lee Moon to Roy Wilkins, April 6, 1955. Both Roy Wilkins Papers, Box, 3, LOC.

⁶¹ Sasha Torres argues that television images of white police attacking black demonstrators, for example, encouraged viewers to identify with the protestors rather than those who were supposed to represent law and order. Torres' examination of the role television played in the civil rights movement is one of the few to deal with this subject. Sasha Torres, *Black, White, and in Color: Television and Black Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

coming forward. "If you can prevent the people from going into court to seek the vindication of their rights, [and] you've won the ball game."⁶²

These challenges caught the Association completely off guard, in large part because, as Carter, later said, the Association thought that the *Brown* ruling "boxed in" segregation, had it underestimated the racism that existed "outside that box."⁶³ As soon as the Supreme Court handed down its ruling on *Brown* the Association focused almost all its attention on attempting to force the federal and state governments to implement the desegregation instructions. In doing so it had failed to consider the possibility of more sophisticated action on the part of some southern politicians. By the end of 1956 the NAACP was fighting for survival in Louisiana, Alabama, North Carolina, Texas, Georgia and Virginia. In the case of Alabama, the Association was banned completely for nine years, allowing other smaller and newer groups to fill the vacuum. In other states, NAACP branches stagnated, not only leaving them ill equipped to fight hostile and devious resistance or to compete with other civil rights groups. A raft of lawsuits was needed not only to force compliance with *Brown* but also to fight several of the state actions against the Association. The lawsuits put additional pressure on an inadequate and untrained leadership in many of its southern branches, where most of the important battles would be fought. As Wilkins wrote later: "The only way to begin was to begin. The real question was 'Where first.'"⁶⁴

Mississippi was the first state to use a distortion of the law to challenge the Association. In February 1956 a law was passed to prohibit the solicitation, receipt or donation of funds for the purpose of filing or prosecuting lawsuits. The state legislature also passed a statute making it illegal for the state to employ any member of the NAACP. If this ruling was not flagrant enough in its unconstitutionality, Mississippi compounded it by requiring public school teachers to list, by affidavit, any organizations they had belonged to or had been involved

⁶² Oral history transcript, Robert Carter, interview by John Britton, New York City, March 8, 1968, MRSC; Report to the Annual Meeting, undated by presented by Thurgood Marshall at the annual meeting of the NAACP board of directors in New York City on January 7, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box J6. LOC; See also Walter F Murphy, "The South Counterattacks: The Anti-NAACP Laws," *Western Political Quarterly*, 12:2 (June 1959): 371-390.

⁶³ Roger Wilkins, Interview by author. Washington, D.C. August 16, 2006.

⁶⁴ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 219.

with during the preceding five years.⁶⁵ Ironically, black teachers were often among the more conservative members of the black community and despite some clandestine support of the Inc. Fund, rarely given to activities that would openly challenge the *status quo*. In fact, as John Dittmer argues, many middle class blacks in the state were reluctant to sign up with the NAACP. There were optimistic signs, in the state however. Medgar Evers, the Association's dedicated and long-suffering field secretary in Mississippi, was beginning to identify an interest among high school students who were keen to form youth groups.⁶⁶

Louisiana, in a deviously creative adaptation of a statute originally designed to curtail the Ku Klux Klan, demanded that the NAACP file its statewide membership lists with the Louisiana Secretary of State. Although several branches did file the requested lists with the appropriate authorities, the Association was enjoined eventually from conducting business in the state for several months while the NAACP challenged the statute in the federal courts. A legal technicality rendered the injunction void when issued and gave the Association a temporary reprieve, during which time branches in New Orleans, Shreveport, Lake Charles, and the State Conference of Branches, filed the lists as required. When the Association finally resumed its operations at the end of 1956, it was in a significantly weakened condition with 1,698 members across the state, a fraction of its 13,190 members in the previous year.⁶⁷ The NAACP may have been back in business but even where operations were revived fear of physical, economic or legal reprisals meant that people were wary about associating with the NAACP. In an attempt to revive operations in the state, Wilkins visited New Orleans to discuss the situation with local branch leaders. They decided that the organization should focus on the six largest cities and that activists in smaller areas should either wait before trying to re-establish a branch.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 54; Memorandum, Prepared by Theodore Leskes of the American Jewish Committee, May 7, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box J4. LOC.

⁶⁶ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1995) 85.

⁶⁷ Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 209.

⁶⁸ Adam Fairclough, *Race & Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana 1915-1971* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 210.

Alabama followed Louisiana's lead almost immediately and to even more devastating effect. Ironically, despite the NAACP's initial reluctance to involve itself in direct action protests, southern politicians automatically associated the organization with any form of racial agitation. The state was particularly exercised over the NAACP's financial support of the Montgomery boycott, and by its legal support of Autherine Lucy's attempt to enter the University of Alabama. The state retaliated on May 31, 1956, with a demand that the organization register with the Alabama Secretary of State. The following day "without notice or hearing" Judge Walter B. Jones of the 15th Judicial Circuit Court in Montgomery issued a temporary restraining order and an injunction forbidding the NAACP to operate in Alabama.⁶⁹

Officially, the pretext of infringements of corporation and tax laws were the basis for its action, but Alabama's Attorney General, John Patterson, also charged that the Association was "creating racial tension and unrest." Judge Jones, who issued the initial temporary restraining order intended "to deal the NAACP...a mortal blow from which they shall never recover."⁷⁰ Wilkins attempted to defuse the situation. "Some time ago at the request of Attorney General Patterson we filed with him a copy of our certificate of incorporation and our constitution. We received a letter thanking us for those items and asking for some names and addresses 'to complete my files.'" There was no mention of compliance with or violation of Alabama law. "We thought we were furnishing what the Attorney General required and if more is required under the law we will endeavour to supply the information."⁷¹

As in Louisiana, the Alabama government also ordered the NAACP to submit its membership list for the state. The debate about whether to comply with the order soured relations at head office. Wilkins, along with Carter, was adamant that filing the lists with the state authorities could endanger members' lives and livelihoods. Marshall was equally adamant that the Association, as an organization that believed in conducting action through the courts, should comply with the legal

⁶⁹ Chronology of Events leading to the trial of the State of Alabama's injunction against the NAACP in Montgomery County, Circuit Court, December 27, 1961, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A273, LOC

⁷⁰ Ibid.; Mark Tushnet. *Making Civil Rights Law*, 283.

⁷¹ Press release, Statement from Roy Wilkins, June 1, 1956. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A273. LOC.

instruction.⁷² When, the NAACP refused to comply, it was fined \$100,000 for contempt of court. Other states used similar methods. Virginia, for example, passed a series of statutes prohibiting fundraising for litigation and also issued restrictions that, in effect, barred a lawyer in the state taking on an NAACP case. State officials also requested access to the Association's membership lists. That request was denied by Wilkins, who told John Boatwright, the secretary of the lavishly named Committee on Offenses Against Administration of Justice: "The slightest danger of revelation of the identity of our members would cause a substantial and injurious curtailment in the size of our membership" – exactly the effect intended by the request.⁷³

Florida waged an investigation of the Association's activities in the state. Georgia launched an investigation into the NAACP's finances to assess whether it owed the state any taxes, and when the Association refused to comply with an order to release its account books, it was fined \$10,000. The effect, as Roy Wilkins pointed out to Daisy Bates, was "to keep us so busy defending the Association and spending our money that we will have no time or resources left to push the program."⁷⁴ By May 1957 eight states had implemented some kind of impediment to the NAACP's operations.⁷⁵ By 1958, the NAACP's budget was the largest in its history, but the cost of the continuing legal battles for its survival, and for school desegregation, combined with the costs of the voting and registration campaign across the South put the Association in a precarious financial situation and made the competition for members even more fierce.⁷⁶

The states also took care to exploit any connection in the minds of their citizens between the NAACP and Communism. Implying that the Association was a Communist organization provided much ammunition for its opponents. The Association produced brochures proclaiming its history as an "American

⁷² Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 285; Williams. Thurgood Marshall, 259.

⁷³ Letter, Roy Wilkins to John Boatwright, February 13, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A272 LOC

⁷⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Daisy Bates, February 25, 1957, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A274, LOC.

⁷⁵ Memorandum, Prepared by Theodore Leskes of the American Jewish Committee, May 7, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box J4. LOC.

⁷⁶ Memorandum, From the desk of the Executive Secretary, March, 1958, NAACP papers, Part III; Box A316, LOC.

organization" whose "philosophy, program and goals derive from the nation's hallowed democratic traditions."⁷⁷ Although the NAACP had taken steps to ensure that, as far as it was possible to tell, no communists and their 'fellow travellers' were members, the hysteria prompted by 'Red Scare' of the McCarthy years meant that southern politicians could make all manner of unfounded allegations in an attempt to discredit the NAACP. The state of Arkansas, for example, accused the Association of being "heavily infiltrated by subversives and, wittingly or unwittingly, is now "a captive of the Communist apparatus."⁷⁸

The effects of this campaign began to take their toll on morale both at head office and among the NAACP's members. Wilkins was candid in a letter to an acquaintance William Walker, a newspaper editor in Texas. "Although the NAACP is far from knocked out in the South (we are barred from only one state, Alabama), our people are jittery and we are groggy. The opposition cannot do us any permanent damage in the long run, but they can carry on a war of irritation which will make our members and prospective members uneasy."⁷⁹ Describing these events as a 'war of irritation' was an understatement. It would take almost eight years and several trips to the Supreme Court before the NAACP was allowed to resume operations in Alabama. While the Association was tied up in legal challenges, the state, as Marshall admitted, "have us exactly where they want us," which was in limbo.⁸⁰

The Association found itself in a similar predicament in Texas but the case there had repercussions that went beyond the effect on membership figures and finances. In September 1956 the state's Attorney General John Ben Shepperd took out an injunction to prevent the NAACP from operating in the state.⁸¹ Under the guise of

⁷⁷ Pamphlet, 'NAACP: An American Organization,' June 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A233, LOC.

⁷⁸ Statement received via phone from Ted Poston of the NY Post, January 16, 1959, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A304, LOC.

⁷⁹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to William Walker, April 15, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A238. LOC.

⁸⁰ Report to the Annual Meeting, undated but approximately January 1957, NAACP papers, Part III, Box J6, LOC.

⁸¹ Press release, NAACP Set to Appeal Injunction in Texas, October 25, 1956. NAACP Papers, Box A272. LOC; Letter, Thurgood Marshall to A Maceo Smith, September 19, 1956. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A272. LOC; W. Marvin Dulaney, *Whatever Happened to the Civil Rights Movement in Dallas, Texas?*. John Dittmer, George C Wright, W Marvin Dulaney, Kathleen

an arcane charge of barratry, the initiation of groundless litigation for the purposes of harassment or financial gain, state troopers seized membership lists from the homes and offices of branch officials who were then questioned about their roles in the Association's law suits in Texas. On appeal in October 1956, state judge Otis Dunagan allowed the NAACP to continue operations but prohibited the Inc. Fund from soliciting plaintiffs or offering them financial support, in effect noting the two as separate entities. The state also accused the NAACP of being a foreign corporation, and as such claimed the organization had failed to pay the proper franchise taxes.⁸² At a subsequent hearing the following May the injunction was made permanent, unleashing a welter of arguments on all sides but most particularly between the Inc. Fund and its sister organization.

Marshall, Wilkins and the board disagreed over the question of whether to appeal the ruling. Marshall endorsed the view of W.J. Durham, the local lawyer hired by Wilkins to represent the NAACP, that the Association should accept the injunction mainly because the injunction hearings uncovered the fact that Association had agreed to pay \$3500 per year to plaintiff Heman Sweatt during his lawsuit against the University of Texas Law School in 1950, an act which probably violated the barratry law.⁸³ On the other hand, the Board of Directors argued that black Americans, and so the NAACP, should fight any opposition to securing equal rights, agreeing with one of the local branch leaders that the Association should appeal on the basis that not doing so would imply that the NAACP had violated the law.⁸⁴

Wilkins agreed, telling Marshall that an appeal should be lodged "for the sake of the troops" who, he said, might be upset at the suggestion that the NAACP had sailed close to the edge of propriety.⁸⁵ However, one of the aspects of the case in Texas that he found frustrating was the autonomy with which branches in Texas operated, sometimes taking actions that not only conflicted with strategy

Underwood, *Essays on the American Civil Rights Movement* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993) 76-78; Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 272-273

⁸² Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 272-273; Walter F. Murphy, "The South Counterattacks: The Anti-NAACP Laws," *Western Political Quarterly*, 12:2 (June 1959): 377; Memorandum, Robert Carter to Roy Wilkins, July 18, 1957. NAACP Part III, Box A281. LOC.

⁸³ *Sweatt v Painter*; Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 273.

⁸⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to W J Durham, May 31 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A272. LOC.

⁸⁵ Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 273.

developed by the national office, but also caused legal problems during the injunction hearings.⁸⁶ He later told William Ming, a member of the NAACP legal committee, that the episode in Texas only served to highlight “the separation, frustration and confusion” developing in the NAACP. He also suggested that a review was needed of its relationship with the Inc. Fund and how it conducted its litigation.⁸⁷

Following a direct appeal by Durham the board did eventually heed its legal counsel’s advice and the Association resumed normal activities. But the disagreement left a bitter residue, particularly between Marshall and some members of the board.⁸⁸ The disagreement over the Texas case highlighted the tension between the NAACP’s necessary focus on public relations and the Inc. Fund’s equally necessary focus on the rule of law.⁸⁹ What was heading for an acrimonious clash of opinion was pre-empted by a process that began in March 1956, when the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) began to question the Inc. Fund’s tax-exempt status. Marshall was summoned to Washington for what turned out to be a “most discouraging meeting,” where he was asked numerous questions about the relationship between the NAACP and the Inc. Fund. “If these corporations are so separate why is it we are defending the NAACP in North Carolina and in Louisiana.” The depressing conclusion was that the IRS was likely to deny any extension to the Inc. Fund’s tax-exempt status, with the additional threat of a congressional investigation.⁹⁰

According to Marshall’s biographers, the IRS investigations provided a convenient excuse to separate the two branches. Relations had been strained between Marshall and his assistant, Robert Carter, even before arguments erupted about handing over membership lists to hostile states. Marshall therefore staged what has been described as a ‘one-man coup’ to rid the Inc. Fund, and himself, of what he saw as

⁸⁶ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Carter Wesley, May 31, 1957, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A272, LOC.

⁸⁷ Cited in Gilbert Ware, “The NAACP-Inc. Fund Alliance: Its Strategy, Power, and Destruction,” *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol.63, No.3 (Summer, 1994), 328.

⁸⁸ Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 220.

⁸⁹ Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 310-311.

⁹⁰ Minutes of the Executive Committee of the Board of Directors, Inc. Fund, April 4, 1956, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A237, LOC.

troublesome ties with the NAACP.⁹¹ In 1957 the split between the two organizations became official. The result was a much clearer separation of the two groups than had been envisaged in 1939. The Inc. Fund moved to new offices out of NAACP headquarters. Carter became general counsel for the NAACP while Marshall became director-counsel of the Inc. Fund. Wilkins became unpaid Secretary for the Inc. Fund but was the only officer serving on both boards. He was concerned that a harmonious working relationship exist between the two organizations, but his greater preoccupation was that legal cases were prompted by NAACP branches should be handled as NAACP cases. This was the only way, he argued, that an organization so dependent on a membership base could rally public support and use the cases as publicity material to win more members.⁹²

Unfortunately, the division was a recipe for confusion and conflict. For several years following the split, the Association was to a large extent a cause without a legal program in that it had no legal team with which to conduct its cases. It was competing with the Inc. Fund for donations, a situation made more difficult by the understandable lack of clarity in the minds of staff or the public about which organization was responsible for what litigation. The Committee on Liaison with the NAACP Legal Education Fund, established to assess the effects of the split, recommended found that the Inc. Fund was not familiar with the work of the Association and its branches and the Association was not familiar with the work of the Inc. Fund. To improve the situation the committee recommended the creation of better channels of communications between the two groups such as the restoration of the legal committee, explanations to the branches about what how the division worked and the restoration of the interlinked boards of the Inc. Fund and Association.⁹³

A further internal report on the NAACP's legal program and its relationship to the Inc. Fund suggested that there were now, in effect, two legal entities of the NAACP, each with different aims. That difference was exacerbated by the limitations

⁹¹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 260; Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 310; Juan Williams, *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary* (New York: Times Books, 1998), 260-261.

⁹² Letter, Roy Wilkins to Carl Murphy, June 2, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A237. LOC.

⁹³ Memorandum, The Committee on Liaison with the NAACP Legal Education Fund to the Chairman of the Board of Directors, October 23, 1961. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 26. LOC.

imposed by the IRS, and also by the barratry laws that required the Inc. Fund to restrict itself to requests for legal assistance that came from lawyers or from potential plaintiffs. It could not, or would not, accept direct requests from branches.⁹⁴ According to Inc. Fund lawyer Constance Baker Motley, the effect on the morale, finances and the smooth running of the desegregation campaign was immense and damaging.⁹⁵ The impact on the NAACP's finances became even more acute in the early 1960s once civil rights demonstrators began to be arrested, fined and often jailed en masse and who usually looked to the NAACP for help. The harmonious and workable relationship sought by Wilkins was as distant as ever.

The presidential election of 1956 offered little respite from Wilkins' troubles. During the campaign, the president said little about civil rights. He spoke only of his success in eliminating segregation in federal offices, and of the progress in reducing discrimination amongst companies under government contract. However, Eisenhower continued to agree that desegregation had to be implemented gradually, driven by a change in attitudes rather than through the imposition of law. As he told a campaign rally in Hollywood, California, shortly before the election: "the final battle against intolerance is to be fought-not in the chambers of any legislature--but in the hearts of men."⁹⁶

On the face of it, there would appear to be little that even the most committed administration could do to halt the white backlash. However, Wilkins had no intention of absolving Eisenhower of his responsibility. He argued that black Americans needed the protection that could only come through comprehensive civil rights legislation. Wilkins then stressed the importance of some form of meaningful congressional action in rather melodramatic fashion in his keynote address to the National Delegate Assembly for Civil Rights in March 1956. "A

⁹⁴ Report on the NAACP Legal Program and the Relationship of the Inc. Fund to that Program. December 21, 1961. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 47. LOC.

⁹⁵ Constance Baker Motley *Equal Justice Under Law* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1998) 128; A definitive history of the Inc Fund remains to be written however the complex relationship between the NAACP and the Inc. Fund is examined in detail in Ware, 323-335 and also in the memoirs of lawyers closely involved with the organization most notably Motley, *Equal Justice Under the Law*, Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts* and Robert L Carter, *A Matter of Law: A Memoir of Struggle in the Cause of Equal Rights* (New York: The New Press, 2005).

⁹⁶ President Eisenhower's Address at the Hollywood Bowl, Beverly Hills, California, October 19, 1956, The American Presidency Project: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu>,

considerable part of the free world's hope for survival and peace depends upon first, what we do and say and how we do and say it, and secondly and more decisively, what our Congress does and does not do in the next four months before adjournment for the 1956 campaign."⁹⁷

In an attempt to secure some form of commitment to civil rights from both political parties, Wilkins travelled to the Democratic and Republican conventions to appear before their respective resolutions committees. In addition to the eight point plan proposed by the LCCR earlier in the year, Wilkins also demanded that any meaningful civil rights plank must include "an unequivocal pledge to use the prestige and the full powers of the office of the President, the Executive Branch and the Legislative Branch of the Federal Government to assure obedience of law and implementation of the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, in accordance with the decisions of the Supreme Court."⁹⁸

Most important, Wilkins argued, was securing the right to vote. To emphasize the absurd conditions that black voters often had to meet in the South in order to register even before casting a ballot Wilkins took a bar of soap to each committee meeting and asked members how many bubbles were in that bar, as one southern registrar had asked black registrants. This dramatic flourish was to no avail; the parties made scant concessions to civil rights in their platforms. Wilkins was more than disappointed: "Both parties gave the Negro the royal runaround on civil rights. The Democratic plank smelled to high heaven; the Republican plank just smelled. If the final judgment were to have been made on those two planks alone, black voters would all have done much better going fishing that November"⁹⁹

Although he credited the Republicans with a less malodorous civil rights plank, Wilkins ceded the Democrats "the one outstanding point": a "promise do to

⁹⁷ Keynote address by Roy Wilkins to National Delegate Assembly for Civil Rights, March 4, 1956, NAACP papers, Part 21, Reel 12, LOC.

⁹⁸ Pamphlet, Leadership Conference on Civil Rights: 1956 Civil Rights Platform Plank, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 76, LOC; Testimony, Roy Wilkins to the Resolutions Committee of the Democratic National Committee, Chicago, August 10, 1956. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 53. LOC.

⁹⁹ Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 241.

something” about the filibuster rule.¹⁰⁰ The civil rights planks of both parties were clearly inadequate, so he encouraged black voters to assess candidates on an individual basis rather than by party affiliation. The Association also offered a series of action points to encourage branch officers to participate in the political process. That included establishing registration campaigns and, in some southern states, poll tax campaigns, analysis and distribution of party platforms and voting records of candidates; and working with the AFL-CIO political action committee and other groups to incorporate a candidate’s record on segregation into an organization’s voting records.¹⁰¹

The NAACP was keen to stress its non-partisan policy; indeed, black voters had switched from the party of Lincoln to the party of Franklin Roosevelt during the Depression, so neither party could take the black vote for granted. In November 1956, black voting patterns reflected the realities of the daily lives of the voter, with a sharp shift towards the Republicans in the South—a protest, Wilkins believed, against the belligerence of southern democrats in Congress. Blacks in northern constituencies tended to remain more loyal to the Democratic Party.¹⁰² In any case, only thirty-seven per cent of blacks eligible to vote did so nationally, and even fewer, twenty-one per cent, in the eleven southern states (excluding Texas) — an appallingly low number, due in large part to the difficulties in even registering to vote.¹⁰³ The political potential of the black voter was not lost on either party, but if any gains were to be made guarantees of federal protection to those blacks wishing to register for the ballot had to be assured. Wilkins told E. Frederic Morrow — who in July 1955 had been appointed Administrative Officer for Special Projects and the only black member of Eisenhower’s administration — that “The Republicans could have wrapped up at least sixty-five percent of the Negro vote (perhaps seventy-five

¹⁰⁰ Letter to branch officers from Roy Wilkins, August 29, 1956, NAACP papers, LOC. Filibuster is the informal term for any attempt to block or delay Senate action on a bill or other matter most often by debating it at length. Wilkins’ concern about the filibuster was prescient; South Carolina’s J. Strom Thurmond set a senate record by filibustering for twenty-four hours and eighteen minutes during the debate on the 1957 Civil Rights Act. Wilkins was to wage a subdued but sustained, and ultimately unsuccessful, campaign to eradicate Rule 22, the filibuster rule, over the next five years.

¹⁰¹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to branch officers, August 29, 1956, NAACP Papers, Part III, LOC.

¹⁰² Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 242.

¹⁰³ Pamphlet, NAACP fact sheet on Negro registration and voting. Undated but circa 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A246, LOC.

per cent) for the next three presidential elections (at least) if they had early and emphatically backed up the Supreme Court decision.”¹⁰⁴

Momentum for some kind of action on civil rights by the Eisenhower administration and Congress increased in pace after the president was comfortably re-elected in November 1956. Eisenhower used his State of the Union address in January of the following year to announce that his administration intended to pursue the civil rights legislation that had initially been drawn up by Attorney General Herbert Brownell the previous March. Brownell had submitted a civil rights bill to Congress in early 1956. It consisted of four main titles: the creation of a federal civil rights commission with a mandate to investigate instances of racial discrimination; the appointment of an assistant attorney general to head a civil rights division within the Department of Justice; a grant of authority to the Attorney General to seek injunctions or other civil remedies in suspected violations of civil rights (including segregation of schools); and giving the Attorney General authority to pursue court injunctions in suspected violations of voting rights.¹⁰⁵

Wilkins was unimpressed. He had little confidence in Eisenhower throughout his tenure in the White House. He complained loudly that Eisenhower had failed to condemn, or even mention, the wave of racially motivated violence currently sweeping through the South. In a pointed statement to the *New York Post*, Wilkins berated Eisenhower for refusing to make a speech in the South on behalf of civil rights, and expressed a hope that eventually “the President will express as much concern for innocent victims of bombings and other terror in the South as he has for the Hungarian victims of Soviet terrorism.”¹⁰⁶ Even more damaging than tepid White House support, Wilkins knew that any civil rights legislation, however weak, would likely fall foul of the filibuster rule in the Senate. Even before the campaign to shore up support for civil rights legislation began, Wilkins, as chairman of the

¹⁰⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to E. Frederic Morrow, June 17, 1957, NAACP papers, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A71, LOC.

¹⁰⁵ Pamphlet, NAACP fact sheet on HR 6127, A civil rights bill, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A71, LOC.

¹⁰⁶ Nichols, *A Matter of Justice*, 143-144; Statement, Roy Wilkins to Ted Poston of the New York Post, January 2, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A304. LOC; An uprising had taken place in Hungary against the Soviet-backed government between October 23, 1956 and November 10, 1956. The uprising was crushed by the Soviet military, which quickly imposed an even harsher regime.

LCCR, started lobbying for a means to weaken the filibuster and limit its potential to damage any potential legislation. Consultations began with sympathetic congressmen in the hope that enough support could be gathered to strike when a new session of Congress convened at the beginning of January.¹⁰⁷ A filibuster could be ended by a cloture vote, requiring a two-thirds majority, which was almost impossible to achieve given the strength of the southern Democrat bloc. This was particularly true for controversial issues such as civil rights. Wilkins' main hope was a small loophole in Senate procedure by which, only on the first day of a new congressional session — in this instance January 3, 1957 — a motion to change the Senate's rules could be passed by a simple majority.

Unfortunately, his argument that support for civil rights could reap rewards at the polls fell on deaf ears, and Rule 22 survived intact, posing a threat to any attempt to pass meaningful civil rights legislation. Although disappointed, Wilkins took some comfort in the fact that thirty-eight senators supported the move, a sign, he hoped, of more support in the future.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, as the Eisenhower administration's civil rights program began to take shape, Wilkins was well aware this was the best opportunity the NAACP had ever had to obtain effective legislation. Adding to the good auspices was the fact that political expediency led both Eisenhower and Senate Leader Lyndon Johnson to back action on civil rights. The politically brilliant Johnson had his eye firmly on the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960 and his position made him the most valuable ally of any bill. He was therefore a person to be courted even if his approach to civil rights was suspect.

Eisenhower's State of the Union proposals were taken as evidence that the White House supported some civil rights reform, but the president continued to preach the virtues of moderation and gradualism. While Mitchell and Brownell worked together on a set of proposals, Johnson's presidential ambitions meant that he came under pressure from several people, including his friend Philip Graham, the publisher of the *Washington Post*, whose support was crucial to his presidential ambitions. Graham warned Johnson that he must present a program on civil rights

¹⁰⁷ Telegram, Roy Wilkins to Senator Herbert Lehman (D-NY), December 31, 1956. NAACP Papers, Box A205. LOC; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Senator George Allot (R-CO), December 18, 1956. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A66. LOC; Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 243.

¹⁰⁸ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 243.

as matter of urgency. By not acting on civil rights, Graham stressed, Johnson would not only lose any claim to the presidential nomination in 1960, but he risked his political reputation.¹⁰⁹

Wilkins had been fighting for federal action his entire career, and he devoted his energies to the challenge of ensuring its passage. Beginning his campaign to garner support for the legislation in early 1957, even before the bill was sent to the House, Wilkins appeared in front of House and Senate committees to highlight the many outrages faced by black Americans every day. He took a conciliatory tone with the House Judiciary Committee. "We are willing, that is, to accept much less at this time than we believe to be justified. It means we are willing to accept a minimum bill but that it must be a meaningful bill. The test is not to be met by any bill with a civil rights label, but only by one that deals effectively with [the right to vote and the right of security of the person]." ¹¹⁰ Possibly recognizing the even less amenable climate of the Senate, however, Wilkins was far more defiant when he testified at a Senate Judiciary subcommittee hearing on the legislation a few days later, warning senators that the patience demonstrated by blacks in the face of recent violence would not last if the civil rights bill was not approved.¹¹¹

Clarence Mitchell was also devoted to ensuring passage of the bill. He had worked with Eisenhower's attorney general, Herbert Brownell, since mid-1955, when Congress had reached a stalemate on civil rights legislation that would be acceptable to both parties. Brownell was, as Wilkins described him "one of the more enlightened men in the Eisenhower administration."¹¹² Proposals to protect voting rights, including the appointment of an assistant attorney general for civil rights, and giving the attorney general with authority to seek injunctions in civil suits in civil rights violations, were already under consideration by the Justice Department. However, any impetus to introduce legislation had faded when Congress adjourned for its end-of-year break.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Caro, *Master of the Senate*, 848-849.

¹¹⁰ Testimony, Roy Wilkins to the House Judiciary Committee, February 5, 1957. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 54. LOC.

¹¹¹ "NAACP Leader Warns Senators," *New York Times*, February 19, 1957.

¹¹² Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 234.

¹¹³ Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 334-335.

In June 1957 the House of Representatives passed the bill with a vote of 286 to 126. H.R. 6127, as legislation was now known, emerged almost unscathed with just two minor amendments, one of which gave authority to the Civil Rights Commission to investigate alleged infringements of voting rights, the other providing legal representation for anyone charged with contempt who could not afford legal expenses.¹¹⁴ Wilkins was not lulled into a false sense of confidence by the vote. It was clear that the bill's passage through the Senate would be far more arduous. To rally the troops as the Senate took up the bill, Wilkins wrote to all NAACP staff members to emphasize the importance of the next stage. "It may well be that the next few weeks will be the most important in the legislative career of the NAACP. While it is going on, the civil rights fight in the Senate is the number one item of business before all of us: everything else takes a temporary second place."¹¹⁵ He cajoled branch members to intensify the pressure on their congressmen to support legislation with letters and telegrams. Most importantly, he encouraged the NAACP's members to cultivate and extend relationships with sympathetic politicians to create a bipartisan coalition that was prepared to support the bill.

Wilkins urged delegates to the annual NAACP conference in Detroit to lobby their senators including "the friendly ones, the lukewarm ones, and the hostile ones."¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, Wilkins spent much of his time during July and early August in Washington working with Clarence Mitchell to build up congressional backing for the legislation, and travelling across the country to speak at rallies, branches and civic lunches. Radio commercials featuring a bipartisan group of senators were broadcast on almost one hundred radio stations in support of the bill.¹¹⁷ Wilkins and Mitchell also guided the lobbying strategy while Wilkins, in his capacity as Chairman of the LCCR, played a key role in coordinating the response of the

¹¹⁴ The first amendment authorized the Civil Rights Commission to investigate alleged violations of voting rights and the second proposed that anyone charged with contempt of the act must be provided with legal representation if the accused could not afford one; Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 377.

¹¹⁵ Letter, Roy Wilkins to The Staff, July 17, 1957, Subject: Senate Action on the Civil Rights Bill, NAACP papers, Part 21, Reel 8, f00037, LOC.

¹¹⁶ Address of Roy Wilkins to the 48th Annual NAACP Convention, Detroit, June 30, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A6. LOC.

¹¹⁷ The NAACP's role in the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act is examined in Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 194-200.

participating organizations.¹¹⁸ However, regardless of the pressure exerted by the NAACP and LCCR members, the success or failure of the bill depended primarily on the Senate leader. For good or ill, the outcome of that fight was now in the hands of someone whose record on civil rights gave Wilkins little comfort.

Lyndon Johnson's record on civil rights up to this point displayed none of the commitment he would show when president, and his Texas background left little room for optimism. Wilkins, who later became Johnson's most ardent advocate among the civil rights leaders, described him as the "Br'er Fox of the Senate," explaining, "you never quite knew if he was out to lift your heart or your wallet."¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, Johnson was a political genius who was particularly adept at manoeuvring legislation through the tortuous congressional process. He was also a political realist, who had come to the realization that, thanks to the Supreme Court, civil rights was now firmly fixed on the domestic agenda and would be for years.¹²⁰

The Senate leader told Wilkins that he was only interested in voting rights, and that the most contentious element of Part III of the bill, which allowed the attorney general to pursue violations of civil rights, would have to be deleted if it were to pass in the Senate. Johnson knew that Dixie senators would never permit a provision that would, in effect, render segregation illegal not only in schools, but also in a broad range of public facilities. To soften the southern bloc, Johnson proffered the jury trial amendment, which would allow a trial by jury for anyone indicted under the new law. Given the blatant disregard for the law displayed by southern juries when it applied to white infractions against blacks, the amendment would virtually nullify Part III.

Wilkins, Mitchell and the coalition of supporters from other organizations were disgusted. Marshall analyzed the amendment and concluded that it was "not merely a limitation on [the legislation], but a calculated attempt to upset the entire enforcement machinery necessary to injunctive relief." The lawyer was damning in

¹¹⁸ Memorandum, The New Civil Rights Act, Draft, unsigned and undated. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 21. LOC.

¹¹⁹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 243.

¹²⁰ Letter, Lyndon Johnson to Price Daniel, March 9 1957. Judiciary/Civil Rights, Legislative Files 1957-1958, Box 289. Lyndon B. Johnson Library (LBJL). Letter, George Reedy to Michael Gillette, June 2, 1982, Oral history transcripts. Reedy XAC84-52. LBJL.

his conclusion: "from a legal standpoint, it appears to me that the jury trial amendment so nullifies the legislation as to make it obvious that the loss involved by the jury trial amendment is so great that legislation so amended would only not accomplish anything, it would not register any more Negroes than could be registered under the existing criminal statutes."¹²¹

In allowing the Justice Department to prosecute civil rights violations, Part III remedied a long-standing problem. As such, Wilkins considered it to be one of the most vital elements of the legislation. Unfortunately, its sacrifice was the price demanded by the southern bloc if a filibuster was to be avoided. The president unwittingly sealed Part III's fate over the course of two press conferences in July. At the first, Eisenhower admitted that he did not fully understand parts of the bill; at the second, in response to a question about whether it was a step too far in allowing the Attorney General to bring suits to enforce integration, Eisenhower stumbled in his response but managed to make it clear that he believed in a gradualist approach, and that forcing integration was indeed going far too fast.¹²² Without presidential support, the provision was swiftly deleted from the legislation.

The elimination of Part III was a painful blow to Wilkins. An extraordinary meeting of the leadership of sixteen members of the LCCR was called to consider its response and discuss whether to continue supporting such an amended bill. Wilkins' political pragmatism is evident in a draft note he wrote laying out his rationale for supporting the bill. Arguing that there was no chance of a better bill passing in the foreseeable future, he laid out exactly the number of votes they could count on to defeat the jury trial amendment and the concessions that would have to be made to ensure even those votes. Another undated, handwritten note also attests to Wilkins' political acumen; Weighing the various arguments and considerations from the NAACP's perspective, Wilkins argued that the decision about whether to support the current bill involved three issues: Was the present bill better than nothing at all in helping more blacks register to vote? Should the Association fight

¹²¹ Memorandum, Thurgood Marshall to Roy Wilkins, August 7, 1957, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A71, LOC.

¹²² Transcript of the President's News Conference on Foreign and Domestic Affairs, July 17, 1957. Reprinted in *The New York Times*, July 18, 1957; Eisenhower's involvement in the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act is examined in Nichols, *A Matter of Justice*, 143-186.

to restore Part III in House conference at the risk of killing the bill completely? And, if the Association accepted the jury trial amendment, how should it explain its decision to its membership, and what would the likely reaction be if the bill proved to be unworkable? However, the fundamental question was whether the bill was now rendered useless, or whether there was enough left in it to claim it as a step forward.¹²³

Wilkins also looked at the issues from the perspective of black voters. He reasoned that if no bill were passed, Democrats would get most of the blame while Republicans could at least fall back on their stronger voting record. If a weak bill were passed, Republicans would still receive much of the credit. The party could even argue that Eisenhower would have supported a stronger bill, safe in the knowledge that he would be required to do no such thing, and that this would be just the beginning. Wilkins argued that while Democrats in states that had a significant black electorate would escape heavy punishment, black voters would likely punish Johnson if he were a candidate in the 1960 election. Vice President Nixon, on the other hand, had thus far suffered no loss of reputation in the battle; on the contrary, black voters persisted in believing that he was a strong advocate of civil rights — unlike Senator Kennedy who, Wilkins concluded, had identified himself further with “deep southerners.”¹²⁴

Eventually, after a day of heated arguments Wilkins spoke for the caucus of groups to announce that, although the bill was a “bitter disappointment,” it had the potential to extend black voter registration.¹²⁵ Small comfort was gained when, before the final vote, the House reduced the impact of the jury trial amendment with a revision that stated that a jury trial, even in criminal contempt cases, would not be required if penalties involved a custodial sentence of more than forty-five days or a fine of more than \$300. When the bill finally passed, Clarence Mitchell deflected potential critics by highlighting the symbolic significance of the

¹²³ Notes, Roy Wilkins, Undated; Several other documents attest to Wilkins’ thinking about the pros and cons of the proposed bill. In comments to staff in a memorandum, Wilkins clarified the questions he raised in his draft note. Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to the Executive Staff, August 7, 1957. Both NAACP papers, Part III, Box A71, LOC; Draft, The Rationale for deciding that the civil rights bill should pass and for doing what is needful to bring passage about. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 21, LOC.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 396; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 197.

legislation: "In spite of gloomy predictions that the bill would die in the Eastland-dominated Judiciary Committee, in spite of the longest and silliest filibuster speech in the Senate's history, and in the face of numerous tricky obstructions, a right to vote bill was passed on August 29, 1957."¹²⁶ Even in its watered-down state, the act was the most significant piece of civil rights legislation to emerge from Congress since 1875. Moreover, in surviving a determined filibuster it proved that a civil rights bill could be passed in the face of tenacious obstruction by southern Democrats.

As he anticipated, Wilkins' decision to back the legislation provoked a barrage of criticism from almost every interested party. His immediate concern was to defend this support to his colleagues. When the bill approached its final hurdle, Wilkins braced himself for the inevitable backlash. He explained his decision to back the bill in a memorandum sent to the NAACP's executive staff.¹²⁷ Wilkins assured staff that Mitchell, with his legislative experience, and other organizations that had lobbied for the bill were convinced that supporting the legislation was the only course to take. He acknowledged the bill's flaws. "We did not ask for the bill that is now shaping up," he wrote. "We wanted something much stronger. We were opposed to the jury trial amendment, and we still believe that the jury trial amendment is a serious restriction to attaining the results we would like to attain in the registration and voting fields." Nevertheless, he suggested that the weakness of the bill might prove to be a bargaining tool by the 1960 election: "The point is, that with a bill we are in a better position to campaign than we would be without a bill."¹²⁸

More interestingly, however, in an earlier draft of the memorandum Wilkins struck a less conciliatory tone with critics who claimed that no bill would have been better than the weak act that emerged from Congress. "There is a certain oratorical satisfaction in saying this. It lends itself to slogans which earn cheers. But after all

¹²⁶ Monthly Report of the Washington Bureau, September 6, 1957, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A71. LOC.

¹²⁷ Memorandum, The Secretary to the Executive Staff, August 7, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A71. LOC.

¹²⁸ Memorandum. August 7, 1957. LOC; A contemporary of Johnson's recollected that Johnson shared this view. According to George Reedy who was a member of the Senate Leader's staff at the time, Johnson believed that passing any bill, however weak, raised the possibility of passing more far-reaching legislation at a later date. Letter, George Reedy to Michael Gillette, June 2, 1982. Oral history transcripts. Reedy XAC84-52. LBJL.

this is said the fact remains that we have not moved forward one inch. We have 'stood firmly' for no compromise, but we have not made progress."¹²⁹ In the draft, Wilkins assumed responsibility for supporting the bill even in the expectation that it would mean "rough times ahead for the NAACP for having made this decision."¹³⁰ Neither statement survived into the final memorandum.

On balance, Wilkins argued, the Association had taken a practical rather than emotional course in the hope of obtaining a better bill in the future, particularly if the current bill proved to be ineffective. Many people, however, were not convinced. Joseph Rauh, chairman of Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), counsel for the LCCR and a close ally of Wilkins and Mitchell, said later that the Association's leader took a "terrible, terrible pounding from the militants in the NAACP" for supporting the bill.¹³¹ Nevertheless, for all Wilkins' obvious doubts about the legislation as it was progressively weakened, he was firmly convinced that passing some form of civil rights legislation that year was essential given the particular composition of Congress. He also emphasized that there would be no improvement in support in the next Congress.¹³²

Supporting the bill was undoubtedly a gamble for Wilkins. In practical terms, the NAACP was unlikely to lose a significant number of members in protest, not least because there was nowhere else for them to go. However, the Montgomery boycott had demonstrated that blacks were willing to try methods other than legislation and litigation, and the NAACP could not risk the consequences of rejecting what would in all probability be the only achievable civil rights bill in the near future.¹³³ If it maintained its stance that legislation and favourable court rulings, rather than boycotts and mass action, were the most effective means of winning full equality, it needed credible action from Congress. On a personal level, the battle in Washington had also raised his profile on Capitol Hill. Senator Paul Douglas (D-IL), an ally of the NAACP, wrote to Channing Tobias, the chairman of the board,

¹²⁹ Draft memorandum, Secretary to the Executive Staff, August 7, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A71. LOC

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 396.

¹³² Letter, Roy Wilkins to Elmer Carter, September 5, 1957, Letter from Roy Wilkins to John T Hatchett, September 3, 1957, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A71. LOC.

¹³³ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 194-200.

that Wilkins: “was always courageous, strong, candid and wise – and without malice or guile, and has won in Congress and in the country many new friends for the NAACP.”¹³⁴

In the short term, the bill was as ineffectual as its critics feared. Nine months after the bill was signed, Clarence Mitchell reported numerous cases of voting discrimination, which, despite being submitted to the Department of Justice, had yet to be prosecuted under the new law.¹³⁵ The Governor of Arkansas, Orval Faubus, inadvertently provided a stark illustration of the implications of deleting Part III and the authority it would have given the federal government even as the Civil Rights bill was being signed into law. Arkansas had been one of the few southern states to voluntarily draw up school integration plans in several cities. Unfortunately, Faubus, who had been relatively liberal in his attitudes to integration until he took up the cause of segregation during the tight gubernatorial race in the 1956 elections, decided to use the issue to advertise his segregationist credentials. The Little Rock school board had drawn up demanding admissions criteria for black pupils wishing to transfer to the city’s Central High School, ensuring that from an initial pool of around two hundred black pupils, only nine were eventually allowed to begin the new school year in the high school.

Before school opened however, Faubus announced that he had ordered the National Guard to surround the school in order to “maintain or restore order and to protect the lives and property of citizens,” claiming that violence would erupt if the black children tried to enter the school.¹³⁶ When the teenagers arrived at the school gates on the first day of term they had to fight their way through a hostile crowd that jeered and pushed them, only to find the armed guardsmen at the entrance of the school refused to let them in. With that action, Little Rock became the

¹³⁴ Minutes, Board of Directors Meeting, September 9, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A26. LOC.

¹³⁵ Suggested statement to President by Clarence Mitchell, June 19, 1958. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A72, LOC.

¹³⁶ Cited in John A Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005) 115. The Little Rock crisis is also discussed at length in Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997) 251-269; Kenneth O’Reilly, “Racial Integration: The Battle General Eisenhower Chose Not to Fight,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 18 (Winter 1997-1998): 110-119.

battleground on which the principles established in the *Brown* ruling would be fought. By using state troops to oppose a federal statute, Faubus had instigated one of the most serious constitutional crises to face the United States since the civil war, creating Eisenhower's worst nightmare.

When Elizabeth Eckford, one of the black students, attempted to enter the school alone, she was heckled and jeered by men and women whose faces, distorted by hate, were broadcast on the evening news. Photographs of Eckford, whose extraordinarily dignified composure stood in stark relief to the mob violence surrounding her, appeared in newspapers across the world. Little Rock became what Taylor Branch called "the first on-site news extravaganza of the modern television era."¹³⁷ Images of diligent students simply trying to attend school but being prevented from doing so by their own government demonstrated the reality of life for black Americans throughout the South more effectively than any lawsuit, congressional testimony or press release ever could.

Daisy Bates, president of the NAACP in Arkansas and outspoken leader of Little Rock's black community, was involved with the students from the start. As Mrs Bates' biographer says, she was comfortable dealing with the media and fully understood the public relations value to the NAACP of the events in Little Rock.¹³⁸ Not surprisingly, Wilkins was keen to capitalize on this unexpected star. From New York, he was kept informed of developments by daily phone calls with Mrs. Bates, who also consulted regularly with national staff on non-legal issues. Wilkins also invited her to fill, temporarily, a vacant seat on the NAACP's board.¹³⁹

Mrs Bates and her husband, L.C. Bates, paid the price for their support of the Little Rock nine. Following the initial attempt to integrate the high school, they were threatened with violence, and their house was shot at, firebombed and burgled. Their newspaper business, the *Arkansas State Press*, was threatened by the withdrawal of advertising amid a sharp escalation of economic reprisals. Wilkins hired a business consultant to assess how much money their newspaper needed to

¹³⁷ Torres, Black, *White and in Color*, 19; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 223.

¹³⁸ Grif Stockley, *Daisy Bates: Civil Rights Crusader from Arkansas* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2005), 148.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 119

stay afloat, as well as placing advertisements on behalf of the NAACP in an attempt to make up the shortfall caused by the reprisals. NAACP funds also supported the Bates' themselves.¹⁴⁰ According to Daisy Bates' biographer, Wilkins went to such lengths because she and her husband were the best chance the NAACP had of building up its organization in the state.¹⁴¹

All that was heard from the White House on the Little Rock situation, meanwhile, was a resounding silence. Wilkins warned the president that continued inaction would undermine federal authority, but the latter did little to intervene for three weeks. Eisenhower met with Faubus, but failed to meet with black leaders. The president also ignored a telegram from Marshall requesting a meeting with parents of the children involved in the crisis. In a letter to Adam Clayton Powell, Wilkins was scathing in his criticism of Eisenhower. "I have great difficulty in speaking calmly about the role of President Eisenhower in this whole mess. He has been absolutely and thoroughly disappointing and disillusioning from beginning to end."¹⁴² He was even more damning of Faubus and the chaos he had inflicted on the country, "Our nation is today faced with the gravest constitutional crisis in our times. Many factors – tradition, law, psychology, politics and economics – went into making the tragedy at Little Rock, but the catalytic agent that set the explosion was the irresponsible manoeuvre of that pious provocateur, Governor Orval E Faubus. But for him there could today be peace and harmony at an integrated high school in Little Rock."¹⁴³

The president was finally forced into action by federal district judge Ronald Davies, who enjoined Faubus and the National Guard from obstructing the desegregation process at the school. The governor immediately withdrew the troops and deliberately left the children to fend for themselves in a highly volatile situation. As chaos threatened to turn into carnage, Eisenhower federalized the National Guard and sent the 101st Airborne Division into the city to restore order and protect the black students for the remainder of the school year but this solution offered only a

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.181, 190

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 214

¹⁴² Williams. *Thurgood Marshall*, 267; Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 251

¹⁴³ Speech, Roy Wilkins address to an NAACP rally, Chicago, October 6, 1957, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A303. LOC.

temporary respite. Faubus continued to avoid desegregation of Little Rock's schools by closing the city's schools, a move endorsed by federal district judge Harry Lemley.¹⁴⁴ The NAACP protested the ruling and Inc. Fund lawyers took the case to the Supreme Court. The Court invalidated Judge Lemley's ruling and reaffirmed *Brown* as the "supreme law of the land," dismissing attempts by Faubus and his legislature to circumvent the desegregation order.¹⁴⁵ The governor made one last attempt to avoid desegregation by holding a referendum in the city on whether schools should be kept open and desegregated or closed. The city overwhelmingly voted to close Little Rock schools, which did not reopen, on an integrated basis, until 1959.

While averting a potentially disastrous situation, Eisenhower's actions in sending in federal troops did little to convince Wilkins, or any other civil rights leader, that he finally understood their struggles. In June 1958 the president finally met with Wilkins, King, A. Philip Randolph and Lester Granger of the Urban League. According to King's biographers, the White House initially restricted the invitation to King and Randolph, deliberately excluding Wilkins, whom they considered the most militant of the black leaders. However, King insisted that it would be impossible for him to meet the president without the NAACP leader.¹⁴⁶ Randolph presented the president with a series of nine recommendations to bolster enforcement of the Civil Rights Act and to help the nation progress on the issue of racial discrimination. The other members of the group then addressed the president about specific aspects of the recommendations.¹⁴⁷

Keen to keep the president's tenuous good will, Wilkins first acknowledged Eisenhower's role in integrating the military and in proposing the 1957 Civil Rights legislation. However, he also expressed his anger at Judge Lemley's ruling in Little Rock, which had been issued a few days prior to the meeting. His main concerns were to press for the restoration of Part III as part of a new civil rights bill, and to

¹⁴⁴ The Inc. Fund's role in the Little Rock legal battle is presented in Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 228-243; Williams, *Marshall*, 269; Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 257-266.

¹⁴⁵ Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 241.

¹⁴⁶ Branch, *Parting the Water*, 234; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 106.

¹⁴⁷ A Statement to the President of the United States signed by A Philip Randolph, Lester Granger, Rev. Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins. June 23, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box 122. LOC.

obtain some protection for the right to vote. Wilkins argued that this was the “most effective and bloodless way” to dispel the problems that were plaguing the South. In an attempt to echo Eisenhower’s professed belief in the importance of gradual change, Wilkins suggested that an increase in the number of black voters would bring about “peaceable change and adjustment.”¹⁴⁸

King attempted to prod Eisenhower by calling for a presidential pronouncement in favour of desegregation. He argued that such a call would set a moral tone for the country and suggested a conference, led by the president, at which peaceful methods of achieving desegregation could be discussed. In contrast to the soothing words of the rest of the group, Granger did little to mollify Eisenhower. Instead, he warned the president that the bitter mood of black Americans showed “more signs of congealing” than at any other time he could remember. The president not only declined to discuss their proposals, he responded petulantly to Granger saying he was “extremely dismayed” to find that blacks were bitter despite the efforts of his administration. He then made the extraordinary suggestion that more executive action on civil rights might only result in more bitterness.¹⁴⁹

Opinions of the outcome from the parties involved might almost reflect two entirely different events. White House aide Rocco Siciliano described the meeting as an “unqualified success - even if success in this area is built on sand.”¹⁵⁰ The black leaders on the other hand found it disappointing. The group left the Oval Office with little to show other than a promise to consider the recommendations the group had proposed and a vague agreement to the suggestion for a civil rights conference on civil rights.¹⁵¹ At a press conference following the meeting, Wilkins and his colleagues attempted to sound more positive about the outcome of the meeting, only for Wilkins to be baited by Louis Lautier, a black reporter, who

¹⁴⁸ Memorandum, Rocco C Sciliano, June 24, 1958. Civil Rights in the Eisenhower Administration, Reel 3. RSC.

¹⁴⁹ Memorandum for the files signed by Rocco C Siciliano, June 24 1958, Subject: Meeting of Negro Leaders with the President - June 23, 1958. LBJ Library, Austin (LBJL).

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid; Siciliano’s report differs in tone from Wilkins’ recollection of the meeting, reproduced in his autobiography, in which he recounts a significantly more skeptical attitude and claims to have challenged the President’s actions in Little Rock; Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 257.

wondered whether he had been brainwashed by Eisenhower.¹⁵² Granger's fears were close to being realized. As white resistance became more entrenched and violent, black frustration with the political and judicial processes mounted. However, although sporadic protests based on the Alabama example broke out in various Southern cities, including Tallahassee, Florida, the failure of the bus boycott to spark a wider Montgomery movement temporarily relieved the Association — and Wilkins — of having to form a coherent response to the kind of non-violent direct action tactics that had made King was advocating.

Nevertheless, the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in 1957 in Alabama was the most overt challenge to the NAACP's position in its history.¹⁵³ SCLC was established to coordinate and extend local non-violent direction action protest movements throughout the South. Although it differed in both structure and tactics from the NAACP, the SCLC posed a significant threat in areas where the Association's operations were prohibited or curtailed. This was particularly true in Alabama where the state's legal reprisals had wiped out the NAACP leaving the way clear for the SCLC to build a network of local affiliates. This was not only a threat to its current program, it would also make it difficult for the NAACP to re-establish itself, if and when the federal courts sustained its appeals against the state court injunctions. John Brooks, the NAACP's director of voter registration, was despatched to observe and report back to the national office on an early SCLC meeting. Participants were careful not to make overt criticisms of the NAACP but Brooks reported that much was made of the fact that SCLC's leaders were based in the South rather than New York or Chicago. It was, apparently, important that the leadership be composed of southern blacks in order to avoid the criticisms of white paternalism and northern interference that had sometimes been directed at the NAACP. Brooks concluded that, "The Southern Christian Leadership Conference has a small hard core of leaders that would like to

¹⁵² Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 236.

¹⁵³ The SCLC was established initially at a conference in Atlanta, Georgia in January 1957. It took the name the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in August 1957 at the organization's first conference in Montgomery, Alabama. Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 32; See also Clayborne Carson, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Charismatic Leadership in a Mass Struggle", *Journal of American History*, 74: 2 (September 1987): 403-440, and "The Preachers and the People: The Origins and Early Years of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1955-1959," *Journal of Southern History*, 52:3 (August 1986): 403-440.

take over the NAACP's leadership in the South. They are willing to use our staff, our branch officers and our members to build their organizations for this purpose."¹⁵⁴ The gauntlet had been thrown down and Wilkins and his colleagues were only too quick to accept the challenge.

According to King, the principal aims of the SCLC were "mutual planning, financial assistance, moral support and the carrying out of common projects across the South in the struggle for civil rights."¹⁵⁵ Despite his protestations that the SCLC had no wish to step on the NAACP's toes, its goals of student liaison and citizenship training and, most particularly, voter registration, were almost identical to those of the older organization. In fact, given the fact that the two groups were operating in the same communities — and even in those areas where the NAACP was banned people often had long ties to the Association — it was inevitable that they would rely on the same pool of organizers and appeal to the same, small pool of members. Some NAACP officials also supported SCLC, or attempted to. For example, Medgar Evers was appointed assistant secretary to the new group shortly after its establishment. Wilkins hastily told him to "quietly ease out of service at a convenient time on the excuse that your duties with the NAACP require that you not be committed to specific duties with another group."¹⁵⁶ However, keen to promote a public face of cooperation, he suggested that Evers continue to collaborate on projects that the NAACP deemed useful, and reject any suggestion that the Association was "at odds with them."¹⁵⁷ When, a year later, the SCLC attempted to establish a toehold in Jackson, Mississippi, Evers reported to Ruby Hurley, who ran the NAACP's South East regional office, that he had "tactfully discouraged any such movement here in Jackson. It will be our design through the

¹⁵⁴ Report, Southern Christian Leadership Conference Meeting, Clarksdale, Mississippi, June 1, 1958, by John Brooks. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211. LOC.

¹⁵⁵ Letter, Martin Luther King to Roy Wilkins, December 16, 1957. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211. LOC.

¹⁵⁶ Letter, Medgar Evers to Roy Wilkins, March 11, 1957, NAACP; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Medgar Evers, April 2, 1957. Both NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211. LOC.

¹⁵⁷ Pamphlet, *This is SCLC*, reprinted in August Meier, Elliott Rudwick and Francis L. Broderick, Eds., *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971, 303; Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962), 94-95; LOC; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Medgar Evers, April 2, 1957. Both NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211. LOC; In response to King's request that a member of the NAACP's national staff join the national advisory committee of SCLC, Reverend Edward Odom, the NAACP's church secretary was selected by Wilkins to serve in that capacity. Letter, Roy Wilkins to Martin Luther King, January 20, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211. LOC.

NAACP and the Progressive Voters League, of which our leaders are in key positions, to control the present state of affairs.”¹⁵⁸

For all the protestations of collaboration and shared aims, Wilkins kept a close and suspicious eye on the new upstart. Despite the obvious similarities between the two organizations, there were also very obvious differences. SCLC’s view of itself as a “service agency” that aimed to coordinate activities among indigenous groups throughout the South was a long way from the NAACP’s policy of directing local activity from its head office.¹⁵⁹ Its fluid structure meant that the SCLC also rejected the idea of individual memberships — the lifeblood of the NAACP — in favour of a fee paid by each affiliate organization.¹⁶⁰ The most fundamental difference between the two organizations, however, was the methods used to achieve their goals. While the NAACP focused its attention on the courtroom and the Congress, the SCLC looked to the streets to mobilize mass protest and to the pulpit to ensure that protest remained non-violent. For the SCLC, non-violence was “the most potent force available to an oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and dignity.” Unlike CORE’s use of localized non-violent protest in the 1940s, SCLC intended to employ the tactic on a mass scale.¹⁶¹

Another important difference between SCLC and the NAACP concerned religion. The use of “Christian” as part of SCLC’s name was of fundamental importance.¹⁶² Given the violence of the white backlash, SCLC organisers believed that a religious element would negate accusations by southern politicians that it was radical in any way. But more importantly, it reflected its church roots. Almost all the members of SCLC’s executive board were clergymen; the SCLC’s religious base was so essential to its organizational structure that sociologist Aldon Morris called it the “political

¹⁵⁸ Letter, Medgar Evers to Ruby Hurley, January 24, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A212. LOC. The Mississippi Progressive Voters League was founded in Clarksdale, Mississippi in 1947 “to educate and motivate potential black voters.” Dittmer, *Local People*, 25-26; Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 57.

¹⁵⁹ *This is SCLC*, leaflet reprinted in Meier, Rudwick and Broderick, eds, 303.

¹⁶⁰ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 33.

¹⁶¹ Meier, Rudwick and Broderick, 303; Stanley Levison, interview by James Mosby, February 14 1970.

¹⁶² Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 33; Aldon Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 86.

arm of the black church.”¹⁶³ Churches provided the movement with a mass base, an economically independent leadership, an organized financial base, and roots in black communities throughout the South that rivalled the extensive branch network of the NAACP.¹⁶⁴

Although SCLC never built an organizational structure with the stability of the NAACP’s, it nevertheless captured the imagination of many blacks who might, under other circumstances, have become involved with the NAACP. Competition for publicity, members and revenues exacerbated tensions in the relationship between the NAACP and the SCLC. In public, Wilkins, Marshall and other NAACP leaders spoke warmly of the new organization and its leader. In private, however, they resented both. The emergence of a potentially dynamic new group revived old criticisms of the NAACP: that it was too cautious, middle class, and reliant on litigation at the expense of other potentially more successful methods of achieving civil rights. Wilkins reiterated again and again that the Association had used techniques such as boycotts during its history, citing the ‘Don’t buy where you can’t work’ campaign in Chicago in 1920 and a five-year picketing campaign against Ford’s Theater theatre in Baltimore against segregated seating.¹⁶⁵ It is notable however, that the protests Wilkins frequently cited did not occur in the South, and despite Wilkins’ claims it was clear that direct action was neither the Association’s preferred method of campaigning nor its strength.

Two SCLC stalwarts, Stanley Levison and Ella Baker, were proponents of the view that the NAACP’s leadership was too removed from the majority of blacks. Both had close connections with the NAACP. Levison, a long-time NAACP member, was particularly critical of the Association’s reluctance to embrace mass action. He called upon Wilkins to appeal to the “ordinary person who does not attend dinners, who hasn’t \$15, \$50 or \$100 for a ticket or a tuxedo, but who has zeal, energy and native talent which cannot be bought but can be given without cost if we ask for

¹⁶³ Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 86.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.* 4.

¹⁶⁵ Wilkins referred to both these episodes at a press conference on October 26, 1960 and made frequent references to these activities in subsequent interviews, conferences and letters in defense of the NAACP. Transcript, Press conference given by Roy Wilkins, Atlanta Georgia, October 26, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A175. LOC.

it.”¹⁶⁶ Baker was equally critical. She had been the Association’s director of branches for three years in the 1940s and as such had been partly responsible for the dramatic rise in membership during that period. In her capacity as executive director of SCLC, she was able to build on the contacts she made during her time with the NAACP to develop a grassroots network for the SCLC. According to Baker’s biographer, Barbara Ransby, she considered legislative victories as “opportunities for organizing, not ends unto themselves.”¹⁶⁷ For her, mobilizing local communities to take direct action was the most effective means to push forward the demand for equal rights. She had tried to implement this approach while at the NAACP but was frustrated by the organization’s rejection of mass action as well as by the lack of internal democracy.

As Sociologist Aldon Morris has argued, “organizational protocol became an enduring feature of the NAACP.”¹⁶⁸ It operated in a hierarchical and bureaucratic fashion, with policies formed by the Association’s leaders then communicated down to members and branches. However, the very bureaucracy that attracted increasing criticism was also responsible, Morris argues, for providing local leaders with the organizational skills and network on which the modern civil rights movement was built.¹⁶⁹ In comparison with SCLC, and civil rights groups that emerged in the 1960s, which rejected organizational structure in favour of informal mobilization, the NAACP used its structure as long-term ballast. Its roots in many local communities across the South proved of crucial importance.

Still, Wilkins found himself increasingly called upon to defend his attitude to boycotts and other forms of direct action. James Peck of CORE took Wilkins to task, arguing that he should take the initiative in pursuing boycotts and, more importantly, move to expand the sphere of NAACP activities outside of litigation and lobbying and embrace non-violent protest. If it did not, Peck warned: “Some other organization (or organizations) may well have to develop to fulfil this need.”¹⁷⁰ Wilkins’ response was typically pedantic. As well as reiterating his belief

¹⁶⁶ Stanley Levison to Roy Wilkins, September 1958

¹⁶⁷ Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 183.

¹⁶⁸ Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 12.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 16.

¹⁷⁰ Letter, James Peck to Roy Wilkins, January 26, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A317. LOC.

that Montgomery's success was ultimately attributed to the lawsuit not the mass action, he argued that the threat of white reprisals, particularly where a group that was as outnumbered as black Americans, made the advocacy of actions such as boycotts wantonly dangerous.¹⁷¹

Some members of the NAACP's national executive shared Wilkins' view of direct action but recognized the threat that the changing climate of activism may pose for the Association. John Morsell, for example, suggested to Wilkins that there might be some value in attending a workshop for organizations that were in the midst of growth and change. Morsell was particularly interested in an item on the agenda about organizations that were discovering their objectives "which have probably not been substantially changed over the years, are now being called into question by certain groups in the community." Morsell underlined the relevant section with the comment that it might have been "expressly tailored for us."¹⁷²

Surprisingly, one of the most serious early challenges to Wilkins' leadership came not from proponents of non-violence but rather from the opposite end of the philosophical spectrum. When Robert F. Williams, a branch leader from Monroe, North Carolina, advocated armed resistance, Wilkins' authority and political skills were tested to the limit. Williams was the first real opportunity for Wilkins to assert his authority as head of the NAACP in the face of an outright challenge, and it demonstrated Wilkins' political strength within the organization. When studied within the context of Wilkins' leadership, the Williams episode offers some valuable insights into the forces brewing at a local level and how Wilkins managed those forces.

When Williams became president of the NAACP's moribund Monroe branch in 1956, he was almost the only member. To drum up support Williams ignored the Association's usual recruitment pool of teachers, doctors and other professionals. Instead, he canvassed pool halls, bars, beauty parlours, and street corners.¹⁷³ His

¹⁷¹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to James Peck, February 4, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A317. LOC.

¹⁷² Note, John Morsell to Roy Wilkins, June 29, 1956. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A201, LOC.

¹⁷³ Timothy B Tyson, "Robert F Williams: 'Black Power' and the Roots of the African American Freedom Struggle," *Journal of American History*, 85:2 (September 1998): 550;

tactics worked and soon the branch had over two hundred members, many of whom were black women, and “black veterans who didn’t scare easily.”¹⁷⁴ Williams quickly proved his willingness to confront white racism. He launched a campaign to desegregate the local public swimming pool, an issue suffused with the fears of sex and race that underpinned much of the South’s fear of integration. He and other branch members also organized self-defence networks to protect themselves against the Ku Klux Klan and other white resistance groups. Their preparations proved useful when the branch’s vice president, Dr Albert Perry, was arrested on bogus charges of performing an abortion on a white woman. Scores of women, many armed with guns and knives, crowded into the police station where Perry was being held and refused to move until he was produced – an episode that even attracted national attention.¹⁷⁵

Williams’ real troubles with the national NAACP began one October day in 1958 when one of two young black boys kissed a white girl with whom they were playing. The boys, who were eight and ten years old, were arrested and detained for six days while their families’ homes were attacked by Klansmen. The ludicrous circumstances of the ‘Kissing Case’ as it became known, provided Williams with the perfect platform to publicize the plight of blacks in the South. In his definitive study of Williams’ life, Timothy Tyson argues that Williams saw the episode as a means of using Cold War politics to prompt the American government to take action.¹⁷⁶ He and his colleagues launched a national publicity campaign that attracted the attention of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP), a Trotskyite group, which took up the case with eagerness and helped Williams to publicize the incident both at home and abroad, much to the embarrassment of the United States government and the NAACP.

The connection between one of its branch leaders and a far left organization was galling enough to the NAACP, but Williams made matters worse by attacking the NAACP publicly, telling a meeting in Cleveland, for example, that he had formed a

Timothy B Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 81.

¹⁷⁴ Tyson, “Robert F. Williams,” 550; Oral History Transcript, Robert Williams interview by James Mosby, Detroit, MI, July 22 1970. 30. Moorland-Spingarn Research Center (MSRC).

¹⁷⁵ Tyson, “Robert F. Williams,” 551.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 552-553.

Committee for Racial Injustice because the Association had failed to act effectively in North Carolina.¹⁷⁷ Matters finally came to head in May 1959 when, following the rapid acquittal of a white man accused of raping a pregnant black woman, Williams stated that as there was no court protection for blacks in the South, blacks must defend themselves “on the spot” from white attacks.¹⁷⁸ He told news reporters at the courthouse that it was time to “meet violence with violence.” He touched an old nerve for the Association when he went on to attack what he described as “state-sponsored lynching,” where courts failed to indict whites charged with attacks on black men and women. “Since the federal government will not bring a halt to lynching in the South and since the so-called courts lynch our people legally, if it is necessary to stop lynching with lynching then we must be willing to resort to that method.”¹⁷⁹

It was a paradox of the non-violent movement that many activists, including Martin Luther King in the early days of the Montgomery boycott, believed that armed self-defence was a sensible precaution in states as dangerous as Mississippi and Alabama. Wilkins himself took a pragmatic view of armed self-defence as an understandable response when faced with white violence, and the NAACP had defended plaintiffs accused of armed retaliation in the past. Unfortunately, during this period of high political tension Williams’ words provided ammunition for the NAACP’s detractors, who cried that the organization was a revolutionary front advocating violent rebellion. Wilkins immediately suspended Williams. In a telephone call between the two, Williams was far from contrite: he confirmed to Wilkins that he had made the remarks and that that he was about to repeat them on television. He went on to attack the ineffectiveness of Kelly Alexander, the NAACP’s state president in North Carolina, and accused Wilkins and the NAACP of being interested in the few “not the masses of Negroes ... The NAACP, your office and Kelly Alexander’s office, are not interested in our welfare before now and I don’t see why you take an interest now.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Letter, Harold Williams, Executive Secretary, Cleveland branch of the NAACP, to Gloster Current, February 12 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A334. LOC

¹⁷⁸ Tyson, “Robert F. Williams,” 556-7

¹⁷⁹ Transcript, Telephone conversation between Roy Wilkins and Robert Williams, May 6, 1959. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 23. LOC; Tyson, “Robert F. Williams,” 557

¹⁸⁰ Transcript, May 6, 1959, Spingarn Papers, LOC.

Wilkins had called Williams to ascertain two things: that his comments to the press were accurate and to emphasize that the NAACP did not advocate meeting lynching with lynching.¹⁸¹ He did not wish the public to associate Williams' comments with the policy of the NAACP. Wilkins therefore suspended Williams pending ratification (or otherwise) at the NAACP's annual convention in New York City in July 1959. Despite Williams' crude calls for assertive action, the points he raised were valid and pertinent, which Wilkins had to acknowledge. Attempting to tread a fine line between disavowal of Williams' words and concern about the issues that had prompted them, Wilkins said in a statement that "the mood of Negroes citizens from one end of the nation to the other is one of bitterness and anger over the lynching in Poplarville, Mississippi, April 25, and over the numerous instances of injustice meted out to Negroes by the courts in certain sections of the South. They see Negroes lynched or sentenced to death for the same crimes for which white defendants are given suspended sentences or set free. They are no longer willing to accept this double standard of justice."¹⁸²

To separate itself from William's comments, and very probably to discredit Williams prior to the convention, the NAACP published a booklet, 'The Single Issue in the Robert Williams Case.' The NAACP, as Wilkins himself admitted, had several times in its history defended those accused of murder in self-defence. The pamphlet therefore reiterated Wilkins claims that the main issue was about Williams' call for 'mob action,' not his call for self-defence.¹⁸³ By the time the convention opened, the debate had widened into a critique of the national leadership's attitude towards mass action. The stage was set for a showdown. In the

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Statement, Roy Wilkins, May 6, 1959. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A333. LOC; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Robert Williams, June 9, 1959. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A334. LOC. The incident to which Wilkins refers in his statement was the lynching of Mack Parker who had been dragged from the jail where he was being held on charges of rape of a pregnant white woman. Parker was then beaten and shot to death. An extensive FBI investigation identified a number of white suspects, some of which confessed to the murder. The FBI compiled a sheaf of evidence over three hundred and seventy pages in length, which was completely disregarded by local law enforcement officials and lawyers. However, the county prosecutor refused to present evidence to a state grand jury and a federal grand jury refused to indict so the perpetrators were never charged. Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America* (New York: Modern Library Paperbacks, 2002) 432-443.

¹⁸³ Pamphlet, "The Single Issue in the Robert Williams Case," July, 1959. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I22. LOC; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Bolza Baxter, May 21, 1959, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A334. LOC; NAACP Leader Urges 'Violence', *New York Times*, May 7, 1959; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Robert Williams, June 9, 1959. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A334. LOC.

weeks leading up to the gathering, Wilkins, Marshall and other NAACP leaders had waged a campaign to isolate and discredit Williams. Wilkins claimed that Williams' supporters were using the affair to undermine the Association by calling it undemocratic and suggesting that its leaders were out of touch with its membership.

Williams had attracted the support of a number of disenchanted NAACP members who wanted to prod the leadership into more direct action. He was outmanoeuvred, however. At the convention, forty speakers, including those described by journalist Louis Lomax as the 'big guns' took to the podium to denounce Williams and call for his continued suspension. Using every political trick at his disposal, not least exerting a great deal of pressure on Daisy Bates to denounce Williams publicly, Wilkins eventually succeeded in winning the suspension vote.¹⁸⁴ Lomax argued that the 'rebel' delegates confused Williams' advocacy of self-defence with that of mass action, and so allowed Williams to be the central issue of the convention rather than the broader and much needed debate on the Association's attitude to non-violent direct action.¹⁸⁵ If that was the case, it was an outcome that suited Wilkins. Despite his victory in this fight, the episode highlighted a potentially larger battle, fuelled by growing dissent within the organization, about the autonomy of branches and the power of the national office in the face of the Montgomery boycott's success and, in comparison, the still glacial pace of change resulting from legal victories such as *Brown*. The debate about Williams was a wasted opportunity to discuss the broader direction of the NAACP, and whether its focus on litigation and legislation was still supported by the Association's members. It was a debate that Wilkins was not prepared to have. Whether that refusal was borne out of fear of precipitating action that the organization could not control, or out of conviction that the NAACP's focus was the right one, is not clear.

¹⁸⁴ Stockley, *Daisy Bates*, 194-195; Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, 113-114; Williams, *Thurgood Marshall*, 281-282; Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 265, Tyson, "Robert F. Williams," 558-559; Draft Report of the NAACP Resolutions Committee (Internal Affairs), undated. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A10. LOC; Resolution by the Committee of Branches, June 8 1959. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 23. LOC.

¹⁸⁵ Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1962) 103.

Doubts about Wilkins' ability to lead a mass organization had already begun to surface in the black press a year before the Williams episode exploded. In the spring of 1958, James Hicks of the *Amsterdam News* published a series of essays on the theme of black leadership, using Wilkins as the focus.¹⁸⁶ Hicks described a history of black leaders attracted by white power through a need to 'belong,' and argued that Wilkins was just the latest in that line of hopefuls. At the heart of Hicks' argument and his call for "forceful, aggressive leadership," was his charge that Wilkins was so keen to belong to the white establishment that he had become hesitant in challenging discrimination. While some of Hicks' allegations were pertinent, this particular charge had little merit and missed the broader point that, although not reluctant to challenge discrimination, Wilkins was wary of using mass action tactics in part because of his fear of alienating white allies.

Hicks also argued that the inclination of the NAACP's board to lean leftwards politically was causing Wilkins problems because his lack of access to the Republican White House hampered his ability to persuade either the executive or Congress on civil rights matters. However, even if Wilkins had such access, Hicks argued, his need to 'belong' hampered his ability to take tough decisions.¹⁸⁷ Hicks's main evidence for this was the 1957 Civil Rights Bill. "Eight months after Roy agreed that a half loaf of Civil Rights was better than no bread at all, the watered down civil rights law, and the Commission which it established, is virtually dead. Actually, because of the compromise, it hasn't really ever been born."¹⁸⁸ Rather than leading his people, Hicks challenged, Wilkins was simply running to keep up with the unstoppable force that was black America's drive for freedom. "Roy can't stop running any more than any other so-called Negro leader can stop running today – for he knows that the minute he stops he will get run over by the steamroller. But this is not leadership. For Roy himself hasn't the slightest idea where the steamroller is going."¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁶ James L Hicks, "Leadership," *Amsterdam News*, April 19, 1958; May 3, 1958; May 10, 1958; May 24, 1958; June 7, 1958. New York *Amsterdam News*. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261. LOC.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ Hicks, "Leadership," *Amsterdam News*, May 3, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261. LOC.

The NAACP's board were not spared from Hick's broadsides. Describing many of its members as "an elderly timid group of people who climbed into a hansom to take a slow ride through Central Park and instead, suddenly found themselves aboard a civil rights jet flying off into outer space, faster than the speed of sound. Some are scared stiff."¹⁹⁰ They were too comfortable, gathered from too narrow a pool of the same professions and region and were, in short, an ineffectual clique reluctant to take the initiative and challenge with aggressive leadership the white power structure to demand equal rights.¹⁹¹ The most damaging accusations Hicks made of black leaders were that they had become so attached to the white world and the power it represented that they colluded in slowing down the fight for civil rights.

The *Amsterdam News* was one of the leading black newspapers, and Hicks was an established and credible reporter, so his essays, even if opinion rather than fact, carried some considerable weight in the black community. In one letter in the NAACP archives, the correspondent thanks Hicks for his articles and his "timely exposé of Roy Wilkins." She wrote that she was about to renew her NAACP membership but Hicks' articles had prompted her not only to rethink her support of an organization whose head did not appear to believe in the fight for black equality but to encourage her friends and family to do the same.¹⁹² A note attached to the letter suggests that a reply to the correspondent was returned "marked no such address," implying that the letter was fraudulent. Still Henry Lee Moon thought Hicks' articles were damaging enough to possibly warrant a libel lawsuit.¹⁹³

Moon sent a spirited response to Hicks. The suggestion of any acquiescence in slowing down black progress was particularly painful and earned the most extensive rebuke. Moon cited the NAACP's history in challenging segregation and

¹⁹⁰ James Hicks, "Leadership," *Amsterdam News*, May 24, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261. LOC.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. and James Hicks, "Leadership," *Amsterdam News*, June 7, 1958 NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261. LOC

¹⁹² Letter, Hazel Taylor to James Hicks, April 30, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261. LOC

¹⁹³ Memorandum, Henry Lee Moon to Robert Carter, May 5, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261. LOC.

Wilkins' contribution to that fight.¹⁹⁴ He then took issue with the specifics in Hicks' essays, although not with his more implicit opinions, the core of which was that the Wilkins, and his organization, were out of touch with the majority of black Americans. Wilkins had some defenders in the press, most notably his colleague in the Mississippi Levee investigation, George Schuyler, who used his weekly column in the *Pittsburgh Courier* to condemn the "shocking attack" on Wilkins.¹⁹⁵

However, Hicks' comments resonated with other black publishers. William Walker, publisher of the *Cleveland Call and Post*, asked Wilkins a rhetorical question. "How can any organization purporting to be the mouthpiece for Negro aspirations and action, consider complete its job when it has been unable to attract no more than four Negroes in each one hundred of the population to join its ranks?"¹⁹⁶ The *Pittsburgh Courier* — at odds, it would appear, with its columnist George Schuyler — also called on the NAACP to broaden its base. The newspaper quoted board member and sports star Jackie Robinson, who accused the Association of failing to enlist the vast majority of blacks.¹⁹⁷ The charge of remoteness clearly contained more than a grain of truth.

Throughout its Association's history, it had tried to control, as far as possible, the manner and pace of the quest for equal rights. In truth, there was little reason for Wilkins to suspect that that might not continue to be the case, despite the protestations of some black commentators. However, Wilkins' reluctance to devolve more autonomy to branches, as well as his reluctance to embrace mass action, were directly challenged in July 1958, when a group of NAACP youth members, angry at the discriminatory policies of lunch counters in the Kansas drug chain, Dockum's, planned a sit-in protest at the Wichita, Kansas store. The president of the local NAACP branch, Chester Lewis, notified head office of the protests the day before the sit-in began, only to be told by Wilkins and Herbert Wright, the Association's youth secretary, that the NAACP would not endorse sit-

¹⁹⁴ Letter, Henry Lee Moon to the *Amsterdam News*, Draft and undated. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261. LOC.

¹⁹⁵ "A Shocking Attack on Roy Wilkins," *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 17, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261. LOC.

¹⁹⁶ Letter, William Walker to Roy Wilkins, August 13, 1958, NAACP Papers, Box A238, LOC.

¹⁹⁷ William G. Nunn, "The NAACP... Where Does It Go From Here?" *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 26, 1958. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A238. LOC.

ins or any other form of mass action.¹⁹⁸ Gloster Current, the national director of branches, confirmed this position, stating that NAACP branches should focus on litigation and not direct action. The sit-ins took place anyway, and within four weeks had succeeded in forcing Dockum's to change its policy across Kansas. Taking heart from this victory, the NAACP youth branch in Oklahoma City successfully launched its own sit-down protest, as did youth groups across Kansas. Despite their success, the Wichita protests initially received little recognition from NAACP leaders, other than a press release praising the youth council as "an outstanding example of what young people can do to help remove discrimination from American life."¹⁹⁹

The national leadership waited two years to acknowledge the contribution of the Wichita protestors, and did so only then because the branch's early success provided a useful defence against accusations that the organization was too staid. The Oklahoma City protests, on the other hand, received speedy approval and praise from Wilkins and the NAACP leadership. The contrast, historian Gretchen Cassel Eick suggests, is that the Oklahoma City branch conducted a highly successful membership drive alongside the sit-ins.²⁰⁰

Wilkins and his colleagues were uncertain about how to manage the Association's younger members. As his many memoranda on the subject shows, Wilkins had long been an advocate of youth chapters and recognized that those branches needed active programs to attract new members and engage existing ones. Unfortunately, the Association frequently used its youth simply as extensions of its adult membership rather than as a valuable resource in its own right. For example, one of the most effective ways southern states curtailed NAACP activities during the 1950s was to use NAACP membership as a reason to fire an employee. If the Association had been better able to use its youth membership, who were less constrained by economic concerns, it could have retained a strong presence in those

¹⁹⁸ Gretchen Cassel Eick, *Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest, 1955-1972* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 5.

¹⁹⁹ Memorandum, Herbert Wright to Henry Lee Moon, August 20, 1958, for press release, NAACP papers, Part III, Box E6, LOC.

²⁰⁰ Transcript, Roy Wilkins Statement to the NAACP Board of Directors at the Annual Meeting, New York City, January 5, 1959. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A303, LOC; Memorandum, Herbert Wright to Roy Wilkins and Gloster Current, March 30, 1959, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A290. LOC; Eick, *Dissent in Wichita*, 9-10.

states and had an active and trained adult membership by the time newer groups moved in to challenge the Association.

When Wilkins informed the board of directors of the successful protest in Kansas and Oklahoma, he did so in the context of congratulating Herbert Wright for revitalizing the Association's youth program. He went on to state, explicitly, that legal action was now only one of the techniques to be used in fighting segregation. At his presentation to the board, Wilkins acknowledged that effective public relations had become an important issue if the NAACP was to gain popular support for its program and activities. Unfortunately, Wilkins and his colleagues at the national office failed to heed their own advice. In not recognizing the shift to active dissent, the NAACP missed a golden opportunity to capitalize on not only the activism of their youth branches but also a ready-made triumph that inspired other similar protests in Baltimore, Louisville, and Maywood, Illinois.²⁰¹

Wilkins' wary response to direct action protests is understandable in the context of the period. The shadow of McCarthyism meant that the organization was still anxious to avoid any taint of radicalism, and mass action was connected, at least in some minds, with left-wing sympathies. It could also be argued that the national office's distrust of mass activism stemmed from a fear that local initiatives like the Kansas City sit-ins would lead to a loss of central control and leadership. The fact that the protests in the mid-West were localized and relatively small gave Wilkins little reason to think that the activities of a few youth branches could be replicated elsewhere, nor did it suggest that such protests might trigger more widespread demonstrations. However, the failure to ask what had motivated the Wichita youth branch to take this action—a failure to recognize the growing militancy among black youth—would cost the Association dear in the coming decade.

²⁰¹ According to Aldon Morris and Gretchen Cassel Eick, several members of the Wichita and Oklahoma City youth branches were personal friends but the Wichita protests inspired protests in other Kansas cities. Eick, *Dissent in Wichita*, 9; Aldon Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-in Movement," 750; Memorandum, Herbert Wright to Roy Wilkins and Gloster Current, March 30, 1959, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A290, LOC.

Chapter Four

Politics and Protest

As 1960 began, Wilkins' most onerous task appeared to be ensuring passage of a new civil rights bill.¹ The presidential election due to take place in November had changed the parameters only in as much as both political parties admitted the need for action on civil rights. Unfortunately, neither had the appetite for the necessary fight that would be required to pass any meaningful legislation. When a new civil rights bill was initially proposed in 1959, Wilkins called for the support of branch officers but warned them that the Johnson's first priority was to maintain a cohesive Democratic party for the election and that he would sacrifice stronger legislation to ensure electoral success. "He wants it said that he gave the civil rights advocates and Negro citizens some improvement over the past, but did not make the southerners mad enough to split the party. He wants to be cheered as a 'compromiser' between the segregationists and the integrationists."²

As everyone in Washington knew, Lyndon Johnson had his eye firmly on the Democratic nomination for president in the 1960 election. He met with Wilkins, Mitchell and other delegates of the LCCR in January of the new year to reassure the group that he was committed to protecting the constitutional rights of every individual. But he refused to be drawn on how to define meaningful legislation nor on whether it might be possible to achieve such legislation.³ However, the senate leader promised to bring the bill to the floor of the Senate on February 15 for debate and a vote. Wilkins called on members of the LCCR to send delegates to Washington to lobby their senators to pass the bill. A schedule was established whereby a revolving group from six or seven different states arrived in Washington every five or six days during the Senate debate. Delegates were encouraged to announce their departure to their local media outlets and then to contact the

¹ The 1960 Civil Rights Act was an attempt to address some of the limitations of the 1957 civil rights legislation. Under the provisions of the Act, voting referees could be appointed by federal courts, the obstruction of an individuals attempt to register to vote became a federal crime and subject to penalties; and voting officials were required to preserve voting records for twenty-two months.

² Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to All Branch Officers, January 23, 1959. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 23. LOC.

³ Notes, Senator Johnson's remarks to Clarence Mitchell and other Delegates to January 13-14, (1960) Legislative Conference, Subject Files 1960, Box 752, LBJL.

Washington press once they arrived in the city. Wilkins warned: “unless we demonstrate genuine breadth and intensity of demand for enactment of a genuine bill in 1960, there is grave danger that the old bipartisan coalition of reaction will succeed in either blocking action or substituting a virtually meaningless bill bearing the title of civil rights, to be used as bait for votes in the 1960 election campaign.”⁴

Wilkins’ words were prescient. The bill, which eventually focused entirely on voting rights provisions, did make it to the Senate floor in February as Johnson promised. The forces opposed to the bill, however, had developed an equally effective strategy of their own: to create a continuous filibuster. They arranged themselves in groups where each member would speak for four hours every three days, resulting in twenty-four hour sittings. When Johnson declared a break in the debate early March, the Senate had been sitting for over one hundred and twenty five hours.⁵ The ludicrous attempts to forestall the legislation drew an exasperated response from Wilkins: “Why in Heaven’s name are United States senators sleeping on cots in anterooms, answering quorum calls at 3.45am and recording endless speeches by Dixie members – all in an effort to pass a civil rights bill?”⁶

The legislation was finally approved by the Senate on April 8 and signed into law on May 6. It was even weaker than its 1957 predecessor and created a byzantine legal process through which an individual whose right to vote had been violated would have to navigate to seek redress. Wilkins was disappointed with the final outcome, saying that a black voter would have to pass more tests and checkpoints to register “than he would if he tried to get to the US gold reserves in Fort Knox.”⁷ Nevertheless, as with the 1957 Act, he tried to look on the legislation as another sign of federal support and a further opening of the door that would eventually lead to more effective legislation.⁸ His frustration at this “quadrennial” game was evident in a letter to *New York Times* journalist Anthony Lewis during the

⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins and Arnold Aronson to All Participating Organizations of the LCCR, February 2, 1960. LCCR Papers, Part I, Box 132. LOC.

⁵ Nichols, *A Matter of Justice*, 252-253.

⁶ Transcript, Roy Wilkins address to the Southwest Regional Conference of the NAACP, Dallas, TX, March 5, 1960. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 55. LOC.

⁷ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 200.

⁸ Transcript, Oral history interview, Roy Wilkins, interview by Robert Wright, New York City, April 29, 1970. MRSC.

congressional battle: "Who wants voting rights for Negroes in Pearl River County, Miss., (where Mack Charles Parker was lynched and where no Negro has been registered to vote within the recollection of living men) unless the advocacy of such rights, in such and such manner, will embarrass X, or check Y and help Z?"⁹

Even before the legislation reached the Senate floor, events far away from Capitol Hill rendered the circuitous route to civil rights almost redundant. Frustration at the constant blocks put in the way of black progress prompted four students, Ezell Blair, David Richmond, Joseph McNeil and Franklin McCain to take matters into their own hands. On February 1, 1960, in Greensboro, North Carolina, the four deliberately sat down in the whites-only section of a Woolworth's lunch counter and refused to leave until they were served. As expected, they were refused service and remained at the counter until the store closed, promising to return the following day when they would resume their protest. When they did, they were joined by a further twenty-nine students, followed by yet more the day after that. The students were organized as effectively as any Dixiecrat filibuster. They took it in turns to occupy seats so that protestors constantly occupied most of the seats at the lunch counter. Within a week, similar protests took place elsewhere in the state: within two weeks, sit-in protests were seen in eleven cities in four states; by the end of March, sit-ins had been noted in sixty-nine cities across the South and Border States.¹⁰

The history of the civil rights movement is littered with false beginnings, but the scale and speed with which the sit-in protests spread across the South was described by August Meier and Elliott Rudwick as little short of momentous.¹¹

⁹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Anthony Lewis, February 4, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A267. LOC.

¹⁰ William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Equality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980) 82-101; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 101; Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-in Movement," 756; Manning Marable. *Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1990* (Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1991), 61-65.

¹¹ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 102; Manning Marable called the protests "a second reconstruction" in his book, *"Race, Reform and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945-1980 Revised Second Edition*, 61; According to Aldon Morris and Gretchen Cassel Eick, several members of the Wichita and Oklahoma City youth branches were personal friends but the Wichita protests inspired protests in other Kansas cities. Eick, *Dissent in Wichita*, 9; Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-in Movement," 750

Meier and Rudwick argue that the sit-ins “speeded up incalculably the rate of social change in the sphere of race relations; broke decisively the hegemony of the NAACP in the civil rights arena and inaugurated a period of unprecedented rivalry among the racial advancement groups; and made non-violent direct action the dominant strategy...for the next half-decade.”¹² *New Republic* magazine wrote that the tactics of the protesters “reveals a purpose and technique that will be hard to withstand.”¹³ The sit-in protests were not simply important for the changes they inspired in the way protest was expressed but also for the shift in balance from one generation to another. Students, both white and black, now became the face of protest, changing its form and pace. The NAACP had to race to keep up.

Wilkins called the Greensboro sit-ins an “electrifying moment” and suggested that the sluggish implementation of desegregation rulings such as *Brown* and an absence of political will to speed the pace of change, forced “a new generation to fall back on its own resources.”¹⁴ James Robinson, Executive Secretary of CORE, cited the same reasons in a report in June 1960, suggesting that the protests displayed “a strong dissatisfaction with the pace of school desegregation; a growing conviction that something active must be done to show that we do not accept the segregated patterns of the South; and that many persons in the South, white as well as Negro, are ready to move far faster than had been supposed.”¹⁵

Although Wilkins argued later that the sit-in protests were inevitable, the timing caught the Association completely by surprise.¹⁶ That the organization was taken so off guard is ironic when their own youth branches in Kansas and Oklahoma had used the same tactics two years earlier, to little acknowledgement by the Association. This is not to suggest that the NAACP refused to participate in or allow direct action protests. As Wilkins pointed out regularly, the organization had been boycotting and picketing for decades, and he encouraged members to support

¹² Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 102. The sit-in protests are examined in detail in Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights*.

¹³ “We are not afraid”, *The New Republic*, March 14 1960, Vol.142, No. 11, Issue, 2365, 3-4.

¹⁴ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 267; Remarks by Roy Wilkins before the City Club Forum of Cleveland, Ohio, April 16, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I15, LOC.

¹⁵ Rough Draft of report by James Robinson, June, 1960. Papers of the NAACP, Part 21, Reel 18. Microfilm, UCL.

¹⁶ Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 268.

the demonstrators. But at this stage of the civil rights movement it must have been difficult for Wilkins and his colleagues to imagine adopting an agenda that the NAACP could not control. The Montgomery Bus Boycott had been an early sign that the NAACP's constituency was evolving, but the absence of any significant protest activity in the intervening years clearly lulled the organization into a false sense of complacency.

Nevertheless, when the wave of protests sparked by the Greensboro sit-ins spread across the South, Wilkins overcame his reservations about direct action to some degree. He was genuinely moved by the Greensboro protests and the courage, dignity and organization of those participating in the demonstrations. He was also quick to note that the Greensboro branch of the NAACP had promised help with any legal fees. The national office was initially more cautious than their local counterparts, coordinating help through branches rather than offering direct support from New York. Marshall reluctantly agreed that Inc. Fund lawyers could represent any sit-in protestors who had been arrested.¹⁷

Within three weeks of the first sit-in Wilkins wrote to branch presidents and other local NAACP activists to assure them of the Association's support for the protestors, offering financial help to those protestors arrested during the sit-ins.¹⁸ The NAACP also paid the bail money and other legal fees for protestors arrested during the sit-ins, a noble gesture that would soon prove to be an expensive burden. He also encouraged local branches to offer support to the Greensboro protesters. Branches were urged to send letters and telegrams of protest to the presidents of Kress and Woolworths, hold protest meetings and to form small groups to visit their local Kress and Woolworth stores and warn them that they may resort to economic boycotts if blacks were not served at lunch counters in the stores.¹⁹ Recognizing the different circumstances facing protestors in the South and members elsewhere in the country, Wilkins' message was a little more vigorous to

¹⁷ Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 273; Constance Baker Motley, *Equal Justice Under Law* (New York: Farrar Strauss and Giroux, 1998), 130-131; Tushnet, *Making Civil Rights Law*, 309-310

¹⁸ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Branch Presidents, February 19, 1960, NACP papers, Part III, LOC.

¹⁹ Ibid.

youth councils and college chapters in the North. Those groups were also asked to write to the stores targeted by the protestors, but rather were also encouraged to picket Woolworth, Kress and other stores that operated discriminatory policies.²⁰

Inc. Fund lawyer Jack Greenberg likened the drama and contagion of the protests to “a spark [that] had been struck in an oxygen-filled atmosphere.”²¹ Although the initial Greensboro protests were an independent action, the sit-in protests quickly became a coordinated effort that capitalized on an existing network of community structures such as churches, civil rights groups and black colleges.²² This helped the protestors achieve remarkable success in a relatively short time. By 1961, lunch counters were fully opened to black customers in San Antonio, Nashville, Atlanta, and at least eighty small towns across the region.²³ Wilkins was so stirred he compared the sit-ins protestors with soldiers of the American War of Independence. “We owe them and their white student cooperators a debt for re-arming our spirits and renewing our strength as a nation at a time when we and free men everywhere sorely need this clear insight and this fresh courage, so quietly and so humbly offered,” he proclaimed. “It is no extravagance to say that they, in a sense, constitute another beacon in an Old North Church, another hoofbeat under a Paul Revere.”²⁴

Despite Wilkins’ admiration for the sit-in protestors, he found their tactics a worrying indication of a growing autonomy among blacks. The fact that victories were secured so quickly provided the movement with a momentum that did not rely on the leadership of a particular group or individual. This dramatically changed the existing power relations within the civil rights movement. The three main groups, the NAACP, CORE and the SCLC, had failed to ignite a chain of protest on the scale of Greensboro. When that scale became clear, the NAACP, like every other civil rights group, was eager to control the growing protest movement.

²⁰ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Youth Chapters and College Chapters in the North, February 19, 1960, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A289, LOC.

²¹ Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 271.

²² Cited in Morris, “Black Southern Student Sit-in Movement,” 764.

²³ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 245.

²⁴ Transcript, Roy Wilkins address to The City Club Forum, Cleveland, OH, April 16, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A304. LOC. The speech was reproduced as a booklet, “The Meaning of the Sit-Ins,” September, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I22. LOC.

Within two weeks of the first sit-in, the national press had also begun to take an interest. A front-page article in the *New York Times* suggested that the protests indicated “a shift of leadership to younger more militant Negroes,” that would likely “bring an increasing use of passive resistance” as a protest technique. The article prompted Wilkins to call an emergency meeting with Gloster Current and Herbert Wright to discuss the new situation.²⁵ He instructed the national office staff to picket Woolworth and Kress stores located near the NAACP’s head office in New York City — although even then he was cautious about the potential for other groups to interfere. Participants were asked not to discuss the protest outside the office because, Wilkins said: “we do not wish outside groups present with their members and literature thus confusing the public.”²⁶

The sit-in protests also prompted one of the NAACP’s frequent bouts of introspective analysis about its programs and strategy. Shortly after the protests began, a three-day staff conference was proposed to give “careful and imaginative scrutiny of the policies, programs and strategies of the NAACP.”²⁷ John Morsell, presumably on the instructions of Wilkins, asked national staff for comments and agenda items. The responses provide a useful snapshot of the views of those responsible for executing much of the NAACP’s program. The responses suggest that not everyone was opposed to either broadening the Association’s base or employing mass action tactics. Morsell guided the discussion: “militancy, protest and their meaning in today’s circumstances. Was the NAACP a “talented tenth organization?” he asked. “Does it lack (or need) mass support? Are its programs developed in isolation from what the ‘masses’ want”? To what extent is continued useful functioning dependent on ‘mass support’?” Morsell also posed the question: should the NAACP be “an ideological movement or an operational agency for engineering social change?” He also raised the highly sensitive issue of the Association’s relationship to other organizations: “should it “be pre-emptive,

²⁵ Claude Sitbon, “Negro Sitdowns Stir Fear of Wider Unrest in South,” *New York Times*, February 15 1960; Memo from Roy Wilkins to Gloster Current and Herbert Wright, February 15, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A310, LOC.

²⁶ Memorandum. Roy Wilkins to The Staff, March 29, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A289. LOC.

²⁷ Memorandum, John Morsell to Gloster Current, Robert Carter, James Farmer, Henry Hill, Herbert Wright, Clarence Mitchell, Henry Lee Moon, Rev. Odom, Roy Wilkins, Wood, Ruby Hurley, Lucille Black, Mildred Bond, Tara Pittman, Bobbie Branche, February 11, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A310, LOC.

parallel, competitive or collaborative?"²⁸

Robert Carter thought the NAACP was caught in a dilemma: "For me the fundamental problem which the NAACP faces is how to (1) devise at the national office and (2) translate and implement at the Branch level an NAACP program which will involve our branches and members actively and militantly in the struggle against racial discrimination within their communities." He argued that unless this problem was resolved, discussions about whether the NAACP engaged in passive resistance, boycotts or other forms of protest activities were redundant.²⁹ Mildred Bond contended, with some foresight, that the Association's traditional tools of litigation, petitions and publicity were "too tame for the times," even though legislation "remains virile and clearly its own use must be greatly intensified on all levels." Bond raised a question, however, about whether the "protest tool," which she acknowledged had been "comparatively little employed" by the Association in the past should now become the focus of the NAACP's program given its middle class base.³⁰

Labor secretary Herbert Hill proposed that the NAACP needed a mass membership base to provide not only financial support but also give the Association "strategic significance" and a better connection with the black community. He suggested that the organization, both nationally and locally, should be more proactive in raising issues and developing programs.³¹ Gloster Current was by far the most optimistic about the NAACP's situation. Many of the Association's goals had already been achieved, he argued. The remaining problem areas were housing and public accommodations in the North, and voting, employment, education and basic inequality in the South. Current's proposals were mainly logistical and administrative: an increase in staff, better delegation of authority to senior staff, consolidation of some functions, and use of technology to improve fundraising and

²⁸ Memorandum, John Morsell to Executive Staff, February 29, 1960, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A310, Staff meetings 1956-64 folder, LOC.

²⁹ Memorandum, Robert Carter to John Morsell, March 17, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A310. LOC.

³⁰ Memorandum, Mildred Bond to John Morsell, March 21, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A310. LOC.

³¹ Ibid.

campaigning.³²

There are no documents indicating whether the conference took place, and what conclusions might have arisen but Wilkins had already decided, in fact, that the Association had to take positive action in support of the sit-in protests. In March 1960 he issued what was described as an “expanded racial defense policy” to local NAACP leaders. Prompted by statements from Woolworth, Kress, Kresge and W.T. Grant stores that they would continue with the policy of not serving black customers at their lunch counters, Wilkins called upon members to withhold patronage from any store that operated segregated lunch counters across the United States. Instructions were also issued on how to organize boycott campaigns and peaceful picket protests.³³ While the boycott instruction was not a significant departure from traditional NAACP policy, waging a national campaign of boycotts and using its branch network in a coordinated countrywide protest were certainly signs of a shift in thinking.

Unfortunately, Wilkins’ views were not shared by some of the NAACP’s more cautious branches. For all the galvanizing effects the sit-in protests had on many branches, they only served to highlight the malaise in others. The vacillation of those branches meant that the Association often looked as if it were following in the footsteps of a more active organization rather than instigating direct action protests of its own. *Gloster Current* painted a dismal picture of the effect that apathy had in Nashville, for example. Apparently, in October 1959, the Nashville NAACP youth council had asked branch leaders for their cooperation in launching a sit-in demonstration. The request was turned down because “the NAACP has more important things to do than to try and eat a hot dog downtown.” This brush-off led the group to work with the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC), a local affiliate of the SCLC instead.³⁴

³² Memorandum, *Gloster Current* to Roy Wilkins and John Morsell, March 22, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A310, LOC.

³³ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Robert Carter, *Gloster Current*, James Farmer, Herbert Hill, Henry Lee Moon and John Morsell, March 16, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A289, LOC; Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to All Officers of NAACP State Conferences, Branches, Youth Councils and College Chapters, March 16, 1960, NAACP papers, Part III, Box I22, LOC.

³⁴ Memorandum, *Gloster Current* to Roy Wilkins, October 6, 1960. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A290, LOC.

The implications of this were not only that the NAACP missed an opportunity to be seen to be leading direct action protests, but also that other groups were primarily credited with instigating the protest, which went ahead anyway, with some NAACP involvement, despite the hesitation of branch leaders. The price for that caution, Current speculated, was that a year later, the Nashville branch was depleted by a lack of interest, a situation that Current attributed to dissatisfaction in the black community with "an organization which has not shown by any aggressive activity recently its militant posture." This in itself was a result, Current suggested, of a leadership in the city that "was not of the highest caliber." It was old, conservative and "tended to have a grandfather's viewpoint about aggressive activity," he told Wilkins.³⁵ Reporting on the annual session of the Tennessee State Conference in Nashville, Current told Wilkins that "it was evident that the recent sit-down demonstrations in that city have had an adverse effect upon the Branch. The conference was sparsely attended, and even in Nashville there was very little interest in the NAACP meetings."³⁶

Current suggested that Tennessee offered an excellent opportunity for the NAACP to expand the kind of protest activities it was promoting elsewhere: a sympathetic press, the growing political influence of blacks in the state, and the real possibility of ending discriminatory practices.³⁷ However, to achieve any goals, the Association needed to have effective leadership in place. This might have worked for other parts of the state but, by the time of the state conference meeting, Nashville had already become a center of student activism out of which emerged a new group whose grassroots activism, David Garrow argues, merited the designation of 'leadership' far more than Wilkins or his counterparts, certainly at a local level.³⁸ The Nashville protestors were led by a group of students from Fisk and Vanderbilt Universities including Diane Nash, Marion Barry, James Bevel, and James Lawson,

³⁵ Memorandum, October 6, 1960, NAACP Papers, LOC.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ David Garrow, "Commentary" in *The Civil Rights Movement in Americas* ed. by Charles W Eagles, Charles (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986), 59.

each of whom became prominent leaders in the civil rights movement.³⁹ These leaders, however, helped to found a new organization that became, in the eyes of the NAACP, yet another undesirable competitor.

When it became clear that a coordinated effort was needed to consolidate the success of the protests, Ella Baker who by 1960 was a frustrated executive director of SCLC, called a conference in Raleigh, North Carolina, under the auspices of, but not convened by, SCLC. The aim of the conference was to bring together the sit-in protestors to meet, share experiences and ideas, and plan future activities.⁴⁰ Baker suggested that the students work together and proposed that they form a new group rather than affiliate with an existing organization. Out of that proposal came the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), which would challenge Wilkins and his organization many times over the coming years.

Speaking at the conference, James Lawson made his poor opinion of the NAACP quite clear. Describing the *Crisis* magazine as "the organ of a black bourgeoisie club," Lawson went on, "Our best agency [the NAACP] accents fund-raising and court actions rather than developing our greatest resource, a people no longer the victims of a racial evil who can act in a disciplined manner to implement the Constitution."⁴¹ Issuing a challenge to the Association, he warned that the sit-ins were "a judgment on middle-class, conventional, half-way efforts to deal with radical social evil. It is specifically a judgment upon contemporary civil rights attempts" to end segregation. "After many court decisions, the deeper South we go, the more token integration (and that only public schools) we achieve."⁴² Lawson's

³⁹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 21-25; Emily Stoper, "The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: Rise and Fall of a Redemptive Organization" *Journal of Black Studies*, 8:1 (September 1977): 13-34; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 274-275; See also David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1999) for a fuller examination of the Nashville protest movement; Morris, "Black Southern Student Sit-in Movement," 760-764.

⁴⁰ Carson, *In Struggle*, 20-21; Ransby, *Ella Baker*, 238-247.

⁴¹ Address, James Lawson at SNCC Conference, Raleigh, NC, April 1960 reprinted in August Meier, Elliott Rudwick and Francis L Broderick ed. *Black Protest Thought in the Twentieth Century* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1971), 314.

⁴² James Lawson at SNCC Conference, Raleigh, NC, April, 1960 reprinted in Meier et al. *Black Protest Thought*; 314; Negro Criticizes NAACP Tactics, Claude Sitton, *New York Times*, April 17, 1960; Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Gloster Current, James Farmer, Herbert Hill, Henry Lee Moon, John Morsell and Herbert Wright, April 18, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211. LOC.

explicit repudiation of the NAACP's techniques and goals captured the attention of the national press, which read his remarks as signs of a split among the civil rights groups. The apparent acquiescence of King and the SCLC in Lawson's comments only served to reinforce such that view and sparked Wilkins' fury.

Some of Lawson's comments had more than a grain of truth to them, but for Wilkins such public approbation — particularly from supposed allies — had to be dealt with immediately. He first called a meeting with senior national office staff to discuss Lawson's remarks. "The criticisms of the NAACP which have emanated from this conference and which have not thus far been repudiated by Martin Luther King would seem to pose a situation to which I think we should give careful consideration." Suggestions from executive staff ranged from a publicity campaign highlighting the Association's sit-in activities to gathering as many of the NAACP's student leaders together as possible to attend a national student's conference.⁴³ He then dispatched a furious letter to King, complaining that the comments, and more particularly the allegation that Lawson's views were shared by others in the SCLC, had "puzzled and greatly distressed" the Association.⁴⁴ Wilkins questioned the grounds on which Lawson had made his criticisms when the Association's members had been actively involved in the sit-in protests, and the national office was providing financial and legal support to the protestors.⁴⁵ Wilkins finished with a veiled reference to "other disturbing elements in the picture which I would not care to go into here, but which I feel you and I should discuss privately as soon as possible."⁴⁶

Lawson rather than King replied to Wilkins' allegations. His tone was respectful, and he went to some lengths to assure Wilkins that the newspaper reports were

⁴³ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Gloster Current, James Farmer, Herbert Hill, Henry Lee Moon, John Morsell and Herbert Wright, April 18, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211. LOC.

⁴⁴ According to a memorandum to Roy Wilkins from John Brooks, Lawson was alleged to have said that "the top leadership of the SCLC is not in harmony with the NAACP" although that does not appear to be the case according to a transcript of the speech reprinted in Meier and Rudwick, *Black Protest Thought*, 308-315; Memorandum, John Brooks to Roy Wilkins, April 20, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211, LOC.

⁴⁵ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Martin Luther King, April 27, 1960, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A175, LOC; Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 270-279; Legal services were, in fact, being offered by the Inc. Fund rather than the NAACP.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

greatly exaggerated. He also reaffirmed his support of the Association through his own membership and through his collaboration with local branches. Despite his deferential approach, however, Lawson did not completely retract his comments about the NAACP, claiming that any mention was “within the context of the effort to indicate how the sit-in movement is a critique of all efforts to bring creative social change.”⁴⁷ Wilkins offered Lawson no reprieve. He pointed out that an SCLC organizer repeated some of Lawson’s arguments against the NAACP at another conference two weeks later, thereby exacerbating the erroneous impression that Lawson had given about the Association’s activities. Wilkins made a more valid argument when he pointed out that if a discussion took place about the various methods in use to achieve equal rights, then the NAACP should have been invited to participate. Before sending the response, Wilkins asked James Farmer for his thoughts. Farmer agreed with Wilkins’ points but said he had an impression that Kelly Alexander and other North Carolina leaders had been invited but had chosen to boycott the event.⁴⁸ If that was the case, it was yet another example of the suspicions among the leadership of some of the Association’s branches.

Wilkins ended his rebuke by telling Lawson “that all efforts by many groups and individuals to end segregation have not accomplished the task does not mean, necessarily, that an entirely new method must be adopted and the other ‘useless’ ones discarded.” Lawson had spent some years in India where he studied the philosophy of non-violence; an experience Wilkins suggested should make Lawson appreciate the complexity of social problems. “No one should know better that no single formula can solve the manifold troubles of a people in this modern world, even though that people rediscover and reactivate the necessary ingredients of soul strength.” Just to make his displeasure absolutely clear, he ended the letter in the tone of a disillusioned father: “Because you must know this, the tone, wording and course of your Raleigh speech are cause for as much disappointment as irritation.”

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⁴⁷ Letter, James Lawson to Roy Wilkins, May 9, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211. LOC.

⁴⁸ Memorandum, James Farmer to Roy Wilkins, undated, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261, LOC.

⁴⁹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to James Lawson, May 13, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211, LOC.

Wilkins expressed his doubts about the extent of Lawson's contrition to Benjamin Mays of Morehouse College. He believed that Lawson had been encouraged to write the letter by Martin Luther King, who was anxious not to exacerbate any tensions between the two organizations.⁵⁰ Indeed, according to King's biographer David Garrow, King had considered adding Lawson to the SCLC payroll but changed his mind for fear of alienating Wilkins.⁵¹ King was also keen to distance himself from any criticism of the NAACP in an interview on television the day after Lawson's speech.⁵² Nevertheless, as Wilkins told May, he was frustrated at the attacks from those he thought should have been allies: "We just don't believe that other people have to get ahead by kicking the NAACP in the teeth and our people are getting pretty tired of acting like a good-natured St Bernard dog while other people snap at us and disseminate sentiment that washes away our public support as we remain dignified, cooperative and calm."⁵³

Throughout its history, the NAACP had been quick to respond when its position was threatened, but it had never faced the kind of challenge that direct action now posed to its fundamental philosophy. With the arrival of SNCC and the SCLC, and the ever-increasing popularity of King, Wilkins sought opinions from his senior staff on how to revise the Association's strategy to accommodate these changing circumstances. As the students clearly had momentum on their side, the NAACP rapidly expanded its youth organization as a response to calls to accelerate the pace of change. Henry Lee Moon, Gloster Current and Herbert Wright all urged Wilkins to call an emergency conference on youth and civil rights that would give the Association the lead in organizing and coordinating tactics nationally. With some foresight, Wright warned Wilkins that "if the Association does not act immediately to sponsor it, I am afraid that we may be out-maneuvered by some other

⁵⁰ Memorandum, John M Brooks to Roy Wilkins, April 20, 1960; Letter, James Lawson to Roy Wilkins, May 9, 1960; Letter, Roy Wilkins to James Lawson, May 13 1960; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Dr Benjamin Mays, May 19, 1960. All documents from NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211, LOC; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 134.

⁵¹ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 134.

⁵² Transcript, *Meet the Press*, April 17, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211, LOC.

⁵³ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Dr Benjamin Mays, May 19, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, A211, LOC.

organizations.”⁵⁴

Wright’s warning came almost too late. The sit-in protests were stark evidence of how much ground the NAACP was losing to younger groups who had contended that the legal gains made by the NAACP were reaping almost no benefits in the South. The acceleration of protest activity also highlighted the strains in the Association’s relationships with its own branches. According to Aldon Morris, the NAACP, with its extensive branch network and organizational structure “served as a vital resource for the mass movements.”⁵⁵ Many of the SCLC founders were also members of the NAACP and the Association provided financial and legal support for many SCLC and SNCC members arrested in various protests.⁵⁶ However, the tensions between the groups escalated as they began to cross into one another’s territory. The NAACP maintained its hold on litigation and lobbying in large part because the other groups had neither the resources nor the appetite to make full use of those tactics. However, if the Association were to maintain its position as the primary civil rights group, it would have to become increasingly involved in the kind of grassroots activity practiced by the newer organizations.

An article published in *Harpers* magazine in June 1960, by Louis Lomax, encapsulated the dissatisfaction of young blacks. The article was potentially far more damaging than the criticism directed at Wilkins by James Hicks in 1958 and Lawson in 1960 because *Harpers* readership very likely included whites who either were existing or potential NAACP supporters. In his article Lomax warned black leaders that a new philosophy was at work among the mass of black Americans: “The demonstrators have shifted the desegregation battle from the courtroom to the market place, and have shifted the main issue to one of individual dignity, rather than civil rights.”⁵⁷ As the NAACP was at the forefront of the battle for civil rights, Lomax reserved much of his criticism for the Association and its leaders. He

⁵⁴ Memorandum, Henry Lee Moon to Roy Wilkins, April 18, 1960; Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, April 18, 1960; NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A211, LOC. Memorandum, Herbert Wright to Roy Wilkins, March 3, 1960, Papers of the NAACP, Supplement to Part 17: Reel 10, Microfilm. UCL.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 120.

⁵⁶ Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 120.

⁵⁷ Louis E Lomax, ‘The Negro Revolt’, *Harpers*, June 1960, Vol. 221, No.1323, 42.

acknowledged that the Association had moved swiftly to support the sit-in students, but contended that it did so only in the face of a potential revolt from its southern members. More importantly, Lomax argued that the NAACP's move to support the protests was an indication that the power now lay with black communities, not with a small group of individual leaders.⁵⁸

Ultimately, Lomax's thesis was that the philosophy of non-violence and its capacity to make "integration an article of faith" inspired the vast majority of black Americans in a way that voting rights and desegregated education did not.⁵⁹ By confronting white racism publicly, with dignity and without visible fear, these young protestors had proved to blacks — particularly those in the South who had lived their entire lives in dread of white violence that desegregation did not necessarily require lawsuits or legislation. More than that, the boycotts and sit-ins brought about improvements in those areas that inflicted daily indignities, such as segregated buses and lunch counters. Lomax accused the black leaders of complacency and elitism and criticized Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph and King for bowing to pressure from the white power structure, neglecting the demands of their constituencies.⁶⁰

Following Lawson's criticisms, Lomax's comments were doubly wounding. As usual, Henry Lee Moon defended the Association, and Wilkins also published a reply. Moon dismissed much of Lomax's article as poorly researched and little more than personal opinion. He was particularly damning about Lomax's assertion that Wilkins and King were overly concerned with the 'talented Negro' and the white power structure. "In this neat package Negroes are divided into betrayed masses and betraying classes and the latter further damned as the financed puppets of white liberals."⁶¹ Moon pointed out that the vast majority of the NAACP's funding came from black membership, and, in a rather more obscure defense, pointed to conference resolutions on police brutality, slum housing, and union and job discrimination as evidence that the Association represented the interest of the masses. Moon's final rebuttal concerned Lomax's assertion that the sit-ins were a

⁵⁸ Lomax, 'The Negro Revolt', 43.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 46-47.

⁶¹ Letter, Henry Lee Moon to *Harpers*, August, 1960, 22:1323: 6

repudiation of the NAACP by citing the Wichita and Oklahoma City protests, and the awards given to the demonstrators by the Association, as evidence that the NAACP recognized the importance of the sit-in as a protest technique.⁶²

Lomax expanded his thesis into a book in which he elaborated his criticisms of the NAACP.⁶³ However, as August Meier pointed out in his review of the book, the NAACP had responded swiftly to the sit-in protests by expanding its youth activities, with four student protest leaders to coordinate and organize new youth councils throughout the South.⁶⁴ To refute Lomax's statement that the NAACP was not interested in engaging the masses, Meier cited the work of Herbert Hill, its labor secretary, who had done much work in opening up new employment opportunities for blacks by expanding the remit of fighting employment discrimination beyond that of individual redress.⁶⁵ Meier also pointed out that, contrary to Lomax's contention that the NAACP's leadership was out of touch with its branches, it was not uncommon for local branch leaders to be out of step with their own membership.⁶⁶

An unexpected benefit of the sit-in protests was that it brought the NAACP new members. However, many of those members were keen advocates of non-violent direction action.⁶⁷ While Wilkins, as executive secretary, was ultimately responsible for the direction of the Association's strategy, the implementation depended to a large extent on the activism of local branches. In Georgia cities such as Savannah, Macon and Brunswick, the national office devolved responsibility to local NAACP branches that had begun a campaign of successful direct action protest.⁶⁸ In Savannah, for example, members of the local youth branch instigated sit-in protests

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Louis Lomax, *The Negro Revolt*. 1962. Reprint (New York: Signet Books, 1964), 105.

⁶⁴ Annual Report, Report by the NAACP's Branch Department, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box C219. LOC.

⁶⁵ August Meier, "The Revolution Against the NAACP: A Critical Appraisal of Louis E Lomax's *The Negro Revolt*," *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol.32, No.2 (Spring, 1963), 149; Memorandum, Herbert Hill to John Morsell, March 21, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A310. LOC.

⁶⁶ Meier, "The Revolution Against the NAACP," 146-152.

⁶⁷ An increase of 46,412 members to 388,347 was reported in the NAACP's annual report of 1960. Annual Report, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I14. LOC.

⁶⁸ Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia 1940-1980*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 155.

with the support of NAACP leaders in the city, and expanded direct action tactics into ‘wade-ins’ — an attempt to desegregate public beaches — and economic boycotts.⁶⁹

Boycotts proved to be particularly effective in Savannah. The city’s NAACP branch asked blacks in the community to stay away from shops in the main shopping areas and to refrain from making any Easter purchases from stores that operated discriminatory policies. Easter was traditionally the time to buy new items of clothing; withholding patronage was likely to have a significant impact on the local economy. In fact, one historian estimates that city merchants lost over \$1 million during the first month of the campaign.⁷⁰ A statement was issued to all merchants in the city warning them of the campaign and laying out a set of demands, including desegregation of lunch counters, job opportunities, courtesy titles and the withdrawal of charges against youth members who had been arrested during the sit-ins.⁷¹ There was clearly a great deal of enthusiasm for the protest. Meetings were held weekly once the demonstrations began in March 1960. By April no church was big enough to accommodate the meetings. According to NAACP staffer, John Brooks, a meeting that took place shortly after the protests began had to be moved to a bigger auditorium to accommodate the crowd.⁷²

In other areas of the South however, the story was much bleaker. Rifts developed between branch officials, who were often more conservative and cautious than their national counterparts, and members who were keen to play their part in the civil rights struggle. In New Orleans, for example, local NAACP leaders hesitatingly undertook boycotts and picketing but refused to initiate sit-ins. Frustrated by this tenuous approach, the local youth branch began to work with CORE and other groups, to the fury of Wilkins. However, Wilkins was even more furious with the local leadership, and subjected Arthur Chapital, the branch president, to an

⁶⁹ NAACP Annual Report, 1960/ NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I14. LOC.

⁷⁰ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 134; Flyer, Don’t Buy Anything For Easter, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A227. LOC; Flyer, A Message for Freedom-Loving Americans, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A227. LOC.

⁷¹ Memorandum, Savannah, GA NAACP branch to All Business Firms of Savannah and Chatham County, April 13, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A227, LOC.

⁷² Report, Response to Wilkins’ Memorandum of March 16 from Savannah, Georgia, April 4, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A289, LOC; Memorandum. John Brooks to Roy Wilkins, April 5, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A266. LOC; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 134-135.

extraordinary reprimand for being too cautious and not encouraging the activist demands of younger members thereby forcing them into alliances with other groups. "The organizations that you are going out of your way to help has members who are busy creating the impression that your Association is no good and they are spreading this so well that some people who usually give money to us are not doing so."⁷³ Chapital earned a further rebuke from Wilkins when he tried to explain that the New Orleans branch had decided not to stage sit-ins following legal advice: "If NAACP branches, composed of cautious adults, and if NAACP local legal advisors, conservative and anxious to maintain a local reputation, are going to hold our branches back in the face of the demands of the times, then we will see other groups stepping in and taking over while the NAACP dies a slow death...While you are 'holding back' CORE and other groups are coming forward and picking up the energy, imagination and daring among our young people that we are carelessly throwing to one side."⁷⁴

Other members of the national staff were equally concerned about the Association's program and the speed with which circumstances were changing. Addressing a staff conference the year before the sit-ins began, Gloster Current had warned that a new generation of impatient activists were likely to force the organization to change — he asked whether the NAACP was "too complacent as an organization and as a staff."⁷⁵ The answer appears to be that the Association, or at least its leadership, was afflicted less by complacency — its frequent bouts of introspective analysis were not the mark of a complacent organization — but more by the bewilderment felt by any established group caught in a wave of changing circumstances.

These episodes suggest a contrary response to the charges of hesitancy and obfuscation often leveled at Wilkins. Along with many of his senior staff, he felt that the legal and lobbying tactics the Association had long used would prove most effective in the long run, and that it would be a strategic error to abandon its established set of tactics in favor of the more dramatic devices of newer groups.

⁷³ Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 282.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* 283

⁷⁵ Remarks by Gloster Current to Staff Conference, January 2, 1959, NAACP papers, Box A310, LOC.

Given the NAACP's organizational complexity, Wilkins' change of heart about the effectiveness of boycotts, and the speed with which he urged members to support this form of protest, was surprising. Wilkins often said that his hesitation about the use of the boycott as a protest tool was that, as a minority group, black Americans did not have the economic weight to make a boycott effective. The sit-in protests clearly changed his mind to some degree. His instructions to branches in his March 16 memorandum, which explained the Association's strategy of nationwide economic boycotts, indicates one of the NAACP's strength, that of a national organization that could bring pressure to bear from Chicago to Chattanooga. In April he reported to branches that the boycott of Woolworth stores, for example, could result in a decline of sales worth about \$40 million based on 1959 sales figures.⁷⁶ A figure impressive enough to convince even Wilkins that large-scale economic boycotts could be an effective use of the NAACP's resources.

As well as encouraging a review of its strategy and program, the sit-ins had a dramatic effect on the NAACP's finances. The Association had committed itself to supporting protestors with legal help and bail money at the same time that other groups were competing for funds. In Memphis, Durham and all of South Carolina, for example, the Association paid bail and other legal fees, which, in the case of Memphis totaled \$4,400, most of which came from the branch's own funds.⁷⁷ Wilkins sent out an urgent call to branch officers in April 1960 asking branches to increase their memberships: "If your branch had 500 members in 1959, get at least 600 in 1960." Citing the sit-in protests as a spur to activity he added, "Don't let our young people down. They are supplying the courage; let us supply everything needed to keep that courage working."⁷⁸

Unfortunately, by June 1961 memberships had fallen by almost twenty thousand compared with the previous year, and the Association faced a budget deficit of \$500,000. The rise in protest activity also demanded more resources: telephone and telegraph bills, for example, stood at \$16,000 for the first half of the year rather than

⁷⁶ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Branch Officers, April, 1960. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 24. LOC

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to NAACP branch offices, April, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part 21, Reel 22, Microfilm. UCL.

the \$10,000 that had been budgeted.⁷⁹ Wilkins painted a bleak picture of the situation at a staff conference in July 1961: "The next six months are bad months.... Contributions cannot only be in the form of inspiration, it has to be in the form of cash." When asked how much of this information could be passed on to members, Wilkins suggested telling them that they had failed to meet their goals, but added that the full picture should not be revealed: "if you tell them that, they will say it's hopeless to give to the Association."⁸⁰

Lucille Black, who held the unfortunate position of membership secretary, reported that there were strong regional variations, with branches in San Francisco, Los Angeles and North Carolina in particular need of help in making up the shortfall of members. Gloster Current mentioned Los Angeles as an "entry point" for SCLC, who he claimed was raising large amounts of money at mass meetings.⁸¹ The mention of SCLC sparked a bitter tirade from Clarence Mitchell who bemoaned its very existence. "It is a great tragedy that there was started such an organization as SCLC. It is simply a haven for disgruntled NAACP people." Part of the NAACP's problem was that many of its local activities were conducted in coordination with other groups such as SCLC, thus adding to the impression that the Association was not involved in its own direct action protests. One of Mitchell's proposals was to better publicize the work of regional leaders such as Medgar Evers, who had the almost impossible task of implementing the NAACP's program in Mississippi. "The best way for us to carry on our work is to show that our program is so dynamic in the things we believe in and work for, and that we promote our own people. People need to know that our staff workers, Medgar Evers for example, do not have to have cameras around them when they do outstanding deeds."⁸²

The presidential campaign of 1960 had offered Wilkins an unlikely respite, since politics allowed him to operate on more certain ground. At the NAACP's annual convention in St Paul, Minnesota, he expressed the anger felt by black Americans at

⁷⁹ Minutes, NAACP staff conference July 18-19, 1961, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A310, LOC.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ The Western Christian Leadership Conference had been established on the West Coast purely as a fundraising operation.

⁸² Ibid.

the lack of executive support for the desegregation process. He challenged both the Republican and Democratic parties to adopt effective civil rights planks in their election platforms. "Federal responsibility in this area has been obscured in the past six years by a succession of incredible and inept pronouncements on the executive level of government, as well as by a mean and ruthless campaign by the Know-Nothings on the local, state and Congressional levels," he told delegates. Proffering the growing importance of the black vote as a carrot, he warned the parties that "Equivocation by party leaders, Democratic or Republican, on the civil rights issue will insure equivocation of Negro voters in the choosing of party designees in the November election."⁸³

Wilkins made it clear that neither the main political parties nor any of the presidential candidates could take black support for granted. The NAACP estimated that around five million blacks were registered to vote but had the potential to tip the balance either way in crucial congressional districts in twelve states so each of the candidates needed to court the black community.⁸⁴ Of the potential candidates, Wilkins knew Kennedy and Johnson from the 1957 battle for the Civil Rights Act. Nixon was a familiar figure thanks to his role as vice president in the Eisenhower administration. He had little, if any, contact with Henry Cabot Lodge, Nixon's running mate. He was ambivalent about each of them; the best endorsement Wilkins was prepared to give Kennedy was to say he was "helpful" to the Association.

Although Kennedy's voting record, according to the NAACP's congressional report card on the candidates, showed that the Massachusetts senator had voted in favor of civil rights motions more often than not, he had "strayed off the reservation" on a part of the 1960 civil rights bill.⁸⁵ Worse, Kennedy had voted with Johnson in the contentious Part III portion of the 1957 civil rights bill, the jury trial amendment. Wilkins found this difficult to forgive or forget. He later wrote that Kennedy's actions for more than a year "strained relations with us at the NAACP, though he

⁸³ Farnsworth Fowle, 'NAACP Warns Two Conventions' *New York Times*, June 27, 1960.

⁸⁴ NAACP Factsheet on Negro Registration and Voting, Undated. Presidential Campaign of 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A246. LOC.

⁸⁵ Congressional Civil Rights Record of Presidential Candidates, June 10, 1960. Produced by the Washington Bureau of the NAACP. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A7, LOC.

did his best to smooth things over." That bland comment, tempered by hindsight, fails to indicate quite how difficult relations were between Kennedy and the Association.⁸⁶

Wilkins impatience with Kennedy became public in the spring of 1958 during a speech he gave in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Although no transcript of the speech appears to be available, the terse exchange that followed between Wilkins and Kennedy indicate the flavor of his attacks on the senator. Wilkins attacked Kennedy on two fronts: the senator's support of the Jury Trial Amendment, and his "fraternization" with southern congressmen. Clearly annoyed, Kennedy pointed out his support of Title III and the 1957 bill, and the proposed changes to Rule 22 as evidence of his consistent support for on civil rights. Wilkins replied that no senator outside of the South should have voted against Parts III and IV of the Act. He also pointed out that although black voters were pragmatic enough to realize the political imperative in keeping southern support, the fact that Kennedy had been "hailed by the Dixiecrat leaders of South Carolina, Georgia and Mississippi, which, with Alabama, are the 'worst' states on the Negro question," disturbed the black electorate. He warned Kennedy that there was some significant political capital at risk. Wilkins suggested that the black voter was not as predictable as some assumed; if the Deep South remained intransigent on race issues then "the mood of many of them (valuable marginal ones) may be estimated with some accuracy."⁸⁷

Kennedy was as tenacious as Wilkins in making his points. He pursued the subject of his voting record on civil rights in subsequent letters arguing finally that, as he expected to be "in and around Washington for a long time, and I know you and Clarence Mitchell do also. I think you would agree that it would be most unfortunate if an 'iron curtain' of misunderstanding were to be erected between our two offices." He suggested that he and Wilkins meet in Washington to try and resolve the matter.⁸⁸ Kennedy's aides attempted to repair the breach, particularly as his support among black voters began to decline sharply. However, the tension became even more pronounced when Kennedy accused Mitchell of being a "close

⁸⁶ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 273.

⁸⁷ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Senator Kennedy, May 29, 1958, NAACP papers, Part III, A174, LOC.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

associate" of Nixon, which Kennedy suggested, led to the Washington bureau chief being "quite outspoken" against the Senator at the NAACP convention in Cleveland.⁸⁹

In an attempt to restore good relations with the NAACP and help improve his standing among black voters, Kennedy made overtures to local black politicians in Massachusetts, members of the black press, and to Kivie Kaplan, a member of the NAACP's board and constituent of Kennedy in Boston. The peace campaign worked. Wilkins was persuaded to issue a letter praising Kennedy's record which, although a lukewarm endorsement, did state that his record "taken as a whole, and including his forthright and repeated support of the Supreme Court decision of May 17, 1954...must be regarded...as one of the best voting records on civil rights and related issues of any Senator in the Congress."⁹⁰ Although this public rapprochement appeared to heal the breach between the two men, Kennedy was left in no doubt about the delicate political path he would have to tread to secure the support of both black voters and the South.

Wilkins was rarely placated easily. His long memory for slights meant that his good opinion once lost was hard to restore. He refused Kennedy's invitation to meet and discuss the issue, claiming pressure of work. Moreover, at a press conference prior to the opening of the Association's annual convention, Wilkins praised Nixon's "good record on civil rights." He suggested that the vice president was responsible for "prodding" the Eisenhower administration into action on the matter of discrimination in government contracts and speculated that Nixon had "done something behind the scenes" to ensure passage of the 1960 Civil Rights Act.⁹¹ The timing of the comments was clearly intended to remind all the candidates, and Kennedy in particular, that the black vote – or the good favor of the NAACP – should not be taken for granted. Wilkins attacked Kennedy again in his address to the NAACP's annual convention that summer, further incurring the fury of the

⁸⁹ Letter, Senator Kennedy to Roy Wilkins, July 18, 1958, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A174, LOC

⁹⁰ Mark Stern, *Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson & Civil Rights* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 19-20; Nick Bryant, *The Bystander: John F Kennedy and the Struggle for Black Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 111.

⁹¹ Farnsworth Fowle, "Wilkins Praises Nixon on Rights," *New York Times*, June 21 1960.

candidate, who responded with a claim that he was being victimized and accused Wilkins of treating his Republican counterpart more leniently.⁹²

If Kennedy had to struggle to gain Wilkins' good opinion, Johnson had an even tougher battle. While Johnson was still lobbying for the presidential nomination, Wilkins was reported as saying: "I think fewer colored people would vote for Johnson than for any other candidate" that, as a Texan, Johnson had "a heavy cross to bear, regardless of personality and abilities," in winning black approval.⁹³ John Morsell went further, stating that "Senator Johnson cannot be counted on to support any legislation which he feels would be genuinely offensive to the southern delegation in the Senate." Given Johnson's record of opposition to the reform of Rule 22, Morsell added: "there is no way in which the NAACP could support Senator Johnson even if our constitution allowed us to express partisan preferences."⁹⁴ Wilkins made a swift political reversal however when Johnson was named the vice presidential candidate. Although Johnson's nomination dismayed most blacks, he decided to give him the benefit of the doubt. "He doesn't have any personal prejudices," said Wilkins, and "may not do as much as I would wish, but he'll get something done, just as he got through a civil rights bill."⁹⁵

Wilkins and Johnson had collaborated to some degree during the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, and Wilkins viewed the Senate leader as self-interested and pragmatic, although with a more altruistic motivation than Wilkins' public comments initially suggested. In an oral history interview with the LBJ Library in 1969, Wilkins said he believed that Johnson's preoccupation with remaining in office was driven in part by his conviction that he could do more good in office than out: "although he never expressed it in so many words [he believed] that it would be better for him to be re-elected from Texas and be Majority Leader than it would be for him to come out flatly for civil rights, be defeated in Texas, and thus

⁹² Bryant, *The Bystander*, 90; Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 18-21.

⁹³ Farnsworth Fowle, "NAACP Praises Nixon, Others," *New York Times*, June 21, 1960.

⁹⁴ Letter, John Morsell to Dr Winfield S Morgan, July 12, 1960, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A246, LOC.

⁹⁵ "Johnson 'Doer' Wilkins Agrees," *Times Picayune*, July 19, 1960; Clayton Knowles, "Wilkins Defends Plank on Rights," *New York Times*, July 18, 1960.

not be in a position of influence at all."⁹⁶ Ever pragmatic, Wilkins knew Johnson as a shrewd politician who could provide Kennedy with the legislative experience the Massachusetts senator lacked. He was therefore worth a gamble.

Wilkins also weighed the political consequences of Johnson's nomination for the Republican party, arguing that the presence of Johnson pushed the opposition to propose a stronger civil rights plank than it would ordinarily have put forward.⁹⁷ In his capacity as chairman of the LCCR, Wilkins appeared before both platform committees to make the case for action on civil rights legislation. Comparing the speed with which former African colonies had achieved independence with the pedestrian pace of desegregation in the United States, Wilkins denied that the civil rights movement was pushing desegregation too quickly, telling the platform committee of the Democratic National Convention:

In these days of conferences on freedom and on dates of independence around tables in London, Brussels and Paris our movement here has fallen prey to those who speak of 'not in my lifetime,' or 'not in the foreseeable future,' or 'not for a hundred years,' or 'never.' If this be thought extremism, then consider that a formal sober proposal to comply with a 1954 Supreme Court school desegregation decision by 1973 has been made by the city of Dallas, Texas!⁹⁸

The LCCR also provided much of the background information for the platform committees, and its witnesses received more time than other individuals and organizations appearing before the committees. Wilkins was rewarded with planks "far ahead of those chosen four years ago," in fact he described the proposed policies as the "best planks on civil rights in the history of either party," even if that standard was particularly low.⁹⁹ Aronson considered the fact that the platforms

⁹⁶ Transcript, Roy Wilkins, Interview I by Thomas H Baker, April 1, 1969, Oral history transcript, internet Copy, LBJL.

⁹⁷ Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 31.

⁹⁸ Statement of Roy Wilkins before the Platform Committee of the Democratic National Convention, Los Angeles, California, July 7, 1960. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A246, LOC; Wilkins gave an almost identical statement to the Republican Platform Committee.

⁹⁹ "Wilkins Praises Planks on Rights," *New York Times*, July 28 1960; Letter, Roy Wilkins to A.C. Tompkins, August 18, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A246. LOC; Press Release,

were very similar to the LCCR's own proposals as conclusive evidence of the organization's effectiveness.¹⁰⁰ Both platforms contained provisions on voting rights, education, open housing and commitments to remove legislative roadblocks that had historically been impediments to passing effective civil rights legislation. Wilkins also took heart from the debates about the proposals: "The interest, attention and controversy surrounding the discussion of the civil rights plank . . . indicate clearly that civil rights can no longer be regarded as a narrow issue of concern to minority groups alone."¹⁰¹

Although both platforms received Wilkins' approval, he felt that the Democratic program "went all out" by being more specific than the Republicans. The Democratic manifesto called on all branches of government to take responsibility for ensuring equal rights. As part of that goal, the platform listed the elimination of discriminatory barriers to voter registration, the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC), a permanent Civil Rights Commission, an end to discrimination in federal housing programs, and powers for the attorney general that were first outlined in the contentious Part III of the 1957 civil rights bill. The most dramatic proposal was a call for a detailed plan, to be submitted by every school district, for "first step compliance" with the school desegregation ruling by 1963.¹⁰² The fact that this provision remained in the plank, despite protests from the southern wing of the party, must have been one of the clearest signals so far of the changing times.

The Republicans countered with a plank that promised to prohibit housing discrimination, establish a commission on equal job opportunities, stipulate that six high school grades should constitute qualification enough to vote, authorize the

Roy Wilkins, *The Civil Rights Planks Compared*, July 28, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A31. LOC; Statement, Roy Wilkins, *Statement on the Civil Rights Plank*, July 12, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A246, LOC; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Carter Wesley, September 8, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A246, LOC.

¹⁰⁰ Memorandum, Arnold Aronson, Secretary of the LCCR, to Cooperating Organizations, August 5, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A246. LOC.

¹⁰¹ Press Release, "Roy Wilkins, *The Civil Rights Planks Compared*," July 28, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A31. LOC.

¹⁰² Bryant, *The Bystander*, 144-45; Democratic Party Platform of 1960. The American Presidency Project: <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/showplatforms.php?platindex=D1960>; William M. Blair, "Strongest Plank on Rights Voted Over Threat of Fight," July 12, 1960, *New York Times*.

Attorney General to file civil injunction suits in school desegregation cases, and remove discrimination in federal facilities or procedures. However, the plan rejected a target date for school desegregation plans arguing that recalcitrant school districts would simply view a target as an excuse for further delay until 1963. The most important difference in the Republican plank was a promise to attempt to change the filibuster rule, Rule 22.¹⁰³

Long and bitter experience, however, had shown that glittering promises could quickly turn to dust, and he spelled out why neither party could be trusted on civil rights: "The Democrats are handicapped by their southern wing. The Republicans are handicapped by their conservative wing, largely from the Middle West. Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota each have two Republican Senators and these eight men vote against civil rights nine times out of ten. Add to these one Republican Senator from Indiana, one from Maryland and two from New Hampshire who also vote against civil rights most of the time and you can see that our problem is not limited to one party."¹⁰⁴ Nixon's political alliances also gave Wilkins cause for concern. In a letter to Texas newspaper proprietor Carter Wesley, Wilkins expressed his reservations about the effect such allegiances could have on civil rights progress. "I am a bit frightened of the forces lining up behind Nixon and the way in which someone among his followers is manipulating the religious issue. If Nixon should be put in a by a coalition of northern and southern conservatives, with the latter including both Negro-haters and Catholic-haters, then we can expect little on civil rights. Alongside these forces, Lyndon is indeed a shining liberal!"¹⁰⁵

Both Nixon and Kennedy continued to make overtures to the black constituency.¹⁰⁶ However, Kennedy's command of the black vote was assured by one tactically astute, and wholly fortuitous, act. A month before the election, Martin Luther King was arrested during a sit-in in Atlanta on a charge of trespass. He was quickly

¹⁰³ Text of Republican Planks on Civil Rights, Defense and Education and Conclusion to the Platform, American Presidency Project <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25839>; William M. Blair, "Firm Rights Plank Offered by Nixon," July 22, 1960, *New York Times*.

¹⁰⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to A.C. Tompkins, August 18, 1960, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A246, LOC.

¹⁰⁵ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Carter Wesley, September 8, 1960, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A246, LOC.

¹⁰⁶ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 161.

released, and promptly re-arrested for the violation of a suspended sentence following his arrest two months earlier for driving without a Georgia license plate. For this apparently egregious act, King was sentenced to four months hard labor. King's wife, Coretta appealed to Harris Wofford, a Kennedy aide, for help. Wofford persuaded Kennedy to make a brief phone call to Mrs. King to offer his sympathy. Although the call lasted only about two minutes it had a galvanizing effect on black opinion and stood in stark contrast to Nixon's refusal to get involved in the issue. The following day Kennedy's brother, Robert, called Judge Mitchell, who had sentenced King, at the suggestion of Georgia governor Ernest Vandiver who worked behind the scenes to pave the way to King's release. Kennedy spoke "simply as a lawyer to express to the judge his belief that all defendants had a right to release on bond while they appealed." The judge had no objections and King was released on bail the following day. With those two telephone calls, Wilkins reported, black voters were "won over in droves."¹⁰⁷

When the ballots were counted, Kennedy became president with a winning margin of less than one per cent of the popular vote. The NAACP was quick to attribute a portion of that victory to the strength of the black vote. In its own analysis, based on spot checks conducted nationally, it found that black voters gave four and five-to-one majorities to Kennedy, proving, that black support "was the essential difference between defeat and victory."¹⁰⁸ Black voters were particularly influential in states that had a high proportion of Electoral College votes, including Illinois, Michigan, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, where the final outcome was especially close. All these states had voted for Eisenhower in the 1956 election. In the South the margin of victory was overwhelmingly on Kennedy's side in Louisiana and Georgia. The race was closer in Texas, North Carolina and South Carolina but black

¹⁰⁷ Jack Bass, *Unlikely Heroes: A Vivid Account of the Implementation of the Brown Decision in the South* by Southern Federal Judges Committed to the Rule of Law (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1990) 116; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 185; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 147; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 75, Address, Roy Wilkins to Newark, N.J. NAACP branch, November 2, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A304, LOC; Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 279; Anthony Lewis, *Portrait of a Decade* (New York: Random House, 1964) 115-116; Clifford Kuhn, "There's a Footnote to History!" *Memory and the History of Martin Luther King's October 1960 Arrest and its Aftermath*, *The Journal of American History*, 84:2 (September 1997): 590. The full and complex story of the political machinations that lay behind Robert Kennedy's telephone call to Judge Mitchell is fully examined in Kuhn, 583-595.

¹⁰⁸ Annual Report, NAACP Annual Report for 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I14. LOC.

votes helped to carry these states for Kennedy.¹⁰⁹

In January 1961 Kennedy entered the White House carrying the high expectations of Wilkins. The new president's appointment of Robert Weaver, the NAACP's national board chairman, as administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency, was a signal that "the Kennedy administration intends to make an earnest executive effort to achieve democratic goals in the vital and sensitive field of housing, home financing and urban redevelopment." Wilkins also suggested that if Weaver's appointment was an early indication of the administration's intent, then "lively and exciting years are ahead."¹¹⁰ He saw "a surge of electricity run through Washington" and fully expected that the weight of black votes for the Democratic Party would mean action on civil rights.¹¹¹ The honeymoon was short-lived however: Wilkins' reservations about Kennedy surfaced as early as February 1961. "For all the good feeling and high hopes, it must be reported, in honesty, that Negro citizens are becoming a bit uneasy over the fast take-off of the Administration on other issues and the slow shaping up on civil rights."¹¹²

Kennedy's failure to support a motion to amend Rule 22, the 'filibuster' rule, in the first weeks of the new Congress signaled that the new administration was likely to follow a model of 'business as usual.' Wilkins let there be no doubt about how quickly black Americans expected action. "If the Kennedy Administration is to achieve any legislative goals, as outlined in the program, that have deadline dates attached to them, then January 1961 is the time to do it."¹¹³ The reform of the House Rules Committee by enlarging the committee by five members incurred Wilkins' wrath because the new members included a congressman from Alabama, whose

¹⁰⁹ Speech, Roy Wilkins to South Carolina State Conference of NAACP branches, November 20, 1960. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A304; Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p158; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 187; Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency, 1930-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 158; Annual Report, NAACP Annual Report for 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I14. LOC.

¹¹⁰ Report, Roy Wilkins to the 52nd Annual Membership Meeting of the NAACP, January 3, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A304. LOC.

¹¹¹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 279; Speech by Roy Wilkins to South Carolina State Conference of NAACP branches, November 20, 1960. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A304, LOC.

¹¹² Remarks, Roy Wilkins speech at the Community Brotherhood Dinner of the Stamford Interfaith Council, Stamford, CT, February 8, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A304. LOC.

¹¹³ Russell Baker, 'Kennedy Tactics Disturb Wilkins,' *New York Times*, December 29, 1960.

record was “just what an Alabaman’s record is supposed to be: 100 per cent negative,” and two “veteran obfuscators on civil rights” from Ohio and Tennessee.¹¹⁴ The composition of the committees that would review potential civil rights legislation was also condemned by Wilkins, made up as they were of many southern or border-states politicians unsympathetic to civil rights issues. Using cold war rhetoric, Wilkins attempted to prod the White House into action. “Western democratic society is under heavy attack. The United States is supposed to lead the West in preserving freedom in the world, but we find ourselves hobbled by the inequities in our own house, by our political cynicism and by our moral lapses.”¹¹⁵

Despite this public jousting, Kennedy made it clear to Wilkins in early January 1961 that he planned to use executive orders rather than congressional legislation to achieve some of the promises made in the Democratic platform.¹¹⁶ Wilkins doubted that such a strategy would achieve the desired outcome, and he suggested that if the president was committed to the idea of using executive orders then he should simply issue one sweeping order that encompassed all the issues. Rather than agreeing to this proposal, Kennedy issued a challenge to Wilkins and Arnold Aronson (who also attended the meeting) to present their ideas to Theodore Sorensen, Kennedy’s special counsel and adviser. They did so in February 1961. Among their proposals was a strong recommendation to end, once and for all, federal involvement in any program that practiced discrimination. The memorandum pointed out that various Supreme Court rulings had already outlawed discrimination in federal programs, but with indifferent success. Wilkins and Aronson argued that the president had the authority to prohibit the expenditure of federal funds where those funds would be spent in the perpetuation of discriminatory practices. “It seems clearly preferable to seek implementation through an overall order rather than through a succession of individual orders affecting different programs. The latter approach has the great disadvantage of permitting opposition to form and intensify around each successive measure.”

¹¹⁴ Speech by Roy Wilkins to the Community Brotherhood Dinner of the Stamford Interfaith Council, February 8, 1961. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A304, LOC.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Transcript, Roy Wilkins interviewed by Berl Bernhard for the John F Kennedy Library, August 13, 1964, John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library, 5; Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 280; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 206; Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 42.

Among those measures was a call for a sweeping executive order that would create a general Federal Civil Rights code, encompassing the entire executive branch, looking at the eradication of discrimination in all federal departments and agencies and their activities.

Kennedy's non-committal response angered Wilkins. He complained to Aronson, that:

Already there are grumblings, not only from Negro citizens but from independents and liberal Democrats, at the delay in indicating more than run-of-the-mill action in this area...My people are restless and many of them already are retreating to cynicism. A very active and loyal Negro Democrat wrote me a warning not to 'get out on a limb with the Kennedy Administration' and find myself and the NAACP left high and dry at non-performance time . . . As I tried to indicate yesterday, the risks are there whether the Administration does much or little: the opposition is opposed, period."¹¹⁷

His anger was evident in a letter to Theodore Sorenson, Kennedy's Special Counsel and Adviser for domestic affairs, during the early days of the administration: "Can the Kennedy New Frontier in civil rights be merely Truman or stand-still Eisenhower? Or, perhaps, the latter with, say, a toupee added for a less naked effect?"¹¹⁸

Wilkins' patience finally snapped when Kennedy's aides made it clear that the administration would not support civil rights legislation introduced by Senator Joseph Clark (D-PA) and Congressman Emanuel Celler, a liberal democrat from New York who was also chairman of the House Judiciary Committee and a friend of the NAACP, (D-NY). An incensed Wilkins publicly accused Kennedy of offering a "cactus bouquet to Negro parents and their children."¹¹⁹ He rejected the argument that Kennedy did not want to jeopardize other parts of his legislative program by

¹¹⁷ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Theodore Sorenson, February 7, 1961, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A175, LOC

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ "President's View on Rights Scored," *New York Times*, May 11, 1961.

forcing a battle on civil rights: "The record is conclusive that whether a President sponsors civil rights legislation or not, his general legislative program is subject to hatchet treatment by southerners and their allies."¹²⁰ More to the point, Wilkins pointed out, abandoning civil rights ambitions at this stage did nothing to save other parts of Kennedy's agenda. "It did not save the minimum wage bill from gutting and it will not save other legislation."¹²¹

Even so, Wilkins was prepared to give the administration more time. He was undoubtedly charmed by Kennedy and enjoyed the enhanced access to the White House — he had been told that, if a pressing issue required consultation, a meeting with the president would be arranged.¹²² But he was also pragmatic enough to know that the support of the executive branch was essential in securing any meaningful progress on civil rights. As the first hundred days of Kennedy's Camelot progressed, the president did make some gestures that in some cases were purely symbolic but in others lent the "President's personal prestige," as Wilkins put it, to the issue of civil rights. In addition to Robert Weaver, who became the first African-American to hold a cabinet post, he appointed a number of other blacks to political posts that were unrelated to race relations. He also called for a review of discrimination in federal departments and required social events at the White House to at least appear fully integrated.¹²³

Wilkins acknowledged that the issue of how to proceed with civil rights legislation was complex. He was nevertheless skeptical about the administration's intentions. He told one correspondent: "I do not believe JFK thinks that the appointments of Negroes alone will carry him through; he is much too sophisticated for that and has too many sophisticated advisers...He would hope that Negroes could be pacified with executive action by the President. The trouble is that there is a difference of opinion, which is helping to delay action. The difference of opinion is on whether one or more executive orders should be issued on this and that phase of civil rights,

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Harris Wofford, April 5, 1961. JFKL:

<http://www.jfklibrary.org/Education+and+Public+Programs/For+Students/Materials+Resources+and+Activities+for+Students/Leaders+in+the+Struggle+for+Civil+Rights/Roy+Wilkins.htm>.

¹²² Wilkins interview, JFKL.

¹²³ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 211-222.

or whether one code should be promulgated for a sweeping general order, with machinery set up to make it work."¹²⁴

Wilkins, both as the executive secretary of the NAACP and Chairman of the LCCR, was a sounding board for the administration on civil rights issues. However, Sorenson and other domestic advisors, notably Louis Martin and Harris Wofford, were well aware of the tensions and rivalries within and between the various civil rights groups, and they encouraged the president to meet with some civil rights leaders more than others. While King was rebuffed for months, leading Wofford to suggest the SCLC leader was "somewhat hurt by the long delay," Wilkins met with the president at least twice, and also attended a state dinner at the White House during the early months of Kennedy's presidency. Moreover, when proposing a meeting with an NAACP delegation prior to the Association's annual convention, Wofford suggested that such a meeting would support Wilkins' leadership and, at the same time, dispel accusations that the president was avoiding formal meetings with black leaders. Louis Martin argued that a meeting between Wilkins and the president would strengthen Wilkins' leadership "at this critical time," although it is unclear from either memorandum whether the perceived challenge to Wilkins came from within or without the Association.¹²⁵ Despite several challenges to his leadership in the 1960s, there is no evidence of any particular opposition to Wilkins within the NAACP at this time, so the challenges more likely referred to those from other civil rights groups.

Even while these discussions were taking place, however, the Kennedy administration was hit by a new wave of direct action protests. One May 4, 1961, two buses containing an inter-racial group of thirteen protestors, set out from Washington, DC with the intention of arriving in New Orleans on May 17, the anniversary of the *Brown* ruling. The protest had been planned and executed by CORE. Although CORE had been in existence since 1942 it was still a small organization without the extensive network of NAACP, the SCLC or even SNCC.

¹²⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to William T Coleman, February 28, 1961, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A175, LOC.

¹²⁵ Memorandum. Harris Wofford to Kenneth O'Donnell, October 4, 1961; Memorandum, Louis Martin to O'Connell, June 20, 1961; Memorandum, Harris Wofford to Kenneth O'Donnell, July 11, 1961; Kennedy and Civil Rights, Part 1, Reel 1, RSC.

Its credo was the use of non-violent direct action and interracial co-operation.¹²⁶ On that basis it had conducted a similar trip, a 'Journey of Reconciliation,' in 1946, following the Supreme Court's decision in *Morgan v Virginia*.¹²⁷ In that case, as with *Brown* the ruling did little to change conditions on the ground, and black travelers continued to suffer discriminatory facilities both on buses and in rest stops. A new court decision in 1960, *Boynton v Virginia*, which extended the prohibition of segregation in interstate travel to include terminal facilities, inspired CORE to resurrect the Journey for Reconciliation model to test the *Boynton* ruling.¹²⁸

Unlike the earlier protest, which only went as far south as Asheville, North Carolina, the Freedom Riders of 1961 intended to drive straight into the lion's den: the Deep South states of Georgia, Mississippi, Alabama and Louisiana. James Farmer, by this time CORE's national director, claimed that the organization did not anticipate that the rides would spark a mass response in the manner of the sit-ins. Nevertheless, the organization did expect to elicit a violent white reaction and participants prepared with orientation sessions and non-violent workshops.¹²⁹ Farmer also intended to apply the Gandhian tactic of provoking imprisonment; his contention was that if enough protestors were jailed, it would make segregation prohibitively expensive to maintain. Farmer announced his intentions at a press conference shortly before the riders left Washington that if they were arrested, they would not accept bail but stay in jail for the allotted term.¹³⁰

The riders approached NAACP branches and other organizations along the planned route to ask for help as the protestors arrived in towns and cities along the way. The requests met with varying degrees of success. The NAACP's branch leader in Greensboro, North Carolina, was an enthusiastic advocate of the Freedom Rides and welcomed the group with open arms, as did leaders in South Carolina, Tennessee and Georgia. In Richmond, Virginia, however, branch officers were less

¹²⁶ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 8.

¹²⁷ In *Morgan v Virginia*, 328 US 373 (1946) the Court's ruling was based on the commercial burden of implementing segregated facilities. Although the ruling referred to buses, it also applied to trains.

¹²⁸ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 135.

¹²⁹ Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 196-198; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 135-138; Raymond Arsenault has produced the definitive history of the Freedom Rides: *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹³⁰ Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 111; Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 109-110.

welcoming. Reverend P.B. Walker complained to Gloster Current that the rides were a “publicity stunt” that was overshadowing desegregation work already underway through the NAACP. He refused to cooperate.¹³¹

Mississippi, as ever, was a special case. Medgar Evers was concerned that the protests would conflict with the desegregation protests that the NAACP was already working on, and that they would clash with activities the Association was planning around the anniversary of *Brown*. Unlike some of the national staff, Evers was willing to cooperate with other groups on a local level. He was nevertheless careful to protect the hard-won NAACP network in the state. He stated to Gordon Carey, CORE’s field director:

We have the advantage of being a state and local based group which has been active in the field of Civil Rights in the state for nineteen years. As much as we would like to be of help, we feel that CORE’s coming into Jackson at this time on a sponsored trip for the purpose stated in your letter, will not have the effect intended and possibly hamper some of the efforts already in progress. Under the circumstances, we do not feel we can make the arrangements suggested in your letter of March 23, or cooperate with you in the arrangements for the mass meeting on the 16th...We hope that you will understand why we feel that outside groups at this time would serve the cause most effectively by unrestraining your efforts on those cities which are currently outside the NAACP area of concern.¹³²

In April a delegation of the NAACP’s Mississippi leaders met with Wilkins in New York to discuss direct action protests in the state. From that meeting “Operation Mississippi” was launched. According to Dittmer, the program “endorsed action by black students to attempt to desegregate facilities.”¹³³ Young people in several Mississippi cities had already initiated a number of direct action protests, including a sit-in by nine Tougaloo College students at the Jackson Public Library. The

¹³¹ Transcript, Telephone conversation between Rev..P.B..Walker and Gloster Current, April 18, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A199. LOC.

¹³² Letter, Medgar Evers to Gordon Carey, May 4, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A136, LOC.

¹³³ Dittmer, *Local People*, 87.

students' arrest on charges of breaching the peace and their threatened expulsion from college sparked a boycott of classes, and a protest march to the city jail. A bigger demonstration of seven hundred sympathetic students then provoked a violent response from police, which in turn mobilized older blacks to defend their youth. NAACP youth members waged various non-violent protests across Mississippi that openly and courageously defied traditional deference to socially mandated segregation. These actions failed to attract national attention, however, because, as Dittmer wryly says, "the freedom riders had come to town."¹³⁴

Wilkins was initially skeptical about the Freedom Rides. He called Farmer the night before the journey was due to start to check whether the "joy ride" was still going to take place.¹³⁵ Nevertheless, both Farmer and Wilkins recognized the importance of the other organization. Farmer knew that he would almost certainly need the NAACP's legal and financial support if the CORE protestors were jailed, and, after the success of the sit-ins, Wilkins was well aware that non-violent protests had captured the attention of the nation and demanded the Association's approval. Wilkins was content to publicly support the sit-in protestors almost from the beginning, in large part because of the protesters' connection with the Association, but the Freedom Rides had not only been organized without NAACP involvement, they had also been executed by another organization that, although significantly smaller than the NAACP, had a presence in the North (unlike SCLC) and, had the potential to attract a membership that ranged across race and age.

Yet more disturbing to Wilkins was the seemingly deliberate provocation of white violence, which he feared would antagonize a White House that was already intimidated by the southern wing in Congress. As anticipated, violence erupted as the buses entered Alabama. At Anniston, about sixty miles north of Birmingham, one of the buses was set on fire, forcing the riders to disembark into a waiting crowd of angry Klansmen that was only prevented from attacking the riders by local police. The second bus got as far as Birmingham, but was met by an armed mob that had a full fifteen minutes to attack the Freedom Riders before police intervened. In both cities, the brutality of the beatings inflicted by the mob upon the

¹³⁴ Ibid., 87-89.

¹³⁵ Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 109.

protestors shocked the nation. The local police chief, Eugene 'Bull' Connor, when asked why no policemen had been on hand when the riders arrived in the city, apparently said that most of them had been visiting their mothers, as it was Mother's Day.¹³⁶

The success of non-violent direct action depends in part on eliciting a violent response from opponents. The Birmingham police force fulfilled this role perfectly not only by its own brutal response but through its complicity with the Ku Klux Klan, which had known of the plans for the rides for some time — thanks to FBI memoranda sent to the Birmingham police department and dutifully passed on by Connor.¹³⁷ His duplicity backfired: according to Michael Klarman, the violence broadcast on national television reversed public opinion in favor of the freedom riders from sixty-four per cent of Americans disapproving the protests to approximately two-thirds of Americans in favor of desegregation of public transport following the Birmingham attacks.¹³⁸

Wilkins repeatedly assured the freedom riders of the NAACP's financial and moral support but he was also quick to emphasize that such support did not change the Association's fundamental belief in using the courts to secure equal rights. He asserted that American citizens had a right to test the constitutionality of Supreme Court rulings. Nevertheless, he insisted that "solid, basic legal moves are necessary if there is to be a foundation for other action. Affirmative action by judicial, legislative and executive means is indispensable. This is still a nation of law. If we colored people hold the white people of the South to law and the Constitution, we cannot sneer among ourselves at the law and the legal processes."¹³⁹

Wilkins may have disliked the use of the Freedom Rides as a tactic, that he admired

¹³⁶ Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 116.

¹³⁷ Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 136; Kenneth O'Reilly, "The FBI and the Civil Rights Movement during the Kennedy Years—from the Freedom Rides to Albany," *The Journal of Southern History*, 54:2 (May 1988): 209-210; George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Hodder Education, 2006), 137-145.

¹³⁸ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 432.

¹³⁹ Remarks, June 7, 1961. NAACP papers, LOC; Memorandum to branches, youth councils, college chapters and state conferences, May 25, 1961, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A136, LOC; AP wire story clarifying the position of the NAACP regarding the Freedom Rides, June 14, 1961. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A136, LOC.

Farmer's "desperately brave and reckless strategy" in using the rides to provoke the Kennedy administration as much as the southern racists.¹⁴⁰ When Farmer was sent to the notorious Parchman prison in Mississippi during the summer of 1961, Wilkins paid a surprise visit with a gift of two books – one of which was *To Kill a Mockingbird* – and a promise of help from the NAACP. Farmer later wrote to Wilkins saying that his visit, and particularly the offer of help, boosted the morale of the imprisoned group. Farmer also told Wilkins that conditions improved following Wilkins' visit, prompting him to stay in jail rather than obtain bail.¹⁴¹

Three weeks after the Freedom Rides began Wilkins issued a statement to branches, youth councils, college chapters and state conferences. The NAACP's position on the Freedom Rides was according to Wilkins "simple and clear." He reiterated the Association's belief that people had the right – and the duty – to test enforcement of the constitution as well as the right to challenge unconstitutional state laws or customs while the government was obliged to protect citizens who attempted to enjoy their constitutional rights. The statement offered an extensive repudiation of the argument that people who chose to exercise their constitutional rights were agitators or provocateurs, and an equally strong rejection of any suggestion of a moratorium on protests such as the Freedom Rides that set out to test constitutional compliance. Wilkins proposed that all NAACP student members test the principle on their journeys home from college that summer.¹⁴² The South Carolina State Youth Conference took up the instruction with enthusiasm and instructed all its youth and college units to board buses at various points throughout the state, as did student leaders in Atlanta who planned to ride as far as Jackson.¹⁴³

Beneath his support, however, there was a skepticism about some of CORE's tactics. In an address to NAACP members in Jackson, Mississippi, Wilkins questioned the efficacy of staying in jail rather than paying bail: "We do not believe

¹⁴⁰ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 283.

¹⁴¹ Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 12-14; Letter, James Farmer to Roy Wilkins, June 12, 1961, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A199, LOC.

¹⁴² Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Presidents and Advisers of NAACP College Chapters, May 26, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A136, LOC.

¹⁴³ Memorandum, Herbert Wright to Roy Wilkins and Gloster Current, June 2, 1961; Freedom Riders Find Charleston, SC a Contrast to Jackson, Miss. Unattributed newspaper article, June 16, 1961. Both NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A136. LOC.

that you can test a law and get it thrown out by staying in jail. After one spends thirty or sixty or ninety days in jail, the law is still on the statute books and still constitutes support for segregation."¹⁴⁴ Associated Press and other media organizations interpreted Wilkins' comments as a rebuke of direct action protests, prompting a hasty clarification of the NAACP's position in the press. Nevertheless, the debate about which tactic or group was most effective continued in the editorial pages of black newspapers. William Walker of the *Pittsburgh Courier* warned the Association that the dramatic revival of CORE signaled a "realignment of groups and supporters. Unless the NAACP watches out, it is liable to be relegated to the second spot of importance." The *Cleveland Call and Post*, which was generally more sympathetic both towards Wilkins and the NAACP, was more supportive and argued that for all the reckless, courageous drama of the CORE protests, the NAACP was still expected to do the "legal mopping up."¹⁴⁵

Gloster Current had drafted instructions to the NAACP youth branches on the issue of 'jail not bail' earlier in the year following the string of sit-in and other direct action protests. Current's instructions highlight the NAACP's dilemma and warrants reiteration here:

Once you have been arrested on charges of trespassing, loitering, conspiracy etc. merely because you sought service in a place of public accommodation, it is the firm belief of the NAACP that you should plead not guilty to the charges and accept bail. The only way we will be able to successfully break down the practices of segregation and discrimination and undermine the legal support of these practices through the law is by the process of having such laws and ordinances declared unconstitutional. We realize that remaining in jail has moral and ethical implications not to be discounted, yet there is a grave danger that the individual, by his failure, neglect or refusal to

¹⁴⁴ Remarks, Roy Wilkins at a mass meeting of the Jackson, Mississippi branch of the NAACP, June 7, 1961. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A136, LOC; Associated Press newswire report, Freedom Riders, Jackson, Mississippi, June 8, 1960; Jackson Arrests 9 'Freedom Riders', *New York Daily Mirror*, June 8, 1961. Both NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A136. LOC.

¹⁴⁵ Newswire report, Clarification of the NAACP's position on the Freedom Rides, June 15, 1960, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A136, LOC; William O. Walker, "CORE, A New Dimension," *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 17, 1961; "Going to Jail is Only Half the Battle," *Cleveland Call & Post*, June 17, 1961. Both articles NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A199. LOC.

fight a criminal charge levied against him and through accepting a jail sentence in lieu thereof, will defeat his main purpose and thus render ineffectual our overall legal attack upon this spiteful, vicious system.¹⁴⁶

There was a clear legal question around the NAACP's support of the kind of direct action demonstrations that had been taking place. Sit-ins and other protests did not concentrate entirely on public accommodations and therefore did, in some cases, violate trespass laws. The NAACP, as can be seen from the comments attributed to Wilkins by Associated Press and other news outlets, held to the principle, that the law should be both observed and complied with, once the Freedom Rides began. Wilkins' comments in Jackson implied that the Freedom Riders were challenging unconstitutional laws, when in fact the challenge was to the federal, and to some extent state, government to assess the extent of executive support for laws already establishing constitutional rights. As had proved to be the case so many times before, a ruling from the Supreme Court could achieve little without state and federal support. In which case, it could be argued that the Freedom Riders tested the principles of the NAACP's philosophy as much as the federal government's willingness to uphold constitutional rights.

Ironically, the Freedom Rides sparked a more perverse protest by southern segregationists. Some Citizen Councils in Louisiana organized 'Reverse Freedom Rides' in which black families were offered free one-way tickets to northern cities with the unfounded promise of jobs. Travellers were sent off with phone numbers for welfare offices, the NAACP and Urban League and left to fend for themselves when they arrived at their destinations. NAACP officials were forced to become involved first by trying to dissuade people from taking up the offer, and then providing help with housing, jobs and welfare for those who did make the journeys to Detroit, Los Angeles or New York. The Citizen Councils originally hoped to send around one thousand African-Americans out of the South through this method but only around one hundred finally made the long journey. The tactic was roundly criticized in the North, although opinion was more mixed in the South, and was provided yet another illustration, if any were needed, of the lengths segregationists

¹⁴⁶ Draft memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, February 9, 1961, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A290. LOC.

would go to preserve the *status quo*. However, one branch leader in Philadelphia laid part of the blame with the White House, saying to Wilkins: “The situation though primarily one of a publicity stunt, a ‘sick joke’, is reflective of the present administration.”¹⁴⁷

For President Kennedy the protests, and more particularly the violence of the white reaction that they provoked, were an international embarrassment.¹⁴⁸ Wilkins had warned Theodore Sorenson in February that discontent was rife at the administration’s inaction on civil rights, but little was done until the Freedom Rides forced Kennedy to pay attention.¹⁴⁹ Attorney General Robert Kennedy demanded that the Freedom Riders call off the protests. But as one of the main objectives of the rides was to push the administration into action, the group refused to give up. Wilkins met with Robert Kennedy, but the attorney general was equally determined not to commit federal troops.¹⁵⁰ Even after the violence in Anniston and Birmingham, he hesitated to provide federal protection.

The administration was finally pushed into action by a particularly brutal display of mob violence, which resulted in the savage beating of John Seigenthaler, a Justice Department official and personal friend of Robert Kennedy. The Attorney General sent in US marshals — not federal troops — to protect the riders. Wilkins hoped that the protests had begun to “bend the Administration or at least . . . convince the Administration that perhaps the policy agreed upon was not as adequate as the president had thought at the outset.”¹⁵¹ By summer’s end three hundred and sixty riders had been jailed, but the tactic almost backfired. Mississippi imposed high bail fees and CORE was soon buckling under the weight of over \$300,000 of legal costs. Despite his reservations about direct action, Thurgood Marshall, in one of his last

¹⁴⁷ Letter, Thomas Burruss, Executive Secretary of the Philadelphia branch of the NAACP, to Roy Wilkins, April 30, 1962; Memorandum, Gloster Current to Henry Lee Moon, May 3, 1962; Memorandum, Jack Wood to Roy Wilkins, May 18, 1962; Monthly Report, Branch Department, May, 1962. All NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A136. LOC.

¹⁴⁸ Dudziak, *Cold War, Civil Rights*, 159-62; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 265-266 Nicholas de B. Katzenbach, *Some of It Was Fun: Working with RFK and LBJ* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2008), 44-48.

¹⁴⁹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Theodore Sorenson, February 7, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A175. LOC.

¹⁵⁰ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 265-266; Katzenbach, 44-48; Reeves, *Profile of Power*, 132-133; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 139-140; Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 221-223.

¹⁵¹ Wilkins interview, JFKL, 10

acts as head of the Inc. Fund before joining the federal judiciary, responded generously to an appeal for funds from Farmer. "What the hell! The Inc. Fund has about \$300,000 in bail-bond money. It's not doing anything but sitting there. You might as well use it as long as it lasts."¹⁵² Wilkins had offered to contribute \$1,000 from NAACP coffers; Marshall's much bigger donation exacerbated friction between the two organizations.¹⁵³ The NAACP was also annoyed that the Inc. Fund was bypassing branches to represent students directly. There were suspicions that the Association was losing donations to the legal group.¹⁵⁴

The Association's reluctance to get involved in the protests proved to be costly in more than financial terms. John Dittmer argues that the Freedom Rides ended the NAACP's domination of civil rights activity in Mississippi.¹⁵⁵ In Louisiana, some of the NAACP's youth branches chafed at the caution of the more traditional branch leaders and found CORE's dynamism far more attractive.¹⁵⁶ The media attention paid to the Freedom Rides propelled CORE, and James Farmer, onto the national stage, adding yet another competitor to the NAACP.¹⁵⁷ Meier and Rudwick argue that the influence of the Freedom Rides upon the civil rights movement that "impossible to exaggerate." For a time, CORE, rather than the NAACP, became the first port of call for journalists looking for comments on civil rights issues.¹⁵⁸

Sharing the stage with at least three other prominent civil rights groups (SCLC, CORE and SNCC) did not help the NAACP's position. Relations between the four fluctuated between outright hostility and reluctant collaboration. Links between the NAACP and SCLC were the strongest, although also the most competitive given that the two organizations were operating within similar communities and chasing the same financial contributions. SCLC's religious base directly competed with the

¹⁵² Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 437.

¹⁵³ Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 129; Farmer suggests that Wilkins had the authority only to offer \$1000. He would have had to request board approval to send a larger amount. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 211.

¹⁵⁴ Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 292-3; Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 211.

¹⁵⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 87.

¹⁵⁶ Fairclough, *Race and Democracy*, 279.

¹⁵⁷ Walker, *Pittsburgh Courier*, June 17, 1961; "Going to Jail is Only Half the Battle," *Cleveland Call & Post*, June 17, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A199. LOC; Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 207-208; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 144.

¹⁵⁸ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 144.

NAACP's church department, created in 1947 to co-ordinate activities between churches and the NAACP. Through this network, the NAACP collected memberships and help in coordinating activities; the SCLC with its religious foundation and leadership was a direct threat to this connection.¹⁵⁹ More important, the SCLC's mass action tactics crystallized the limitations of the NAACP's appeal. Montgomery, Greensboro and the Freedom Rides were all visible demonstrations that mass action could work. The Association defended its record on activism by pointing out that its legal team and its youth chapters were playing an integral part in many of the direct action protests. It was not enough, however, and SCLC proved a magnet to students who may otherwise have joined the Association.

Although its courageous protests had pushed it into the spotlight, CORE posed less of a long-term threat to the NAACP than King's organization and so Wilkins was more forgiving of that group and its leader, James Farmer. He had a genuine respect for the CORE leader's courage and appeared envious of his apparent autonomy: Farmer's anecdote of a wistful Wilkins telling him, as he left the NAACP, that he was "going to be riding a mustang pony" while Wilkins was left "riding a dinosaur" has been often repeated.¹⁶⁰ For his part, Farmer appears to have held Wilkins in high regard, or at least respect. Wilkins invited Farmer to speak at the NAACP's annual conference that summer where the CORE leader paid a generous and effusive tribute to the historical efforts of the Association. However and presumably less to Wilkins' liking, Farmer also challenged its members: "If we fail to take advantage of our hard won rights, then we are no less guilty than the segregationists in the perpetuation of the injustice."¹⁶¹

Despite Farmer's conciliatory remarks, some top NAACP officials disliked and distrusted CORE. Even before the Freedom Rides revived CORE, Gloster Current dismissed the organization's tactics and questioned its motives. He told Wilkins of increasing friction in one Kentucky town where the NAACP and CORE appeared to be competing for attentions of the black community." Current's suggestion at that time was to consider, very carefully, whether the Association could and should

¹⁵⁹ Morris, *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, 122.

¹⁶⁰ Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart*, 195.

¹⁶¹ Remarks, James Farmer to the NAACP 52nd Annual Convention, Philadelphia, PA, July 11, 1960. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A13. LOC.

cooperate with the organization.¹⁶² Current may not have been alone in his suspicion of the group. One unnamed “NAACP leader” went so far as to describe CORE as “a bunch of loonybirds and crackpots” in *Time* magazine.¹⁶³

The problem of competition grew worse once the Freedom Rides brought an influx of activists into the South. In Richmond, for example, the president of the local branch complained to Current that CORE and the NAACP often had the same members, who competed to raise funds for the organizations separately. She also complained that some of CORE’s tactics were damaging projects that the NAACP was implementing.¹⁶⁴ Documents in the NAACP archives suggest that there was some confusion in the mind of the public about CORE’s relationship to the NAACP. The national office received numerous requests for CORE literature, help in setting up a CORE chapter and offers for donations to CORE. Recognition was a problem for all of the groups. Protests such as the sit-ins were rarely conducted under obvious signs that they were a CORE or SCLC or NAACP demonstration. It was therefore difficult for the general public to distinguish one group from another.

Public recognition was therefore vitally important in maintaining a healthy flow of funds. The lack of recognition, particularly by the press, of the NAACP’s local protests, was a constant source of frustration for Wilkins and his colleagues. Although the Association remained the largest and most powerful civil rights organization, it was now overshadowed by the charisma of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and by the activism of CORE and SNCC. The media played a part in both helping and hindering the NAACP’s cause. Television had become a staple part of American life during the 1950s and the most vicious battles in Montgomery, Jackson and other southern cities were captured on film and shown on the nightly news both domestically and abroad. The images were clear evidence that, contrary to some accusations that black students had instigated the violence, the protestors faced brutality from white mobs and the police with non-violence. Much to

¹⁶² Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, May 16, 1960. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A289, LOC.

¹⁶³ “Confused Crusade,” *Time*, January 12, 1962.

¹⁶⁴ Letter, Helen Phelps to Gloster Current, October 4, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A199, LOC.

Wilkins' fury, the same cameras that made heroes out of King and the student groups made little reference to the NAACP, reinforcing the suggestion that the Association was not playing any part in the protests.

Wilkins was right in that NAACP members frequently took part in many direct action protests and some of the more active branches, such as those in Savannah and Jackson, had organized successful demonstrations. But, his frustration with the media missed this point. Even though Wilkins responded quickly to the new wave of protest action, it was exactly that – a response – rather than leading the way in developing creative programs that would inspire and attract a new army of members. Clearly, effective public relations were important: more public recognition could usually be relied upon to translate into more members and more funds. Moreover if Wilkins were to have any credibility with the White House and Congress as the black leader with which to business, he had to represent the broad spectrum of black Americans. However, since the *Brown* victory the Association had lacked a clear program. Of course, it would argue that the litigation around the implementation of the ruling was of fundamental importance, but the Inc. Fund was now carrying out that program. Securing effective civil rights legislation was also an important part of its activities, but legislation was a long process and, so far, had offered little reward for the battle. Neither litigation nor legislation lent themselves to compelling television — the battle of words in a courtroom lacking the obvious drama of a pitched battle between young protestors and the brutal Alabama police. Sending telegrams offered limited opportunities for ordinary members to get involved in changing conditions in their daily lives.

When Wilkins could criticize other organizations without appearing to suggest a rift between the groups, he did so. In an interview with a French news agency in 1962, for example, Wilkins swiftly reduced SCLC to a loose organization composed mainly of church members in the South, and CORE to a “small, trained striking force dealing with one problem in one particular manner at one time in one locality.” Black Muslims were described as a rather amorphous organization dedicated to a separatist philosophy that offered no value to the broader civil rights battle, although, Wilkins acknowledged that they were a disciplined group. SNCC did not merit a mention. When he had put the other groups in their place, he

suggested that the NAACP incorporated “all techniques, not just one technique of a march or a demonstration or a picket – we use all those also – but we use legislation, we use political action, we use the courts, we use the boycotts, we use all the things that one uses to protest and make progress in this field.”¹⁶⁵

By early summer the Freedom Rides began to dissipate, although some protests did continue into the fall. By then the Kennedy administration had finally stepped in and asked the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) to ban segregation in interstate transport. The ICC concurred. The order went into effect on November 1, thus signaling a major victory for CORE and for non-violent direct action. But despite Kennedy’s intervention with the ICC, he remained reluctant to take any strong executive action on any other civil rights issues. His hesitation presented the administration with a difficult political dilemma. It was clear that the tide of public opinion, and of events, was moving swiftly towards desegregation. The problem for Kennedy was how to support those forces and defuse the growing anger among blacks while at the same time not alienating southern democrats, whom he deemed essential to achieve his legislative goals.¹⁶⁶

Voting rights helped solve a large part of that dilemma because it was an issue that almost everyone could support. Moreover, by persuading SNCC and CORE to participate in voting registration programs rather than direct action, it temporarily rescued the administration from an increasingly embarrassing situation. To persuade the younger, more militant leaders to participate, Harris Wofford offered a stark choice: southern jails could be filled with Freedom Riders or with southern officials guilty of obstructing federally protected voting rights.¹⁶⁷ The idea was not unanimously popular. A philosophical disagreement within SNCC itself about whether to move into voter registration and away from direct action further complicated matters. Some members of CORE also questioned the necessity of moving away from direct action.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁵ Letter, Lillian Tonnaire-Taylor, Chief of Bureau for Lynx to Roy Wilkins, January 22, 1962 NAACP papers, Part III, Box A314, LOC. Lynx was a French photographic and news agency.

¹⁶⁶ Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 63.

¹⁶⁷ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 480; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 284.

¹⁶⁸ Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 83; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 175.

Nevertheless, over a period of months the Voter Education Project (VEP) took shape and was finally launched in the spring of 1962. The program brought together each of the civil rights groups, including the Urban League, and was coordinated by the Southern Regional Council (SRC), a biracial organization. Funding was provided by several liberal non-profit foundations including the Taconic Foundation, which donated the lion's share of the more than \$870,000 budget.¹⁶⁹ The funds would be distributed between the five national organizations and local projects in the South.¹⁷⁰ Robert Kennedy negotiated with the Internal Revenue Service to secure a tax-exempt status for the VEP but even when funding issues had been successfully resolved, persuading the organizations to cooperate in such a joint venture required persistent diplomacy.

The NAACP viewed the VEP with caution. While the extra VEP funds would be welcome, the NAACP was, as usual, reluctant to enter into a project that was controlled by another organization. The Association had expanded its existing voter registration program in 1957, and by 1962 had two full-time staff members, John Brooks and W.C. Patton, who worked alongside field secretaries and volunteers in communities in Tennessee, Florida, South Carolina, Georgia, Louisiana, Arkansas and Texas as well as in northern cities such as Baltimore.¹⁷¹ Wilkins asked other members of the NAACP's leadership and board of directors for their opinions and many were highly skeptical about the project's potential for success. It was hardly surprising that some of the most voluble criticism came from John Brooks who ran the NAACP's voter registration program and was particularly disdainful of other groups which, he claimed, were planning to use the additional funding to build their own organizations at the expense of the NAACP. He also suggested that Wiley Branton, a black attorney from Arkansas who had been designated to run the program, was mainly interested in using the program to further his own career.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 66; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 181; Berg and Stern cite different figures for the total budget. Stern cites a total figure of \$885,000 while Berg claims that the VEP disbursed \$870,000 between April 1961 and November 1964.

¹⁷⁰ The five organizations were the NAACP, SNCC, SCLC, CORE and the Urban League.

¹⁷¹ Memorandum, The Structure and Activities of NAACP in Voter Registration, Unattributed, and undated but the memorandum formed part of the NAACP's submission to the Taconic Foundation for a request for funding so is likely to have been composed during the latter half of 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A271. LOC.

¹⁷² Letter, John Brooks to Roy Wilkins, February 27, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A266. LOC.

John Morsell echoed some of Brooks' concerns: "Not the least of the irritations is that the only voter campaign in existence (ours) is in effect equated with the unrealized aspirations of five other groups, any one of which can exploit the vagaries of the press to its advantage and our detriment."¹⁷³ Clarence Mitchell was even more dismissive, arguing that the involvement of other groups was unnecessary and that the NAACP should simply have been offered the money directly.¹⁷⁴

There was also some question initially about Wilkins' own view of the VEP. Two meetings were scheduled to discuss proposals, but Wilkins did not attend the second gathering, citing a prior commitment an LCCR meeting in Washington; he sent Henry Lee Moon in his place. Stephen Currier, head of the Taconic Foundation, suspected that Wilkins' absence indicated a lack of interest. Wilkins sent an apology to assure Currier of his support⁶ for the project but he also took the opportunity to spell out some of the NAACP's expectations of the VEP. He made three assumptions: that the program would not be used to support direct action protests or recruitment drives for other organizations; that the SRC would not exercise "arbitrary" authority over the programs conducted by participants; and that the program would demand financial statements and accountability.¹⁷⁵ Thus, Wilkins agreed to participate, but only under strict terms expressly designed to protect his organization. He was particularly concerned that the proposed allocation of geographical areas should not require the NAACP to discontinue voter registration programs that were already taking place under the supervision of local NAACP branches.¹⁷⁶ Wilkins fears on this issue were not without foundation. Several branch officers had already complained that SNCC, CORE or the SCLC were duplicating or even ignoring NAACP efforts in an area. Tensions only heightened as the newer groups intensified their voter registration efforts.

¹⁷³ Memorandum, John Morsell to Roy Wilkins, September 27, 1961, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A271, LOC.

¹⁷⁴ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 181.

¹⁷⁵ Memorandum from Henry Lee Moon to Roy Wilkins, August 28, 1961; Letter from Roy Wilkins to Stephen Currier, August 31, 1961; Letter from Stephen Currier to Roy Wilkins, September 8, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A271, LOC.

¹⁷⁶ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Leslie Dunbar, October 17, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A271, LOC.

Wilkins proposed that the SRC should disburse funds to tried and tested voter registration programs, such as the NAACP's, rather than wait for the results of new research to assess the most effective means of encouraging registration.

"Diversionary efforts" that sidetracked registration campaigns should be discouraged, and he argued that small, local groups such as voter leagues and churches should not be granted funds directly but only through national or regional agencies, which, in his opinion, would be better placed than the SRC to evaluate such groups.¹⁷⁷ That latter clearly implied that the NAACP, with its "many years of experience," would be best placed to decide whether local groups were deserving of VEP funds. Such a measure would also keep much of the community activity under the control of the NAACP. A more curious point made by Wilkins was that the areas selected for the campaigns should be restricted to those likely to produce genuine increases in registrations, also be open to federal intervention if necessary – a stipulation that would appear to exclude Mississippi, which would have failed on both points. SNCC and CORE chose as their territory the most isolated rural areas of Mississippi, a decision that infuriated Wilkins who believed it was impossible to achieve any significant results in those communities and that any voter registration efforts were better concentrated in the metropolitan areas of the South.¹⁷⁸

In general, Branton, Dunbar and the SRC acquiesced in Wilkins' terms and the program progressed reasonably smoothly, even though in the Association's view the project merely "augmented" existing NAACP voter registration efforts.¹⁷⁹ The Association had no intention of subordinating its efforts to the broader VEP program. As John Morsell told branch leaders, the Association would continue its normal program of activities, which would be supplemented by VEP funds.¹⁸⁰ The first VEP program lasted just over two years and during that time registered approximately six hundred thousand new voters. That figure was not achieved without some internal and external problems. Wiley Branton often castigated the

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1997), 266

¹⁷⁹ Annual Report, NAACP Annual Report 1962, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I14. LOC.

¹⁸⁰ Memorandum, John Morsell to Presidents of Branches, State Conferences and Youth Councils, October 19, 1962. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A271. LOC.

NAACP for filing inaccurate, incomplete, and late reports. He also complained that some of the Association's more enthusiastic branch leaders were taking credit for non-NAACP activities while NAACP branches made the same accusations of the other organizations.¹⁸¹

The Association claimed to have registered at least eighty two thousand new voters through its efforts in 1963 and its annual report emphasized that this figure was "very conservative and represent[s] only a portion of the voters registered through NAACP efforts."¹⁸² Certainly, the Association's extensive and established local network enabled it to reach a greater number of communities in a more organized way than the other groups. However, as Manfred Berg points out, the different approaches some of the other groups took in their voter registration programs were also an important factor in assessing the success or otherwise of the NAACP's participation in VEP.¹⁸³

Tensions between the various civil rights groups became painfully obvious during the Albany campaign, which almost destroyed the civil rights movement through infighting, factionalism and lack of planning. The Albany campaign was launched in November 1961 when two SNCC workers, Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon brought together a loose coalition of six local organizations including some members of the local NAACP youth branch. The Albany Movement, as the group became known, issued various demands to city leaders including equal employment opportunities and an end to police brutality, but its principle goal was the desegregation of the city. Dr. William Anderson, a local osteopath with had little previous involvement in civil rights group, was named president, and in that capacity approached the NAACP to secure its support. However, local branch

¹⁸¹ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 183; Letter, Wiley Branton to Mildred Bond, July 23, 1963; Letter, Roy Wilkins to John Walker, August 17, 1962; Letter, John Morsell to Wiley Branton, August 1, 1963. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A271, LOC. The VEP also contributed funds to the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), formed in 1962 to bring together all the civil rights groups working in Mississippi under one organization.

¹⁸² NAACP Annual Report, 1963. NAACP papers, Part III, Box I14, LOC. The NAACP claimed to have registered between 400,000 and 500,000 voters through its voter registration campaign but it is unclear whether that figures dates from 1958, when it expanded its program. Memorandum, John Morsell to Presidents of Branches, State Conferences and Youth Councils, October 19, 1962. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A271. LOC.

¹⁸³ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 183.

leaders were unenthusiastic and reluctant to offer any help. The NAACP's state and regional officials, Vernon Jordan and Ruby Hurley, in an attempt to keep any activity in the city under the Association's control, pointed out that there was already a local NAACP branch, making another civil rights group unnecessary. Unfortunately, that branch was almost inactive and Jordan was unable to stimulate any interest from its leaders. The Albany Movement was established anyway.¹⁸⁴

The Movement took on a life of its own in December 1961 with the arrival of Martin Luther King, who had been invited by Anderson to address a mass meeting. Although negotiations were already underway before he arrived in town, King's presence emboldened Movement leaders to press for a speedy concession from city officials, which only served to infuriate the officials who rejected the ultimatum. Tension escalated when over two hundred and fifty demonstrators, including King, were arrested at a prayer march. Although King vowed to stay in prison through Christmas, with Anderson on the verge of a nervous collapse terms were agreed that allowed King and the others to be released from jail. With the demonstrations now halted, however, local officials swiftly disregarded the tenuous agreement. The ebullience of the Movement swiftly gave way to disappointment. King returned to Albany in July to be sentenced and as expected, the SCLC's arrival revived enthusiasm for the protests but the local police chief, Laurie Pritchett had studied non-violent tactics and made preparations for any jailed demonstrators to be sent to prisons in other counties in the state. Protests continued into the next year although with significantly less momentum than the 1961 and 1962 demonstrations. They failed to achieve any significant gains.

Neither SNCC nor the NAACP came out of Albany cloaked in glory: the former resented King's position as a figurehead while the latter appeared to be primarily concerned with protecting its own position and reputation. Reports to the NAACP's head office by Vernon Jordan resonate with suspicion about the motives of the other groups involved. According to Jordan, there was hostility between

¹⁸⁴ Transcript, Summary of telephone conversation with Vernon Jordan and Gloster Current, December 14, 1961. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A277, LOC; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 178; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 87; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 526; For more on the Albany Movement see Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 85-109; Carson, *In Struggle*, 56-65; Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 147-153; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 173-230; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 524-561.

movement leaders and the SCLC, but he also made clear the NAACP's hostility toward SNCC, advising a youth chapter leader, early on in the protests, to avoid "getting involved with anything initiated by SNCC."¹⁸⁵ Despite its apparent failure, Aldon Morris calls the Albany Movement 'crucial' to the development of the civil rights movement because the Movement demonstrated that blacks could be mobilized on a large scale and its mistakes provided valuable lessons for the future.¹⁸⁶ For Roy Wilkins, however, the episode only confirmed his belief in the futility of relying upon nonviolent direct action.¹⁸⁷

Nevertheless, direct action protests caused an enormous increase in work for the NAACP's legal team, as well as for the Inc. Fund. The Inc. Fund had separated completely from its parent organization in 1956, and although the two were still inked in the minds of the public, they became, in effect, competitors. Relations had become particularly bad between Thurgood Marshall and Robert Carter, who became the NAACP's legal counsel following the split in 1956. When Marshall was appointed to the United States Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit in late 1961, Jack Greenberg, a white, Jewish lawyer who had worked for the Inc. Fund since 1949 and had been groomed by Marshall to succeed him, was appointed general counsel of the Fund with the unanimous approval of the Inc. Fund's board.¹⁸⁸ Despite this apparent unity, tensions remained. Both Robert Carter and Constance Baker Motley resented being passed over for the top job. Thanks to the explosion of direct action protests, the Inc. Fund had enjoyed a significant increase in public donations, in large part because donors assumed the two organizations were one and the same, while the Association began to see a deficit.¹⁸⁹ The fact that the public assumed the Inc. Fund to be part of the NAACP irked Wilkins.

¹⁸⁵ Summary of telephone conversation between Vernon Jordan and Gloster Current, December 14, 1961, NAACP; Summary of telephone conversations between Vernon Jordan, Ruby Hurley and Gloster Current, December 18, 1961, NAACP papers, LOC.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁸⁷ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 286.

¹⁸⁸ Carter, *A Matter of Law*, 168-169; Motley, *Equal Justice Under Law*, 150-151.

¹⁸⁹ According to the report, the NAACP was spending between \$75,000 and \$100,000 a year out of its general budget to support legal activities. The Inc. Fund saw its income rise from \$361,000 in 1959 to over \$586,000 in 1961. Report on the NAACP Legal Program and the Relationship of the Inc Fund to that Program, December 21, 1961. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 47. LOC; Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 292.

Both organizations recognized the problems inherent not only in such a confusing situation and, more importantly, in appearing to be divided in process if not in purpose. The committee's final report concluded: "In a legal program directed at racial segregation, divided control historically has been proven to be dangerous. A planned program of litigation and legislation involving delicate constitutional and political questions ought not to stem from several sources."¹⁹⁰ In true NAACP fashion, a committee was set up to determine what form the Association's legal program should take, and how the Inc. Fund should work with that program. Despite certain restrictions, it was concluded that there was an "area of infinitely wide scope in which the NAACP and the Fund can work cordially and cooperatively" on the basis that each organization shared the same goal – an end to racial discrimination. That shared vision, the Inc. Fund argued, implied that there was almost no course of litigation on which the two organizations could not agree, a belief that quickly dissipated as the scale and pace of protests escalated and moved out of the NAACP's control.

Nevertheless, the various discussions did produce some clarity. The NAACP's legal team would direct its work towards civil rights legislation, attacks on the Association, and internal problems that arose between branches. The Inc. Fund, on the other hand, would be responsible for the desegregation program. This division of labor was relatively straightforward and Wilkins was eventually in a position to issue a set of guidelines for branches on how to proceed with legal cases. Unfortunately his memorandum was a masterpiece of bureaucratic opacity. Branch leaders were expected to extrapolate an effective legal strategy from this instruction: "When persons or groups on the local or state levels ask legal assistance from the local NAACP Branch or State Conference in a civil rights case differing from, or having implications beyond, the routine local cases customarily handled alone by the Branch or State Conference, the Branch or State Conference shall forward such a request in writing to the Secretary at the National Office."¹⁹¹ There was almost no guidance as to what constituted a case outside the 'routine' however.

¹⁹⁰ Memorandum, Relationship Between the NAACP and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, Inc.. Undated but probably March 31, 1962. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 26. LOC.

¹⁹¹ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Presidents of Branches, State Conferences and Youth Groups, November 28, 1962. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I13. LOC.

In the fall of 1962 Wilkins escaped to Europe. He made several trips to the continent during the 1960s, each of which appear to have offered him some of the acclaim that he felt was his due at home. On this particular trip, he almost became the government's ambassador for civil rights. In London, he was interviewed by BBC television about civil rights in the United States. He was also interviewed by a French radio station, which, according to the press attaché at the United States Embassy in Paris, was considered to be so interesting that the station broadcast it three times. Two weekly newspapers published articles based on conversations with Wilkins that, the press attaché believed, treated the complex subject of race relations with objectivity and understanding, an outcome that the attaché attributed to Wilkins. Wilkins' trip also delighted the Kennedy administration, which was facing its own problems with America's reputation abroad.¹⁹²

Before Wilkins returned to the United States, confrontations again erupted in Mississippi. The governor of Mississippi, Ross Barnett, had been vociferous in his refusal to comply with the Supreme Court's rulings on desegregating schools and colleges. His segregationist rhetoric inflamed public debate and raised the political temperature in a state that was already in ferment about the 'progress' of civil rights. The situation exploded when James Meredith, a twenty-nine year-old black Air Force veteran, applied to the University of Mississippi, one of the most potent symbols of the old confederacy. His application was initially rejected with a series of blatant excuses, and Meredith reluctantly approached Medgar Evers, and Inc. Fund lawyers, for help in gaining admittance. When the federal courts finally supported his application and he attempted to register for classes, this simple act became what Inc. Fund lawyer Constance Baker Motley called "the last battle of the civil war."¹⁹³

The violent backlash at Ole Miss intensified an already inflamed situation. The night before enrollment Barnett spoke to the fired-up crowd at an Ole Miss football match. His brief but emotional remarks about loving his state and its customs sent the crowd into a frenzy of violence. A riot ensued on the campus, which soon spun

¹⁹² Letter, Ralph Stuart Smith, Press Attache, US Embassy, Paris to Roy Wilkins, October 11, 1962.; Letter, Ralph A Dungan, Special Assistant to the President, to Roy Wilkins, November 8, 1962. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A313. LOC.

¹⁹³ Motley, *Equal Justice*, 178.

out of control when state troopers, who had been ordered to stay on campus to keep control, were withdrawn on orders from a representative of the governor and contrary to promises made to Kennedy. In the riot that followed, two people were killed and many injured. In the morning, protected by US marshals, Meredith picked his way through the debris to the admissions office and completed his registration. By the end of the week, more than twenty-three thousand federal troops were stationed on the campus to restore order.¹⁹⁴ The debacle invoked exasperation in Wilkins. "in the same week in which the United States launched its third astronaut into space, it had to use thousands of soldiers and hundreds of federal marshals to enable one Negro, James Meredith, to enter the University of Mississippi, in order to complete his education. A few short years ago, not many would have believed it was easier to send up a manned spacecraft than to guarantee an American citizen his right to attend his own state's university. But the facts are the facts."¹⁹⁵

Meredith's admission was of enormous symbolic importance to black communities throughout Mississippi, but the episode badly damaged whatever limited credibility the Kennedy administration had established by this point.¹⁹⁶ It would take another show of almost fatal violence by southern whites to convince the president that he had to act decisively on civil rights. Results in the congressional and gubernatorial elections in November 1962 clearly marked the battleground for civil rights and demonstrated how important race had become as a political issue. While voters in Georgia and South Carolina elected racial moderates to govern their respective statehouses, Mississippi and Alabama chose ardent segregationists. The Republican Party, which had historically considered the South as a lost cause, suddenly made significant southern gains in the House of Representatives. Race had put Kennedy in an unenviable position; despite some progress, blacks were disappointed and frustrated at the lack of more proactive executive action on civil rights, while southern whites, including the rising generation of republication politicians, used even his limited actions as evidence of a left-wing liberalism.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁴ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 351; Reeves, *Profile of Power*, 364.

¹⁹⁵ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Lionel Rogosin, undated. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A228. LOC.

¹⁹⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 138-142; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 331-356; Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, 318-332.

¹⁹⁷ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 359; Reeves, *Profile of Power*, 431-432.

In February 1963 Kennedy presented a set of civil rights proposals to Congress. Drawn up by Lee White, an assistant special counsel, in conjunction with the Justice Department, they focused almost entirely on voting rights, and were a long way from the Democrats' ambitious civil rights plank of 1960. Wilkins was not impressed and issued a lukewarm acknowledgement the following day. "In many respects, President Kennedy's civil rights message to Congress is an admirable document...However it offers no new proposal for dealing with the acute problem of discrimination in housing. Nor does it call for an effective deadline for school systems to achieve desegregation. Also lacking is a recommendation for a Federal FEP law with strong enforcement powers. These are the weakest aspects of Mr. Kennedy's message."¹⁹⁸ Housing and employment discrimination had been identified as the most pressing problems facing black communities in an informal survey conducted by the NAACP in June 1961. The continued lack of any federal will to address these issues left Kennedy's commitment to civil rights open to question, regardless of any civil rights message he may send to Congress.¹⁹⁹

Kennedy's tepid proposal was transformed into an unequivocal commitment when the intractable force of southern racism confronted non-violence in Birmingham, Alabama. Even measured against the appalling standards of other Dixie states, Birmingham was no city in which to be black. Long considered the most segregated city in the United States, Birmingham was also distinguished by having a particularly belligerent police chief, Eugene "Bull" Connor. Putting lessons learned in Albany into practice, King and his SCLC colleagues decided to wage war on Birmingham's segregated facilities. They relied on Connor's notorious hostility to desegregation to provoke him into an action that would ultimately benefit the movement.²⁰⁰ Thousands of protestors joined King in Birmingham, in April 1963 to prod the city's government into implementing a policy of desegregation.²⁰¹ The city's intransigent police department responded as anticipated but with a ferocity

¹⁹⁸ Press release, "JFK Message "Admirable" but Not Enough," February 28, 1963, NAACP Papers, Part III, A175. LOC.

¹⁹⁹ Memorandum, Calvin Banks to Roy Wilkins, June 28, 1961, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A251, LOC.

²⁰⁰ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 228; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 126.

²⁰¹ The causes and political effects of the Birmingham campaign are examined in detail in Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 111-139; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 231-263; Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 81-85; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 381-395; Reeves, *Profile of Power*, 482-506; Branch, *Parting the Water*, 671-802.

that was entirely unexpected. SCLC's campaign to fill the city's jails was soon fulfilled so the organization resorted to using children as protestors. Over a thousand school children took the streets but the protestors were attacked by snarling police dogs, cattle prods and water cannons, at Connor's instruction. As the SCLC anticipated, the sight of such tactics being used against such young protestors was almost too much for the country to stomach but illustrated vividly, in one minute to the entire world, the intractability of southern racism.²⁰² Within a month, a settlement had been brokered between the protestors and the Birmingham's political and business leaders to desegregate facilities and introduce equal hiring practices.

Wilkins was reluctant to concede the impact of Birmingham, even though it helped to persuade Kennedy to propose the legislation that a year later became the landmark Civil Rights Act.²⁰³ He did concede that the outrage the Birmingham violence provoked in the American public was a contributory factor in the introduction of the civil rights bill.²⁰⁴ But, he refused to consider it the primary factor.²⁰⁵ His main argument was that the protests failed to influence any congressman from the areas in which the protests took place. Instead, he attributed the combination of several episodes that took place over a series of months around the Birmingham protests has having equal weight. He gave equal credence to the "piling up of information and expansion of knowledge of the Kennedys," driven by events such as the Freedom Rides and the fatal violence at the University of Mississippi. Wilkins' opinion appears disingenuous, at best, given the administration's reluctance to launch any significant attack on segregation at any of the points Wilkins cites as part of their education.

One of the incidents that Wilkins credited as being an important factor in promoting executive action on civil rights was underway in Mississippi. While the Birmingham campaign garnered media attention both domestically and

²⁰² Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 228; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 126; Torres, *Black, White and In Color*, 28-29.

²⁰³ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 392-393; Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 80; Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul*, 135-139.

²⁰⁴ Wilkins interview, MSRC.

²⁰⁵ Wilkins interview, JFKL; Wilkins interview, MSRC.

internationally, the NAACP's branch in Jackson, Mississippi was waging its own direct action campaign. The Jackson Movement, as it became known, began in late 1962 with a boycott of stores in the downtown area of the city. Despite calls for support, the NAACP's national office paid little attention until the success of the Birmingham campaign indicated that King might move into Mississippi next.²⁰⁶ The national office was suddenly galvanized into action. Gloster Current revealed a certain panic in a memorandum to branches that suggested direct action protests should be stepped up. "The apparent success of the Birmingham protest, utilizing the shock troop methods will, if the objectives are obtained, accelerate the pace toward desegregation in other hard core cities."²⁰⁷ Current identified Jackson as the likely target for the "next scene of attack by King forces" but argued that "whatever target is selected next, it will make it that much harder for the NAACP to carry on its work effectively."²⁰⁸

When a handful of sit-in protesters were brutally beaten and kicked while police stood by, many of Jackson's outraged black community joined the call for desegregation in the city. Faced with a potential Birmingham, the mayor conceded to most of their demands but quickly reneged on the agreement as soon as the trouble appeared to have passed. His duplicitous tactics brought hundreds of young blacks on to the streets. Around four hundred and fifty young demonstrators, including members of the NAACP's local youth council, were arrested during a mass march suddenly energized both the movement and the NAACP's national leadership.²⁰⁹ Wilkins' called on other branches to protest in support and, more importantly, raise money to fund bail and legal costs.²¹⁰ He then flew down to Jackson to speak at the first mass demonstration.

Some within the NAACP were keen to see a more active approach taken by its national leaders. A telegram from Eugene Reed to Wilkins at the end of May urged

²⁰⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 160; Memorandum, Gloster Current to Ruby Hurley, Clarence Laws, LC Bates, Medgar Evers, Vernon Jordan, Willie B Ludden, Charles McLean, I. DeQuincey Newman, Robert Saunders, U. Simpson Tate, May 13, 1963, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A236. LOC.

²⁰⁷ Memorandum, Current to et al., May 13, 1963, NAACP Papers.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Dittmer, *Local People*, p162-163.

²¹⁰ Telegram, Roy Wilkins to all Branch Presidents, May 28, 1963. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 27, LOC.

him as the “acknowledged chief executive” to go to Jackson “and “give personal leadership on the front line to the fight until the critical situation has passed.” Reed also suggested that, should Wilkins be arrested, it would “force a critical decision of conscience on the part of many who in spite of everything else thus far have yet to take a decisive stand.”²¹¹ According to Taylor Branch, Evers was also keen to see the Association take a more active role in the demonstrations and worked with the SCLC in secret. Branch argues that it was only when Evers told the national office that King was proposing to come to Jackson unless the NAACP assumed command of the protests that Wilkins flew to Jackson.²¹² The likelihood that Wilkins would be arrested should he join the protests was a calculated risk, but one that promised to yield considerable favorable publicity.

Once in Jackson, Wilkins first gave a rousing speech then, the following morning, joined Evers and the other protestors to picket a variety store in downtown Jackson. As anticipated, he was quickly arrested, along with Evers and Helen Wilcher, another protestor, and indicted on a felony charge of restraint of trade. Wilkins had no intention of staying in jail and was released on a \$1000 bond. Although it was largely symbolic, the arrest had a rousing effect on the NAACP’s members and even on King himself who, on hearing of Wilkins’ arrest, told his aides “We’ve baptized brother Wilkins.”²¹³ L.C. Holman of the Chicago branch urged Wilkins to stay in Jackson now that the NAACP had “regained the initiative,” while Percy Sutton, an influential politician in New York, wrote to say, I couldn’t have been more proud of you than I was when the news of your arrest in Jackson, Mississippi, flashed across the television screen on Saturday night. Even on 125th Street, here in Harlem, the Black Nationalists were saying on Sunday “Sutton, your boy Wilkins, was in the thick of it - Boy that’s the stuff’.”²¹⁴

With such momentum on their side, Wilkins, Current and other NAACP leaders took a completely unexpected decision and not only called a halt to the

²¹¹ Telegram, Dr Eugene Reed to Roy Wilkins, May 29, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A231, LOC.

²¹² Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 101

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 101

²¹⁴ “Roy Wilkins is Arrested at Jackson,” *New York Times*, June 2, 1963; Letter, Dr L.H. Holman to RW, June 3, 1963; Letter, Percy Sutton to Roy Wilkins, June 3, 1963. Part III, Box A231, LOC.

demonstrations but also added more conservative blacks to the strategy committee thereby curbing the energy of the movement.²¹⁵ The action disappointed many and angered more, leading to a gulf between the local branch and its younger members. Historian John Dittmer offers several credible reasons for the decision: the debilitating cost of getting the demonstrators out of jail, political infighting between the national office and the Jackson movement's leaders, and the NAACP's general discomfort with direct action tactics.²¹⁶ On the latter point, however, the NAACP had, by this point, been involved in, and instigated, enough direct action protests to disprove that particular accusation. Nevertheless, Wilkins and his colleagues were always uncomfortable with protests that threatened to spiral out of control. A more generous interpretation of the decision might also be that Wilkins, ever conscious of the wider political ramifications of mass action at this time, was keen not to antagonize the Kennedys and risk the tenuous relationship he had built up with the administration by having his organization involved in such demonstrations. But even as sophisticated a political operator as Wilkins could not anticipate the next steps.

In early June, George Wallace, Alabama's governor, in a blustering pretence of anger, blocked the entrance to the University of Alabama to prevent the enrolment of two black students. Kennedy used Wallace's actions as a very public demonstration that the administration was now willing to tackle the intransigent South. He federalized the National Guard and forced Wallace to allow the students to enter, with none of the violence witnessed at Oxford. Although a crisis was averted, Kennedy decided to address the nation on civil rights immediately. Speaking without emotion but stating the case simply and unequivocally, Kennedy told the nation that:

The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South. Where legal remedies are not at hand, redress is sought in the streets, in demonstrations, parades, and protests, which create tensions and threaten violence and threaten lives. We face, therefore, a moral crisis as a country and as a people. It cannot be met by repressive police action. It cannot be left to

²¹⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 164.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 165.

increased demonstrations in the streets. It cannot be quieted by token moves or talk. It is time to act in the Congress, in your State and local legislative body and, above all, in all of our daily lives.²¹⁷

He went on to say: "We cannot say to ten per cent of the population that you can't have that right; that your children cannot have the chance to develop whatever talents they have; that the only way that they are going to get their rights is to go into the streets and demonstrate. I think we owe them and we owe ourselves a better country than that." Finally, Kennedy gave Wilkins tangible hope that circumstances were changing when he announced that he planned to send civil rights legislation to Congress,

Next week I shall ask the Congress of the United States to act, to make a commitment it has not fully made in this century to the proposition that race has no place in American life or law. The Federal judiciary has upheld that proposition in the conduct of its affairs, including the employment of Federal personnel, the use of Federal facilities, and the sale of federally financed housing. But there are other necessary measures, which only the Congress can provide, and they must be provided at this session. The old code of equity law under which we live commands for every wrong a remedy, but in too many communities, in too many parts of the country, wrongs are inflicted on Negro citizens and there are no remedies at law. Unless the Congress acts, their only remedy is in the street. I am, therefore, asking the Congress to enact legislation giving all Americans the right to be served in facilities which are open to the public--hotels, restaurants, theaters, retail stores, and similar establishments.²¹⁸

Wilkins was delighted with Kennedy's forceful remarks and sent a congratulatory telegram immediately. "Your speech last night to the nation on the civil rights crisis was a clear, resolute exposition of basic Americanism and a call to all our citizens to

²¹⁷ Radio and Television Report to the American People on Civil Rights, President John F. Kennedy, The White House, June 11, 1963. JFKL: <http://www.jfklibrary.org/Historical+Resources/Archives/Reference+Desk/Speeches/JFK/03POF03CivilRights06111963.htm>.

²¹⁸ Address, June 11, 1963. JFKL.

rally in support of the high traditions of our nation's dedication to human rights. Thank you."²¹⁹ Tragically, the celebrations were to be short-lived. Just hours after Kennedy delivered his speech, Medgar Evers was murdered as he arrived home from another meeting of the Jackson Movement. Evers' death was a devastating blow to both Wilkins and the Association. Wilkins wrote later that: "My eyes filled with tears. I had not felt such a rush of feeling since Earl's death. If there was moment in my life when I hated whites, that was it."²²⁰

Evers had frequently acted as a conduit between the NAACP and other groups operating in Mississippi and had increasingly taken a neutral position in between his leaders and local activists.²²¹ But even in his untimely death, Evers was caught in the middle of dissension and politics. Following Evers' murder, King announced the creation of a bail fund in his name under the auspices of the Gandhi Society, the SCLC's legal arm. Wilkins was furious, and insisted that the fund be administered by the NAACP rather than the SCLC.²²² Wilkins' nephew Roger later recalled that his uncle was still smarting at Evers' funeral. "Can you imagine it?" he fumed. "Medgar was an NAACP man all the way, and King comes in and tries to take the money." Wilkins recalls his uncle saying. "I had never seen my uncle so incensed," with obvious surprise at such heightened emotion from a usually dispassionate man.²²³

Wilkins' fury led him to make a series of unusually combative public remarks about other groups during a speech to an NAACP branch in Alexandria, Virginia. Wilkins could be caustic in memoranda and letters but rarely let his temper show in public. Although the transcript of the speech is not available in the NAACP archives, contemporary newspaper reports and references in correspondence following the speech gives some indication of its content and tone. Whether affected by grief, exhaustion or fear at his organization losing power, Wilkins

²¹⁹ Telegram, Roy Wilkins to President Kennedy, June 12, 1963. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A174, LOC.

²²⁰ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 290.

²²¹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 165.

²²² Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 829; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 269.

²²³ Roger Wilkins, *A Man's Life* (Woodbridge, Connecticut: Ox Bow Press, 1991), 123; Evers' murder is examined in detail in Adam Nossiter, *Of Long Memory: Mississippi and the Murder of Medgar Evers* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1995).

turned the full extent of his rage onto other civil rights groups who “furnish the noise and get the publicity while the NAACP furnishes the manpower and pays the bill.”²²⁴ He dismissed their more dramatic tactics. “All the rest start a little and then rush off somewhere else. They are here today, gone tomorrow. There is only one organization that can handle a long sustained flight – the NAACP.” For all of Wilkins’ heightened emotion, money lay at the root of his remarks. “Don’t go giving them your money, when it should be given to us. Don’t get so excited. To give them your money is like a Baptist giving money to the Presbyterian Church,” he warned.²²⁵

It was unusual for Wilkins to be quite so publicly vituperative, but he stood by his comments. When assailed by an NAACP member for the attacks, Wilkins was unapologetic. He replied: “it is the NAACP which has maintained unity in spite of pettiness, provocation and open contempt and hostility on the part of followers of, and workers in, CORE and SCLC.”²²⁶ Wilkins stopped short of overt criticism of leaders of the other groups and claimed to want no breach among the civil rights organizations, but in another scathing display of anger he wrote: “We were at work when Negroes who now shovel out bushel baskets of money to a hypnotic handclap rhythm and white people who now write checks to salve their conscience could not find a lone dollar bill for the NAACP, battling for a place for the Negro when there was, literally, no place for him in the citizenship picture.”²²⁷ Wilkins was equally scornful in a letter to James Farmer on the same subject saying that many of the CORE people “have not been courteous and a great many of them, being younger than springtime, have absolutely no knowledge of anything prior to February 1, 1960.”²²⁸

²²⁴ “NAACP Leader Assails Other Civil Rights Groups,” *New York Times*, June 17, 1963. Foster Hailey, “Four Direct Action Groups Seek Funds and Support for their Cause,” *New York Times*, June 23, 1963; Anita Ehrman, “Wilkins hits Rival Negro Rights Units,” *Washington Post*, June 17, 1963; “Wilkins Brings Negro Split Out in the Open,” *Long Island Press*, June 17, 1963.

²²⁵ Ehrman, *Washington Post*, June 17, 1963.

²²⁶ Telegram, Roy Wilkins from James Stamps, June 19, 1963; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Roy Stamps, June 26, 1963. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A294, LOC.

²²⁷ Wilkins to Stamps, June 26 1963. NAACP papers.

²²⁸ Letter, Roy Wilkins to James Farmer, June 18, 1963. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A294, LOC.

For all the accolades offered to Kennedy following his televised address on civil rights, the majority of black Americans were not so easily impressed. Evers' murder sparked a chain of demonstrations in one hundred and eighty six communities resulting in the arrest of fifteen thousand protestors, five hundred young blacks attacked police in Jackson as Evers' hearse passed through the city.²²⁹ It was within this context that Kennedy's civil rights bill was sent to Congress. Among other provisions, the bill included measures to protect voting rights in federal elections and to prohibit discrimination in hotels, restaurants, leisure parks and other public accommodations.²³⁰ Wilkins admitted that the proposed legislation was "the most comprehensive civil rights measure ever submitted to Congress by a President." Nevertheless, he argued that it did not go far enough. The bill failed to include a provision to create a statutory Fair Employment Practices Committee but even more galling was the "revised and truncated Part III of the 1957 civil rights bill," which in its new iteration was limited to the denial of civil rights in school cases rather than a broader denials of rights.²³¹ Even in school cases, Wilkins complained that "it provides only for continued piecemeal action, school district by school district."²³²

Kennedy met with a group of civil rights leaders including Wilkins, King, Whitney Young, the new leader of the Urban League, and A. Philip Randolph shortly after the bill was submitted to Congress. The president proposed that the leaders take on the task of persuading swing voters to pass the bill, but the group could not agree on tactics. King and some of the other leaders advocated using demonstrations to pressure Congress into passing the bill, while Wilkins and Young were reluctant to use direct action tactics for fear of jeopardizing the nascent legislation. Wilkins' preferred method was to work with the LCCR in crafting a strategy that would identify those congressional votes that could be most important and then mobilize LCCR members to lobby the relevant congressmen. Wilkins was also on guard for

²²⁹ Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 90; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 426.

²³⁰ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 427; Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 543.

²³¹ Roy Wilkins, "NAACP backs civil rights bill but holds it is not strong enough," Part of a symposium written by prominent black leaders and published during August and September, 1963 by the *St Louis Post Despatch*. Reprint, NAACP papers, Part III, Box I17; Press release, "Wilkins Sees JFK's Proposals as not Meeting Today's Needs," June 22, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A175, LOC.

²³² *Ibid.*

any weakening of the bill by the time it reached the House. "If the bill at that time is as strong as we hope it will be, the job will be one of defeating weakening amendments. If the bill is weaker than the present Administration bill, the job will be one of strengthening it."²³³

In July he delivered an impassioned statement supporting the public accommodations portion of the bill to the Senate Commerce Committee, which, Clarence Mitchell's biographer argues, matched the intensity of Martin Luther King's letter from Birmingham City Jail.²³⁴ That assertion may be exaggerated. Nevertheless, Wilkins clearly felt as impatient as those taking to the streets.

It must be remembered that while we talk here today, while we talked last week, and while the Congress will be debating in the next week, Negro Americans throughout our country will be bruised in nearly every waking hour by differential treatment in, or exclusion from, public accommodations of every description. From the time they leave home in the morning, enroute to school or to work, to shopping or visiting, until they return home at night, humiliation stalks them.²³⁵

As the hearing took place at the height of the summer, Wilkins described the journey a black family might make from Norfolk, Virginia, to the Gulf Coast of Mississippi. He asked Congressmen to put themselves in that family's position, to think about where they might sleep on the long drive, where they might be able to sleep and whether their children might be denied a soft drink or ice cream simply because of their color. "How far do you drive each day? Where, and under what conditions can you and your family eat? Where can they use a rest room? Can you stop driving after a reasonable day behind the wheel or must you drive until you reach a city where relatives or friends will accommodate you and yours for the night? Will your children be denied a soft drink or an ice cream cone because they

²³³ Memorandum, From the LCCR to participating organizations, undated by presumably approximately the end of July, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A206. LOC.

²³⁴ Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 365.

²³⁵ Pamphlet, "Humiliation Stalks Them," Reprint of Roy Wilkins testimony in support of the public accommodations section of the proposed civil rights bill being considered by the Senate Commerce Committee, August, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A233. LOC.

are not white?"²³⁶

Wilkins then put the sit-in protests into context, citing the example of one of the first protestors who was "a veteran in his country's non-segregated Air Force [who] after service overseas to spread and preserve democracy could be refused a cup of coffee and a piece of pie in his home state. Such treatment, he added, was "something he just could not take any longer." Wilkins also exposed the absurd distinctions that Congress made in its treatment of its black citizens. "The Congress has legislated for the health and welfare of its livestock. Why does it balk at legislating for the welfare of its twenty million loyal Negro citizens? Are cows, hogs and sheep more valuable than human beings?"²³⁷ "The players in this drama of frustration and indignity are not commas or semicolons in a legislative thesis; they are people, human beings, citizens of the United States of America," he told the committee.²³⁸

Wilkins' testimony was not entirely without levity. When Senator Strom Thurmond (D-SC) asked if, for example, a woman ran a beauty parlor from her home, would that fall under the public accommodations law that Wilkins was demanding? Wilkins replied that he would not be inclined to fight his way in to be served in her parlor.²³⁹ However, Congress, like the White House, was preoccupied by the prospect of a potentially violent march in the capital, plans for which were already taking shape. When Senator Winston Prouty (R-VT) asked Wilkins to guarantee that the march would be non-violent, he refused, saying that "even in New England, where self-control is a virtue of the people," no one could promise such a thing. He was "relying on the restraint of his people, which has been exemplary."²⁴⁰

Wilkins probably shared Prouty's wariness about the proposed march. He was certainly skeptical about the value of a mass demonstration in Washington, and was hesitant to offer his support, arguing that such a protest would only be

²³⁶ Ibid.

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Pamphlet, "Humiliation Stalks Them," NAACP Papers, cited in "The Root of the Spirit," *Time* magazine, August 2, 1963; Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 564-565.

²³⁹ Mary McGrory, "Wilkins States the Case," July 23, 1963, *New York Post*, LCCR Papers, Part I, Box I42, LOC.

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

appropriate in the event of a filibuster. He warned advocates of the march that “the greatest care must be taken unless the demonstration has a specific objective.”²⁴¹ Wilkins nevertheless knew that the Association had to be involved in any demonstration on the scale being discussed by other groups if it was to have any credibility. It is also difficult to imagine that Wilkins would willingly allow King, or any of the other leaders, a free run of what promised to be a national media spectacle. As Manfred Berg argues, the politically astute Wilkins realized the risk the Kennedy administration had taken in introducing civil rights legislation in the year before a presidential election and feared that disturbances such as those seen in Birmingham could only damage the bill’s chances of survival, particularly if those disturbances took place on the streets of Washington.²⁴²

In early July members of all the major civil rights groups came together in New York for the first planning session of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Several historians, and some attendees, have described this meeting in detail. Those descriptions show that Wilkins retained a powerful hold on the movement. John Lewis of SNCC described an assertive Wilkins who, on entering the meeting room, tapped the shoulder of those he did not want in attendance and insisted they left the room.²⁴³ Among those ejected were James Forman of SNCC, Bayard Rustin and Fred Shuttlesworth, each of whom, to the surprise of Lewis, acquiesced to Wilkins demand.²⁴⁴ Rustin had originally been proposed as the director of the march, but Wilkins exerted his authority on this decision too, insisting that Rustin’s history of pacifism, his previous association with Communism, and his arrest for a homosexual act would all be unnecessary distractions for the press and critics of the march. A compromise was suggested where Randolph would be named director but Rustin, as deputy director, would actually organize the event.

In an attempt to contain the various forces that could disrupt the march, the leaders drew up an agreement following the meeting “to define further the nature” of the

²⁴¹ “Wilkins Cautions on Mass Protests,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1963.

²⁴² Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 205.

²⁴³ John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Harvest Books, 1999), 208, also described in Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 847.

²⁴⁴ Lewis with D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 208.

proposed demonstration. "We are going to Washington to demand that adequate and meaningful civil rights legislation be passed, and to call for training and work for all people, Negro and white." The leaders emphasized that any form of direct action would have no place during the march and also warned that the demonstration had been carefully planned to prevent any disruptions. "Sit-ins (in Congress, the streets, in places of public accommodation etc) are not part of the March program for August 28. Persons wishing to engage in such actions are urged not to join the March."²⁴⁵ It is not clear whether that document was ever issued as a public statement but many of the points were contained in a statement issued by the leaders prior to the March: "It will be orderly but not subservient. It will be proud, but not arrogant. It will be non-violent but not timid. It will be unified in purpose and behavior, not splintered into groups and individual competitors. It will be outspoken, but not raucous."²⁴⁶

Wilkins' reluctant involvement in the march could, as Taylor Branch argues, be considered prudent.²⁴⁷ The mood of black Americans was becoming more militant. Wilkins was faced with a vivid demonstration of that changing attitude at the NAACP's 1963 annual convention, which opened in Chicago a few days after the official announcement of the March on Washington. To the embarrassment of the Association's leaders, delegates booed two speakers, one of whom was Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley. In addition, members of the Revolutionary Action Movement heckled speakers, and more than two hundred delegates walked out of a workshop led by James del Rio, a member of the Detroit branch who had recently criticized the Association's tactics.²⁴⁸

A resolution endorsing a broad program of direct action tactics illustrated the extent to which the balance of power had shifted. Although the endorsement of

²⁴⁵ Statement, Undated but following the July 2, 1963 meeting. Unsigned. Bayard Rustin Papers, Box 31. LOC.

²⁴⁶ Draft statement, The heads of the six active civil rights organizations calling for discipline in connection with the Washington March of August 28, 1963. Bayard Rustin Papers, Box 31. LOC.

²⁴⁷ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 848; "Direct Action' Backed by NAACP Convention," *Washington Post*, July 6, 1963.

²⁴⁸ Christopher Robert Reed, *The Chicago NAACP and the Rise of Professional Leadership, 1910-1966* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 198; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 848.

picketing, sit-ins, mass action protests and selective buying campaigns was not revolutionary in itself — all of the tactics listed in the resolution had been used many times in the Association's fifty-four year history — the resolution was driven by the members who wanted the NAACP's leadership to acknowledge a change in strategy that moved away from the courtroom and into the streets. The resolution also tackled branches that resisted direct action protests stating that "in cases where such direct action...is resisted or hindered by an NAACP unit, immediate corrective action shall be requested of the committee on branches of the national board of directors."²⁴⁹ In addition, following the presentation of a petition to the organization's leadership, youth branches were to be permitted more autonomy and support where "instances of differences between the local branch and the youth council."²⁵⁰

Some of the NAACP's younger members, however, were already taking action. In St Augustine, Florida, the local branch, led by Robert Hayling, had begun a campaign to desegregate the city's facilities encouraged by the visit of the vice president to the city in March 1963. Protests intensified throughout the summer with youth members picketing Woolworth, McCrory's and other stores that operated segregated lunch counters. When the demonstrators were arrested, four of the youths, aged between fourteen and sixteen, were jailed and sentenced to schools for delinquents although, as the county had no juvenile detention, the children were held in the local jail for some months before being released. The national office paid scant attention to the events in St. Augustine. Ironically, in light of the convention resolution allowing action against obstructive branches, it was the national office that caused problems. By September, lunch counters in the city were on the brink of being desegregated and some employment opportunities were opening up for blacks, but the Ku Klux Klan met every small step of progress with violence. By early 1964, frustrated by the lack of response from federal authorities and the NAACP's national office, Hayling, who had resigned from the NAACP at the end of 1963, approached the SCLC for help. King's group seized the opportunity to move into the city and build local support for the organization.

²⁴⁹ Margaret McElheny, "NAACP Opens Sessions; More Mass Protests Seen," *Washington Post, Times Herald*, July 2, 1963.

²⁵⁰ Extract from NAACP Annual Report, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I14, LOC.

SCLC's subsequent campaign in St. Augustine left the Association on the periphery once again, bemoaning the attention paid to King.²⁵¹

King also grabbed the headlines at the March on Washington, which took place on August 28, 1963. Approximately two hundred and fifty people gathered peacefully to participate in an event that has come to symbolize the moral authority of the civil rights movement. Each speaker was asked to speak for only five minutes and Roger Wilkins recalled later how his uncle worked to edit his six-minute speech to fit the time allotted to him.²⁵² Introduced by Randolph as the "acknowledged champion of civil rights in America," Wilkins used his five minutes to prod the Kennedy Administration and Congress into passing the pending legislation. "We have come asking the enactment of legislation that will affirm the rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and that will place the resources and the honor of the government of all the people behind the pledge of equality in the Declaration of Independence."²⁵³ Wilkins tried to bring some humor into his attack on those who pleaded for the right of single private landlords – "Mrs. Murphy" – to be exempted from the public accommodations portion of the bill:

If Mrs Murphy, rugged individualist as she must be, has taken her chance with the public thus far, she can get along without the solicitous protection of the august Senate of the United States. It is true, of course, that Mrs Murphy might get a Negro traveller here and there in her boarding house, or in her tourist home, but then we must remember this, she might get a white procurer, or a white embezzler too.

Wilkins ended by paying tribute to W.E.B. Du Bois, who had died in Ghana the previous day. "It is incontrovertible that at the dawn of the 20th Century his was the voice that was calling to you to gather here today in this cause. If you want to read something that applies to 1963 go back and get a volume of *The Souls of Black Folk* by Du Bois published in 1903." He also called upon the crowd to "keep up the speaking by letters and telegrams and

²⁵¹ Memorandum, Father Brown to Gloster Current, December 20, 1963. NAACP papers, Part III, Box C24, LOC.

²⁵² Wilkins, *A Man's Life*, 122.

²⁵³ Gentile, *March on Washington*, 237; Roy Wilkins' speech at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A227, LOC.

telephone and, wherever possible, by personal visit.” He made no mention of applying pressure with any more demonstrative tactics.²⁵⁴

King’s soaring speech about his dreams for a free and color-blind society ensured the March’s place in the history books. Nevertheless, the NAACP played a crucial role in ensuring that the march was a success. Once over his initial and rather belligerent reluctance, Wilkins did much to keep the theme of the march in focus and, to the relief of Kennedy, peaceful. The Association contributed \$10,000 and the assistance of five full-time staff members in New York and Washington. Henry Lee Moon was responsible for public relations while Gloster Current and John Morsell spent at least half their time on administration for the march.²⁵⁵ Wilkins also mobilized the branches in support of the march, and members from across the country chartered trains and buses to the capital.

Immediately following the March, Wilkins and the other leaders met with Kennedy at the White House, who congratulated them on the day’s success. But the celebrations were short-lived. Wilkins told the president: “I feel it my lot, sir, in this afternoon of superlative oratory, to be the one to deal rather pedantically and pedestrianly with the hard business of legislation.”²⁵⁶ The group made a plea for a stronger FEPC portion and a provision to allow the Justice Department to intervene in discrimination cases. Kennedy, wary of losing Republican support, refused.²⁵⁷ A few weeks later, recalcitrant whites in Alabama proved, yet again, that the administration could no longer afford the luxury of political bargaining for civil rights, when a bomb killed four young schoolgirls and injured twenty other people at a church in Birmingham.

When Wilkins became Executive Secretary in 1955, he had promised to work to eliminate segregation and discrimination by 1963. Despite the fact that the most far-reaching civil rights legislation ever proposed was pending in Congress, that goal

²⁵⁴ Remarks, Wilkins, August 28, 1963. NAACP Papers.

²⁵⁵ Memorandum, John Morsell to NAACP staff members, August 21, 1963. NAACP papers, Part III, Box A227, LOC.

²⁵⁶ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 436; Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 105.

²⁵⁷ Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 105; Reeves, *Profile in Power*, 585.

remained out of reach.²⁵⁸ On Capitol Hill the behavior of Governor Wallace, swiftly followed by the murder of the children in Birmingham emboldened Congressman Emanuel Celler to add strong new provisions to the bill under consideration in the House. Specifically the public accommodations portion was widened to include private businesses; a dramatically expanded Title III would allow the Justice Department to sue any infringement of civil rights; and the FEPC provision was strengthened.²⁵⁹ While Celler's amendments were almost everything Wilkins and the other civil rights leaders could have wished for, they were an unpleasant surprise to Robert Kennedy. The Attorney General had quietly been making deals with House Republicans on the basis that it was more important to craft a pragmatic bill that would be passed than a strong bill that would fail and he began his campaign to dilute the stronger provisions.²⁶⁰

Wilkins sent a telegram to members of Congress arguing that the compromises inflicted on the legislation during the committee stage had weakened an already "soft" bill. Stopping just short of outright anger, Wilkins wrote that the murder of four young black girls who died in the bombing of the 16th Street church in Alabama in September 1963 was a "defiance of basic truth that Negro citizens are included under United States constitutional guarantees." The proposed amendments, he argued, "agrees with bombers that the United States Department of Justice may not act on its own to uphold these guarantees." He ended the telegram on a defiant note, stating that "a vote for softened version in its present form is a vote for so little as to be of dubious value to Negro citizens or to its architects."

Political imperatives, particularly the 1964 presidential election, drove the Kennedy administration, primarily through Robert Kennedy, to argue for a compromise bill that diluted some of Celler's stronger provisions. Robert Kennedy was particularly reluctant to allow the Title III provision to go through unchecked. President Kennedy questioned whether the LCCR could deliver the necessary votes thus

²⁵⁸ Wilkins pledges campaign to end Jim Crow by 1963: NAACP Press Release, April 14, 1955; NAACP's Top Man, *Ebony*, July, 1955. Roy Wilkins papers, Box 26, LOC.

²⁵⁹ Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 571-574; Bryant, *The Bystander*, 448-449; Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 108-109; Reeves, *Profile in Power*, 628-629.

²⁶⁰ Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 573.

successfully raising the specter of complete failure. Presented with the choice of a weakened bill or no bill at all, the congressman agreed to restore some of the original White House provisions while Kennedy agreed to praise the new bill as being stronger than the one originally proposed by the administration. The FEPC and Title III provisions were deleted and only expanded public accommodations provisions were added to what was, essentially, the bill the Kennedy's had originally suggested. After much political horse-trading, the administration and congressional leaders managed to gather the necessary votes to get the bill out of committee and onto the floor.²⁶¹

As anticipated, President Kennedy argued that the amended bill was better than his original proposal and that it would stand a greater chance of passing successfully through Congress. However, Wilkins and other black leaders were bitterly disappointed.²⁶² Wilkins painted a bleak picture of the events that had taken place since the last civil rights bill was debated but was particularly incensed at having to fight for Title III yet again. "Even to the naked eye of a layman it is worse than it was in 1956. Yet the Kennedy Administration seems to be saying that the Justice Department powers deemed necessary in 1956, requested by the Eisenhower Administration and passed by the House of Representatives, are not necessary today." As for the blighted FEPC provision, Wilkins argued that, with a black unemployment rate that was three times that of white workers caused by "three factors, automation, racial hiring practices by employers and racially restrictive practices by some unions," made federal action on employment discrimination an urgent necessity.²⁶³ The bill was reported out of the House on November 20, and even in its neutered state still offered a glimmer of hope for the future.

Wilkins was working in his office in New York when he heard the news of President Kennedy's assassination. Recalling that day in his autobiography, he said he initially disregarded the report, only believing it when he came across men

²⁶¹ Reeves, *Profile in Power*, 629-630.

²⁶² Bryant, *The Bystander*, 449. Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 578.

²⁶³ Transcript, Roy Wilkins remarks to the Forum of the Temple Emmanuel Brotherhood, Worcester, MA, October 21, 1963. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 56. LOC; Memorandum, Arnold Aronson to Cooperating Organizations, November 18, 1963, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A206. LOC

weeping on Fifth Avenue.²⁶⁴ Black leaders had enjoyed greater access to Kennedy than to any of his predecessors and Wilkins, despite frustration at the political considerations that governed Kennedy's approach to civil rights, felt that the president instinctively understood the intellectual and humanitarian imperatives of the civil rights movement. Nevertheless, Wilkins was frequently exasperated with the administration's reluctance to deal with the southern bloc in Congress.

"Kennedy was concerned – and deeply so – that Negroes should enjoy their rights as citizens; he was for correcting patent, long-standing and openly admitted inequalities; and for the protection by the United States of the rights guaranteed to all citizens of the Constitution. But he never 'gave' the Negroes anything except two invaluable items: respect and recognition in the same measure and with the same warmth with which he bestowed these upon other Americans; and an opportunity to achieve in society where the normal competition was sharpened many times over by the factor of skin color."²⁶⁵ Wilkins credited Kennedy with contributing to "significantly changing the moral climate" of the country regarding race, and he mourned the young president.

Although the strength of Lyndon Johnson's civil rights credentials was still unclear, Wilkins was keen to claim the new president as a friend of black Americans. "As Vice-President, Mr. Johnson has given active personal and affirmative leadership to the equal-opportunity phase of the JFK program." Wilkins referred to a speech Johnson made on Memorial Day that year at Gettysburg, one entirely devoted to a plea for equality for black Americans. "His speech at Gettysburg, PA last spring placed him irrevocably in the civil rights camp. No one as well aware of political implications as Lyndon B. Johnson would have made such a speech inadvertently. It is a fair and justified estimate that it represents our new President's personal conviction and his commitment to continued advancement in the crusade for racially unrestricted opportunity, dignity and justice."²⁶⁶ It remained to be seen whether the man from Texas could fulfill this expectation.

²⁶⁴ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 294.

²⁶⁵ Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 294; "An Appreciation of Kennedy: Dr King and Wilkins on Rights," *New York Herald Tribune*, Saturday, November 24, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box II6, LOC.

²⁶⁶ "An Appreciation of Kennedy: Dr King and Wilkins on Rights," November 24, 1963. NAACP Papers.

Chapter Five

All the Way with LBJ

President Kennedy's death left "everything in a state of suspension." Nevertheless, Wilkins believed that the mood of grief and revulsion over Kennedy's murder that had overwhelmed the nation would ease the passage of the pending civil rights bill.¹ He was not alone in that hope. Johnson quickly began to court the main black leaders. He had made it clear to aides Bill Moyers and Jack Valenti that passage of Kennedy's civil rights legislation was a priority, and that securing the support of Wilkins, Whitney Young, and Martin Luther King was essential its ensuring passage of the bill.² To make his determination quite clear, Johnson addressed a joint session Congress five days after Kennedy's death. Among the list of legislative actions he intended to pursue, Johnson made a plea that was almost impossible to rebuff. "No oration or eulogy could more eloquently honor President Kennedy's memory than the earliest passage of the civil rights bill for which he fought so long. We have talked long enough in this country about equal rights. We have talked for one hundred years or more. It is time to now write the next chapter, and to write it in the books of law."³

Wilkins' initial reaction to Johnson's address was measured. "The whole message had a strong tone affirming basic Americansim," he stated. "It cannot but assure all our citizens that our country will move forward and that President Johnson is ready to lead the Congress and the people in any action in the national interest." Such caution was understandable given Johnson's role in the passage of the 1957 civil rights bill and the tortuous route this legislation had already taken to get through the House of Representatives. However his political pragmatism soon took over and shortly after he also issued a press statement stating "Mr. Johnson would push for enactment of the Kennedy civil rights package because of his 'own conviction that it was essential and because of the political necessity' of it."⁴ Wilkins

¹ Layhmond Robinson, "Negroes ponder next rights step," *New York Times*, November 25, 1963.

² Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 160; Robert Dallek, *Flawed Giant: Lyndon Johnson and his Times 1961-1973* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 112.

³ Transcript, President Johnson's Address to Joint Session of Congress November 27, 1963, LBJL: <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/631127.asp>.

⁴ Secretary's report, Both the comment and press statement were reprinted in the Secretary's report to the Board of Directors, December 9, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40.

was more enthusiastic when talking with the press. He told the *New York Times* that the speech was a “rallying cry against bigotry and hate and violence” and said that it showed Johnson to be a “civil rights leader in his own right and not just a follower of President Kennedy.” Johnson had, according to Wilkins, “left no doubt as to his recognition of the urgency of the civil rights issue or of his commitment of full support to the cause of equal rights for all Americans.”⁵

White House advisers such as Lee White and Bill Moyers, some of whom had worked closely with civil rights leaders during the Kennedy administration, also recognized the need for urgent action, they encouraged the president to meet with the black leaders as quickly as possible. Johnson originally wanted to invite them to his ranch in Texas arguing that entertaining such a group at his home would “be a pretty dramatic thing for the nation.”⁶ It certainly would have been a striking confirmation of his commitment to equal rights, but Johnson was eventually advised against doing so for fear of looking “phoney.”⁷ In addition to meeting with the main leaders, Johnson intervened to add Wilkins’ and Whitney Young to the guest list for President Kennedy’s funeral when he noticed they had not been included.⁸

A White House official called Wilkins the day after President Kennedy’s assassination and summoned him to a meeting with Johnson the following week. Wilkins was the first civil rights leader to be asked to meet with the new president, a fact that the NAACP, and Wilkins’ supporters, often made use of later. For example, Tarea Hall Pittman, regional secretary of the NAACP’s West Coast offices, told Wilkins shortly after the meeting that his presence in the White House had

⁵ Laymond Robinson, “Negroes praise Johnson speech,” *New York Times*, November 28, 1963.

⁶ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lee White and Lyndon Johnson, December 12, 1963, Tape no. K6312.18, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.

⁷ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Lee White, December 26, 1963, 9.47PM, Citation no. 63121827, LBJL; Dallek, *Flawless Giant*, 112.

⁸ Bryant, *The Bystander*, 459.

been widely covered by newspapers in California, and she suggested that it boosted the NAACP's stock "one hundred percent."⁹

On November 29, Wilkins spent approximately forty-five minutes with Johnson. He received the full "Johnson treatment," with the president bringing his chair "within a few inches of my knees." Wilkins remembered later: "it was the first time I had really felt those mesmerizing eyes of Texas on me."¹⁰ Johnson assured Wilkins of his support for the pending civil rights bill but warned that, as president, he could not lobby for its passage. However, Wilkins said, he gave "unmistakable notice that you had a friend and not an enemy in the White House for this legislation."¹¹ Johnson emphasized how important it was to enlist the help of Republicans in both the House and Senate in getting the discharge petition signed—a requirement with which Wilkins was only too familiar given his experience with previous civil rights legislation. Lawrence O'Brien, an aide to Johnson, also suggested that Wilkins urge religious leaders in the LCCR to supplement the lobbying efforts of civil rights organizations, which, the aide felt, lacked the broad strength necessary to get the bill passed.¹²

Johnson's complex attitude to civil rights has been thoroughly examined by several scholars and does not bear repeating in any detail in this thesis.¹³ However, because Wilkins' relationship with Johnson was pivotal in defining the NAACP leader's contribution to the civil rights movement, a brief discussion of Johnson's credentials as a champion of civil rights is warranted. Johnson's approach to civil rights was defined by a struggle, as Robert Caro describes it, between his compassion, pragmatism and quest for power. His biographers cite his upbringing in West Texas among desperately poor farmers, both white and Hispanic, as formative in his awareness of social injustice. Johnson had a reputation as a

⁹ Letter, Tarea Hall Pittman to Roy Wilkins, December 18, 1963. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 29, LOC; Letter, Clarence Laws to Roy Wilkins, January 31, 1964. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 7, LOC.

¹⁰ Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 296.

¹¹ Wilkins, Interview I, LBJL.

¹² Memorandum, Lawrence O'Brien to Lyndon Johnson, November 29, 1963, WHCF, Named file, Roy Wilkins, LBJL.

¹³ Several scholars have examined Lyndon Johnson's attitude to civil rights including Dallek, *Flawed Giant*; Caro, *Master of the Senate*; Robert A. Caro, "The Compassion of Lyndon Johnson," *The New Yorker*, April 1, 2002.

compassionate legislator during his time in the Texas congress but his personal convictions about social justice were often compromised by his ambition.¹⁴ Even while directing the passage of the 1957 civil rights bill, Johnson assured many outraged constituents that reports of his support for the bill were “entirely unwarranted. I am unalterably opposed to it” and told another that he had “always been opposed to forced integration of the races and I am still opposed. We must maintain the right of the states to deal with matters that in their proper jurisdiction.” These words would come back to haunt him as president.¹⁵

Wilkins believed that Kennedy’s appointment of Johnson as chairman of the Committee on Equal serious about civil rights issues than had previously been expected.¹⁶ Johnson was reluctant to assume the role in part because the Committee had so few resources it was almost ineffective.¹⁷ Nevertheless, despite his reluctance, the chairmanship brought Johnson into contact with a range of black leaders, many of whom were encouraged by his sincerity in wanting to achieve equal opportunities for black Americans.¹⁸ It was during this period that Wilkins felt it had become “possible for his [Johnson’s] feelings [on race issues] and his future to coincide.” However, until the meeting at the White House, Wilkins had remained uncertain about Johnson’s commitment to civil rights.¹⁹

At the meeting in November 1963 Wilkin asked Johnson why he was waging such a determined fight for the bill. The president repeated King’s words at the March on Washington: “Free at last, free at last. Thank God almighty, I’m free at last,” which Dallek interprets as the comments of a man liberated from those political considerations that had prevented him from taking action until that moment.²⁰ Whatever Wilkins’ skepticism, the shared desire to see the civil rights bill passed

¹⁴ Stern also cites his segregationist rhetoric during his 1948 Senatorial campaign in Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 115.

¹⁵ Letter from Lyndon Johnson to Hurschel Mericle, Chairman of the Beaumont Taxpayers for Segregation and Clean Government, March 29, 1957. Letter from Lyndon Johnson to Mrs Wayne Pigg, February 22, 1957, Legislative files, 1957-58, Box 289. LBJL. Both the letters and Johnson’s replies are representative of many similar exchanges from this period in the Johnson archives.

¹⁶ Wilkins, Interview I, LBJL; Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 296.

¹⁷ Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 26.

¹⁹ Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 153.

²⁰ Dallek, *Flawless Giant*, 113.

forged a relationship between the two men that remained strong throughout Johnson's presidency. Wilkins was also a moderate, and his belief in the power of the legislative process, made him Johnson's natural confidante on civil rights issues.²¹ Others in Johnson's administration shared the president's good opinion of Wilkins, including press secretary George Reedy who advised Johnson that he should consider Wilkins "*the Negro leader*," echoing the consensus of opinion among administration officials about Wilkins' "judgment and sense of fair play."²²

For Wilkins, this access to the highest reaches of political power was a satisfying recognition of his position – certainly in his own eyes – as the most important leader of black Americans. His predecessor, Walter White, had enjoyed the support of Eleanor Roosevelt, and through her gained limited access to President Roosevelt. White had also thrown his support behind Truman during the late 1940s and had been rewarded with encouraging signs of executive action on equal rights. However, neither White nor any other black leader had enjoyed the kind of collaborative relationship with a president that characterized Wilkins' and Johnson's interaction. Wilkins was ambivalent, at best, about most presidents before Johnson, judging them entirely on their commitment to civil rights. Johnson's apparent commitment to pushing through Kennedy's civil rights program, however, led Wilkins to lose his doubts and he soon became an enthusiastic ally.

This close association with Johnson was all the more important to Wilkins in the face of the public adulation heaped on Martin Luther King, which offended both Wilkins' inherent reticence and his jealous ego. In the three months following his assumption of the presidency, Johnson called or met with Wilkins seven times; four of which took place in the space of twelve days in January. The president solicited Wilkins' advice on what he should say about civil rights in his first State of the Union message, gathered his opinion on black appointees and goaded him to seek

²¹ Steven F Lawson, "Mixing Moderation with Militancy," in *The Johnson Years: Volume 3, LBJ at Home and Abroad* ed. Robert Divine, (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 84.

²² *Ibid.*, 84-85; Transcript, Harry McPherson Oral History Interview V by T. H. Baker, April 4, 1969, Internet Copy, LBJL.

Republican support for the civil rights bill.²³ “When are you going to get on down here and do some civil righting?”²⁴ This set a pattern that continued throughout Johnson’s tenure at the White House and beyond. Even after leaving office, he continued to seek Wilkins’ counsel; Roger Wilkins recounted that in one instance, shortly before Johnson died in 1973, when the former president asked his opinion on a speech he was due to give, Wilkins suggested he speak to his uncle, to which the president immediately agreed.²⁵

Johnson’s habit of recording telephone conversations that took place in the Oval Office has provided a valuable legacy of reference material, offering an illuminating insight into the relationship between the two men. During one telephone conversation early in his presidency, Johnson asked Wilkins for his opinion on the suitability of Spottswood Robinson and Leon Higginbotham for judicial appointments. Johnson asked whether Wilkins wanted the two appointed, saying he “wanted to be fair to his [Wilkins’] people,” and then if Wilkins didn’t want them appointed, he would appoint someone else. Wilkins was effusive in his praise of both men, saying that he would consider the appointment of Higginbotham a personal favor, to which Johnson promised that the appointment “would be made in the next five minutes.” True to his word, the president appointed him a judge to the Eastern District of Pennsylvania on the same day that he spoke to Wilkins.²⁶

During another conversation, Johnson proposed appointing black journalist Carl Rowan as director of the United States Information Agency, and asked for Wilkins’

²³ Between November 1963 and March 1964, Johnson met or spoke with King twice, Whitney Young four times and James Farmer three times. Schedule of meetings between President Johnson and civil rights leaders, 1963-1968, Legislative Background, voting rights act of 1965, Box 1, LBJL;

²⁴ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Roy Wilkins, January 6, 1964, 5.12PM, Citation no. 1200, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL; Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Roy Wilkins, December 23, 1963, 10.30PM, Tape#K6312.17, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL; Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Roy Wilkins, January 16, 1.20PM, Citation#1384, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL, Recording continues in Citation#1383; ²⁴ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Roy Wilkins, February 6, 1964, 12.15PM, Citation #1906, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.

²⁵ Roger Wilkins. Interview by author, Washington DC, August 16, 2006.

²⁶ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Roy Wilkins, January 6, 1964, 5.12PM, Citation no. 1200, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.

opinion. Wilkins gave the president a considered judgment that broadly supported the proposal, while pointing out that some articles that Rowan had written for the *Saturday Evening Post* had earned the antagonism of some blacks because of what they saw as a bias towards whites.²⁷ For Johnson, the main priority appears to have been securing the good opinion of the black community, and he clearly viewed Wilkins as his interpreter and conduit to that constituency. The only other black leader who commanded Johnson's attention and favor was Whitney Young. Although much younger than Wilkins, Young shared his pragmatic approach and, like Wilkins, believed in using the power of more established power structures such as business and Congress, rather than direct action, to achieve equality. Young also endeared himself to Johnson, who was happy to use him as yet another listening post to test ideas, gather opinions and seek advice.²⁸

What became a relationship of mutual respect and admiration between Johnson and Wilkins was forged during the fight for the civil rights bill originally proposed by the Kennedy administration. The legislation was a far-reaching attempt to redress some of the injustices faced by black Americans. The original bill, sent to Congress in June 1963, contained provisions to fight discrimination in voting rights, public accommodations and federally assisted programs; give more authority to the justice department to enforce the desegregation of public schools; establish a Community Relations Service and a statutory Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity; and continue the Civil Rights Commission.

Even in the emotionally charged atmosphere that pervaded Washington in early 1964 it was clear that in pushing for the legislation the stakes were dangerously high for both Wilkins and Johnson. After early attempts by the Kennedy administration and Congress to dilute some of the provisions, Wilkins warned that failure to pass the bill would encourage many blacks to abandon any faith in the

²⁷ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Roy Wilkins, February 6, 1964, 12.15PM, Citation no. 1906, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.

²⁸ Whitney Young's biographer Nancy J Weiss examines the relationship between Johnson and Young in *Whitney M Young St and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 146-150.

legislative process and resort to direct action to find relief.²⁹ If that happened, Wilkins would surely lose much of his authority, and the NAACP was likely to find its entire strategy questioned to an even greater degree by more militant groups who already saw little benefit in pursuing such a slow and uncertain plan. Johnson too had staked his political reputation on the passage of the bill. Like Wilkins, he recognized that the patience of black Americans could finally snap if faced with a compromised or failed bill, with the possibility that violence could follow. He also recognized that the segregationist tactics of many of its politicians and business people was hampering economic development in the South.³⁰

The president made it clear to Wilkins that it was not a fight he could wage alone and he put increasing pressure on the NAACP to take up the most public parts of the battle. In a telephone call to Wilkins in January 1964 he prodded Wilkins to “get working on this bill” as soon as possible, arguing that it was his responsibility to persuade Republican leaders to support the legislation. Johnson had long experience in navigating the personal politics involved in Congress and knew the battle that lay ahead in persuading politicians to support the bill. “You can’t make a southerner change his spots,” he warned Wilkins. “If we lose this fight Roy, we’re going back ten years.”³¹ Despite his insistence that, as president, he could not get involved in the fight, Johnson could not resist directing Wilkins’ strategy. He told Wilkins to focus on Senator Everett Dirksen (R-IL) and to persuade him of the potential benefits of the bill for the Republican Party: “blacks will go for the senatorial and presidential candidates who would support civil rights bill.”³² Johnson warned Wilkins that despite Clarence Mitchell’s significant reputation it would be better if Wilkins rather than Mitchell approached Dirksen, as Mitchell irritated the senator.³³ Johnson assured Wilkins that he would have access to the White House whenever necessary either in person or on the telephone.

²⁹ Anthony Lewis, “Civil Rights Issue: Administration will be Judged to Large Degree by the Fate of this Bill,” *New York Times*, December 8, 1963.

³⁰ Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 111-114.

³¹ Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon B Johnson and Roy Wilkins, January 6 1964. 5.12pm, Citation No.1200. Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL

³² Dirksen was minority leader of the Senate and as such of great strategic importance in ensuring the passage of the legislation.

³³ Ibid.

In much the same way as Johnson was able to make full use of his prodigious knowledge of Senate personalities and procedures to help ensure passage of the civil rights bill, Wilkins was able to make use of his knowledge of the membership of the NAACP and LCCR to exert pressure on Congress. At the time of Kennedy's death, the bill was with the House Rules Committee where it stalled as the shock of his murder reverberated through the country. The LCCR had planned a campaign of rallies, demonstrations and letter writing targeted at members of the Committee over the Thanksgiving recess, but the events in Dallas postponed further activity.³⁴ However, with Johnson's very public endorsement of the legislation and his plea to enact the bill as part of Kennedy's legacy, the bill's progress finally began to gain traction. Wilkins announced in December 1963 that the Association would urge members to vote against candidates who opposed the civil rights legislation.³⁵

Wilkins summoned NAACP delegates to Washington before the House began to debate the bill in early February 1964. To keep potential confusion to a minimum, he stipulated that only those branch leaders who knew their congressmen should attend. Along with lobbyists from the LCCR, the group waged a campaign of pressure to gain support for the bill.³⁶ Clarence Mitchell assigned LCCR members to watch four or five congressmen, who were potential supporters of the bill, from the balcony of the House. According to Mitchell's biographer, one of the aims of this tactic was to give the impression of a full gallery — and an interested electorate — to add pressure on lawmakers.³⁷ More importantly, members of LCCR organizations, nicknamed "gallery vultures," populated the House galleries throughout the debate, monitoring votes on amendments. House rules prohibited spectators from taking notes so the "vultures" had to remember how the votes were cast and report their observations to LCCR organizers the following morning. The "vultures" then returned to the galleries while a second group of volunteers were stationed on every floor of the two House office buildings to ensure that friendly

³⁴Memorandum, Arnold Aronson to Cooperating Organizations, November 18, 1963. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A206.

³⁵ Laymond Robinson, "NAACP to Ask Voters to Purge Civil Rights Foes," *New York Times*, December 2, 1963.

³⁶ Report, Executive Secretary to NAACP Board of Directors for April, 1964, May 11, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40. LOC.

³⁷ Memorandum, Arnold Aronson to Cooperating Organizations, February 11, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A206, LOC; Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 593.

congressmen were on hand to vote.³⁸ When, after nine days of debate, the House passed the bill by a margin of 160 votes, it was without the kind of compromise amendments that weakened earlier civil rights acts. Arnold Aronson boasted to members that LCCR tactics had been credited both by friends and enemies of the bill with playing a major part in its passage.

However, there was little opportunity to rest: the fight in the Senate would be far more difficult than the battle in the House. Wilkins instructed NAACP branch presidents on lobbying tactics: "Name a special committee for letter writing. Ask them to call people, speak to people, write to people and get individuals to write the two Senators from your state...ask your youth members to ring doorbells and get people to pledge to write letters to the Senators. Keep a list. Keep score. Hold huddles. Compare notes."³⁹ To bolster these lobbying efforts, the LCCR held a strategy meeting in Washington DC, from which a five-point plan emerged. It consisted of proposals for a one-day conference with voter registration committees to check on progress; a student assembly to encourage discussion of the bill; day of protest to be held by the women of B'nai B'rith to urge their two hundred thousand members to telegram their senators; an interfaith meeting; and regular visits to senators by LCCR delegations.⁴⁰ Wilkins directed the Association's lobbying efforts towards defeating amendments that threatened the strength of the proposed legislation.⁴¹

While Mitchell continued the association's lobbying effort on Capitol Hill, Wilkins traveled the country to bolster support for the bill at rallies and on television, speaking to students, religious and civic groups, and local NAACP branches. Ensuring passage of the pending bill dominated much of his life for much of the first half of 1964; almost every speech he made and every appearance was devoted to stressing the importance of its successful passage. Delegations of constituents visited their congressmen to lobby for the bill. Wilkins targeted senior senators to

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Memorandum, February 11, 1964, NAACP Papers; Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to NAACP Branch Presidents, March 24, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A72, LOC.

⁴⁰ Report, April, 1964, May 11, 1964. NAACP Papers; Monthly Report of the Washington Bureau, May 8, 1964, Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 47, LOC.

⁴¹ Report of the Executive Secretary for the month of May 1964, Undated but after the June 10, Senate vote on the Civil Rights Bill. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40, LOC

protest against amendments suggested by Senator Bourke Hickenlooper (R-IA). Wilkins met Eisenhower to discuss the bill. He also debated the legislation on television.⁴²

Even areas where support for the bill could be assumed were not exempt from his cajoling. Speaking to a YMCA conference at the California Institute of Technology in April 1964 for example, Wilkins criticized Proposition 14, a voter initiative that proposed to repeal California's "mild" fair housing:

It is something to ponder that in 1964 here in the great, wide West, in the state with the largest population in the United States, the one with the greatest road system, the greatest university system, the most sunshine, the most fruits and vegetables, the longest ocean coast line, the snow mountains coupled with the skin-diving beaches, the opera, the ports to the Orient and the world, the over-the-Pole flights to Europe and the Old Missions with their ages-old message – that with all this your state should be seeking to perpetuate the idea and practice of 16th century ghettos of the old, old world?⁴³

Although Wilkins coordinated efforts with Joseph Rauh, counsel for the LCCR, he worked most closely with Clarence Mitchell. The relationship between the two had sometimes been tense, particularly when Wilkins had assumed the role of Acting Secretary and subsequently Secretary. But there is no evidence in the NAACP's papers of any personal animosity between Wilkins and Mitchell. On the contrary, by the time the battle to pass the civil rights bill was underway, their relationship appears to have been one of mutual respect. Wilkins praised Mitchell's efforts effusively to the board of directors, describing how Mitchell sat in the gallery throughout Senator Robert Byrd's (D-WV) attempt to derail the legislation by speaking through the night. Wilkins also told of how Mitchell organized LCCR workers, with whom he worked during weekends and nights, and held weekly meetings with the legislative agents, at which they reported on the senators

⁴² Report of the Executive Secretary for May 1964, undated by after the June 19 vote. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40, LOC.

⁴³ Speech, Roy Wilkins at the California Institute of Technology YMCA Conference, Beckman Auditorium, April 22, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A304, LOC.

assigned to them. Shortly after the bill moved into the Senate, Mitchell wrote to Wilkins to thank him for the "kind and encouraging things you have said to me and other others about the progress of the civil rights bill. This is the kind of thing that makes one want to work twice as hard."⁴⁴

Their efforts were rewarded on June 19 when the Senate passed the bill by seventy-three votes to twenty-seven. It had been a long fight with rancorous debate that included a filibuster of over fourteen hours, and a historic vote to invoke cloture and cease further discussion. The cloture vote caused almost as much celebration in the ranks of the LCCR as the passage of the final bill. "The strong margin by which the cloture petition passed is . . . a tribute to those in the Leadership Conference who helped marshal support for the move that finally broke the filibuster," Wilkins noted. He added that "the overwhelming nature of the victory has broad implications for the future of the Senate and may mark the first real break in southern domination of the body."⁴⁵

When the bill finally passed, Johnson called Wilkins to share the news. It was a moment for the Association to savor. The NAACP declared the act on a par with the Emancipation Proclamation and the Declaration of Independence in importance, calling it "a measure by the people for the people."⁴⁶ In his annual report to the Board of Directors, Wilkins called the act "the final Congressional affirmation of the Negro's status and rights as a constitutional citizen . . . a Magna Carta for the race, [and] a splendid monument for the cause of human rights."⁴⁷ Mitchell was effusive in his praise of Wilkins' "statesmanlike and impressive leadership." He had been critical of the efforts of newer groups such as SNCC and SCLC, and reiterated his belief that Wilkins' more conservative and measured approach was by far the most effective. "You have found the way of consistent, effective, forward movement that will be long remembered when the history of this

⁴⁴ Letter, Clarence Mitchell to Roy Wilkins, February 18, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part IX, Box 233. LOC.

⁴⁵ Memorandum, Arnold Aronson to Cooperating Organizations, June 10, 1964, LCCR Papers, I37, LOC.

⁴⁶ Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 620; Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 302.

⁴⁷ Annual Report of Roy Wilkins, January 4, 1965, LBJL; Legislative background to Voting Rights Act of 1965, Folder: Preparation of Voting Rights Bill, Box 1; Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 302.

period is written by objective persons who want to tell the truth rather than by scribes who want saleable instead of facts."⁴⁸

Previous experience had demonstrated that establishing a set of rights in the statute book was no guarantee that those laws would be respected. But although Wilkins anticipated further courtroom battles to ensure implementation, he was quick to reject the idea of using demonstrations to force the issue. Mindful of antagonizing Johnson, and also aware of damaging the potential for future legislation if civil rights groups were too aggressive in testing compliance with the Civil Rights Act, he urged a cautious approach. "If you have to change spark plugs in your car, you don't use a sledge hammer," he warned. "We ought to be smart rather than loud in the manner we choose to implement the bill."⁴⁹ At the NAACP's annual convention in Washington in June 1964, Wilkins told delegates that the Association would maintain a "high degree of productive militancy without resort to 'adventurism'."⁵⁰

The NAACP's entire existence had been predicated, in large part, to achieving equal rights through legislation and litigation, and it could be argued that the Civil Rights Act, as momentous as it was, represented a serious challenge for Wilkins' deeply held belief in the redemptive power of legislation. It would have been naïve to imagine that the Act could cure the ills that beset black communities, and Wilkins was certainly not naïve. Once Johnson had signed the Act in July 1964, the Association would have much work to do in ensuring complicity with its provisions. Wilkins acknowledged this to some degree; as he pointed out to Arthur Baker Lewis, ensuring implementation of the Act would require further, sustained efforts including "money and staff and a far-reaching program not solely of action, but of education and community projects."⁵¹ Nevertheless, so much effort had been expended in the direction of securing the legislation that Wilkins must have felt uncertainty about how best to harness the resources of the Association for the next stage.

⁴⁸ Letter, Clarence Mitchell to Roy Wilkins, December 22, 1964. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 7, LOC.

⁴⁹ "Two Kinds of Leadership," *Augusta Herald*, June 23, 1964.

⁵⁰ M.S.Handler, "NAACP Keeps Moderate View," *New York Times*, June 24, 1964.

⁵¹ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Alfred Baker Lewis, February 19, 1965. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A33, LOC.

Herbert Hill, the NAACP's labor secretary, described the NAACP's confusion during this period in an interview some years later with historian Simon Hall. Hill called the NAACP simplistic in its view that American society could be changed through education and legislation. He argued that the Association underestimated the country's attitude towards race. This lack of awareness meant that the NAACP "was significantly weakened" after the passage of Civil Rights Act because it failed to make a "fundamental re-examination of the assumptions about race in American society and develop a significantly new program."⁵² There is some truth to Hill's hypothesis. Although NAACP branches were encouraged to file complaints against employment discrimination in order to implement the Civil Rights Act, the NAACP was not equipped to take on the challenge of redressing economic inequality as its primary strategy.

While Wilkins may have basked in Johnson's admiration and respect, he did not enjoy the same approval at the national office. Some of his colleagues among the NAACP board of directors were critical of his leadership. Just as the battle for the civil rights bill began in January 1964, Wilkins was once again in the spotlight as reports about dissent among the board began to reach the press. James Booker, one of those commentators who kept a close eye on the Association and an old foe of Wilkins, reported that there was a new move among some members of the board to dismiss Wilkins and replace him with Franklin Williams, a former NAACP official on the West Coast who by this time was a member of staff at the Peace Corps. Booker also suggested that there was a move to change the manner in which the president of the NAACP was elected.⁵³ Wilkins moved swiftly to dismiss Booker's assertions. In a letter to the executive staff criticizing the article, Wilkins made only an implicit reference to the suggestion that he could be replaced but instead took issue with Booker's suggestion that he was against change. However, Wilkins' argument was less with the specifics of Booker's article than the fact it had been published at all, presumably with the help of someone at the meeting. "The harm lies in the public discussion of it and the manner of that discussion – in this case a

⁵² Transcript, Herbert Hill, interview by Simon Hall, May 16, 2000.

⁵³ James Booker, "Move to Drop Wilkins?" *Amsterdam News*, January 18, 1964. "The Revolt Against Roy Wilkins," *New York Courier*, January 28, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A317, LOC; Letter, J.M. Tinsley, member of the National Board of the NAACP to Roy Wilkins, undated but presumably January, 1964. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 7, LOC.

community column devoted to rumors, reports and tid-bits." He argued that public speculation "looses a chain reaction among employed staff and, by interaction, among our vast volunteer membership and officer corps. It has its effects, also, in the board itself."⁵⁴

Another newspaper went even further than Booker. An article in the *New York Courier* headlined "The Revolt Against Roy Wilkins" claimed that the "smoldering revolt against Roy Wilkins...broke out in the open at the January board meeting and bids fair to become more pronounced with the passage of time."⁵⁵ The article referred to arguments over a one-day boycott of New York schools, with the aim of desegregating public schools, proposed by a new coalition of civil rights groups led by Reverend Milton Galamison. Wilkins had strong reservations about the boycott, reiterating his argument that boycotts could only be effective where "local conditions warranted."⁵⁶ The boycott was successful in terms of participants but a second protest much less so. Although the boycott movement faded away, it provided critics of Wilkins with ammunition.⁵⁷ Board members frustrated at Wilkins' conservatism raised the boycott episode at the annual NAACP board meeting in January 1964. The *New York Times* also devoted several articles to both the boycott and its implications for black leadership in the city. One article warned that "the profusion of civil rights organizations will produce so much confusion that the average Negro or white citizen will wander through this supermarket of philosophies – and buy nothing."⁵⁸ The *New York Courier* was quick to defend Wilkins but feared that "The NAACP rebels . . . are biding their time until they have sufficiently embarrassed and discredited him to make his replacement seem warranted."⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Executive staff, January 27, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A311, LOC.

⁵⁵ "The Revolt Against Roy Wilkins," January 28, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A311, LOC.

⁵⁶ Fred Powledge, "Who Leads the Negro?" *New York Times*, January 13, 1964,

⁵⁷ More on the New York school boycott can be found in Clarence Taylor and Milton A. Galamison, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton A. Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2000).

⁵⁸ "Who Leads the Negro?" January 13 1964; Fred Powledge, "New Rights Leaders," *New York Times*, February 6, 1964.

⁵⁹ "The Revolt Against Roy Wilkins", January 28 1964, NAACP Papers. Part III, Box A311, LOC.

Although nothing came of the attempt to challenge Wilkins — it was foiled by the opposition of several more established members of the board — Wilkins battled to restore morale inside the organization. He succeeded only temporarily and discontent rumbled on throughout the year. In October 1964 Eugene Reed, a dentist from Amityville, New York, called for a change in the composition of the NAACP's board of directors to "reflect more aggressive, grass-roots opinion..⁶⁰ Wilkins' detractors established themselves as a constant and very public thorn for Wilkins. Reed was joined by Jack Tanner, head of the NAACP's Northwest Conference of Branches, in a chorus of disapproval that followed Wilkins throughout 1964 and into the following year. Reed, Tanner and their supporters publicly criticized Wilkins wherever possible, most often around the time of the Association's annual conference. Tanner, for example, told one newspaper that "the job of the NAACP is to intensify the heat on all fronts in all parts of the country and not to play around with the Government. There is growing sentiment that the organization is becoming inert."⁶¹

In November 1963, the NAACP hired a group of consultants, Lennon Rose from Chicago, was hired to make "an objective and critical study of the Organizational Structure, the Systems and Procedures of the National Office, Regional and Field Offices, and Branch Operations of the NAACP" with the primary aim of saving money.⁶² The Committee to Create a Dynamic Program, led by Daisy Lampkin, was then given the task of managing and implementing the changes recommended by the report. The Rose survey took four months to complete, with consultants visiting branches in twenty-two cities. Among the questions the consultants asked were whether the Association should be more militant, and whether its fund raising methods were effective. Although they did not officially ask questions about Wilkins, branch leaders were questioned closely about his management style, personality and public image.

⁶⁰ Fred Powledge, "NAACP Rebels Seek Board Posts," *New York Times*, December 8, 1964; Fred Powledge, "Militants Press for NAACP Role," *New York Times*, October 5, 1964.

⁶¹ M.S.Handler, "NAACP to Help Implement Laws," *New York Times*, July 4, 1965. The decline in memberships was also cause for concern. After rising to over 534,500 by the end of 1963, it had fallen to just under 456,000 a year later.

⁶² Report, Conclusions of the Management Survey Commissioned by the NAACP and Completed by Lennon/Rose, August, 1964, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A316, LOC; Minutes, Board of Directors meeting, April 13, 1964, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 16, LOC.

Althea Simmons, the NAACP's field secretary on the West Coast, sent Wilkins a summary of her conversation with Sam Rose, and her comments suggest that the consultants were less than convinced about Wilkins' leadership, even at the beginning of the survey.⁶³ Simmons reported that the consultant was "obviously fascinated with the factions within the National Board of Directors." In a surprisingly indiscreet comment, Rose apparently told Simmons that the faction of which Chet Lewis is a part should gain control because they were willing to revitalize the association. Rose also claimed, said Simmons, that Wilkins' "idiosyncrasies," such as "not wanting staff or branch people to meet him when he comes into town," were "hurting the Association."⁶⁴ The lack of press coverage given to Wilkins and the NAACP was questioned, despite Simmons' retort that Johnson's call to Wilkins, before any other civil rights leader, hardly suggested a bad image. According to Simmons, Rose told her that the NAACP was "the poorest run organization I have ever seen," that the branch structure should be radically overhauled, and that younger people should be brought in to run the organization "from the top right down to the bottom".⁶⁵

Far from guiding the Association towards a more dynamic program, the final report concentrated mainly on organizational restructuring and logistical tinkering. To ease the management burdens on the Secretary, the consultants proposed that his title be changed to Executive Director, which was more "descriptive of the responsibilities of the Executive who is in fact to 'direct' the NAACP organization in the preparation and implementation of programs." In addition, the number of people reporting to that position should be reduced from twenty to one: a newly created Director of Operations.⁶⁶ By creating an operational role, the consultants argued that Wilkins would have more time for public relations, strategy planning and public appearances. Lennon/Rose proposed that responsibilities under the newly created position should include national programs involving labor, voting,

⁶³ Notes, Interview between Althea Simmons and Sam Rose, December 18-19, 1963, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 29, LOC.

⁶⁴ According to Judge Nathaniel Jones, who worked as the NAACP's General Counsel from 1969 to 1978, Wilkins believed that, by making his own travel at his destination, he avoided any potential difficulties that might arise from being met by members of one faction or another. Judge Nathaniel Jones. Interview by the author, December, 2007. New York.

⁶⁵ Notes, Althea Simmons and Sam Rose, December 18-19, 1963, Roy Wilkins Papers, LOC.

⁶⁶ Annual Report, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I14, LOC.

education, housing, fund raising, youth activities and individual or specialized programs.

An important question posed to all survey participants was why the Association did not enjoy a larger members relative to the total black population, and why only a small number of members were actively engaged in implementing the Association's programs at a local level. Althea Simmons told Wilkins that during Rose's visit to the Los Angeles office the consultant raised several questions about the process of taking instructions from a regional office as well as the national office.⁶⁷ To redress the situation, the consultants recommended decentralizing the NAACP's regional framework. The Association already operated regional offices for the southeast, the west coast, the southwest, the tri-state area and the mid west, but the structure could be cumbersome. On the West Coast, for example, there was a regional office, with a field secretary, five area conferences and then a number of branches throughout the state with information and instructions coming from all directions.⁶⁸

Lennon/Rose's solution was for the Association to establish seven regional offices, to which local branches would report, with the offices situated in the largest cities in each region. Only issues that could not be dealt with by the regional office would be sent up to head office. Within each regional office, field directors and secretaries would deal with local membership drives, fund raising and direct action campaigns.⁶⁹ Reorganizing the field structure in this way, the consultants argued, would eliminate the 'bottleneck' of communication that existed between the national office and branches. More importantly, by releasing national office staff from day-to-day tasks that could and should be managed by regional teams, more thought could be given to the development of programs.⁷⁰ To capitalize on potential

⁶⁷ Althea Simmons December 18-19, 1963, Roy Wilkins Papers, LOC.

⁶⁸ Organizational chart, Organization and Conference Manual, West Coast Region, May, 1953. Arthur Spingarn Papers, Reel 35, LOC.

⁶⁹ Conclusions of the management survey commissioned by the NAACP and completed by Lennon/Rose, August, 1964, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A316, LOC

⁷⁰ Report, Results of management survey completed by Lennon/Rose, March 20 1964. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 29, LOC; Another recommendation made by the consultants was to computerize the national office. This was done at some expense but was a notorious failure. John Morsell, interview, MRSC transcript, 29

members in large urban areas that might not be best served by a single branch, the consultants proposed 'multi-branches.'

The report appears to have been adopted with almost no dissent. Gloster Current offered his thoughts to Wilkins. He approved of the multi-branch idea but questioned the wisdom of closing some of the regional offices, if that indeed was what the consultants proposed, particularly in areas such as Mississippi. Current was more concerned, however, with the distinctions that would be made between "line" and "staff" functions in the reorganization. His main complaint was that many of the roles that the consultants had identified as line positions, such as public relations, general counsel and the director of the Washington bureau were in fact staff positions responsible for advisory and strategic decisions.⁷¹ As one of those who would be 'demoted' by reporting to the director of operations, rather than to Wilkins, his remarks would surely have been prefaced with a certain amount of self-interest. Nevertheless, he was right to question the wisdom of not only attaching too many responsibilities to one role, but also removing access to the final arbiter of strategy and tactics. Ultimately, the Lennon/Rose proposal appeared to make the NAACP more bureaucratic rather than less.

Some of the recommendations, particularly those involving the most senior members of the national office staff, were implemented quickly, not least because those were the changes easiest to make. In September 1964, the NAACP announced Wilkins' new title, John Morsell's appointment as director of operations, and Gloster Current's new role as director of branches and field administrator. New positions for fund raising, office administration, and training were also announced, along with plans to open several new regional offices.⁷² However, it was clear that reorganizing the regional operations was a far more delicate process than the consultants imagined. A progress report sent to Wilkins eight months later that regional directors had still not been appointed, and that Tarea Hall Pittman and Althea Simmons, both from the West Coast region, had not been reassigned to their new regional roles. Wilkins was supposed to reassign Pittman to position of

⁷¹ Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, April 9, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A30, LOC.

⁷² Press Release, "Reorganization Program Adopted by NAACP Board," September 15, 1964, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A316, LOC.

fundraiser for the West Coast — a conversation he had clearly avoided. It can be assumed that when the discussion finally took place, it was not well received. A letter from Wilkins to Leonard Carter in May 1965, when Carter was about to move from Kansas City to San Francisco to take over regional responsibilities, warned that “the idea, bluntly, is to separate Mrs. Pittman from any authority, influence or connection with the ordinary duties of a regional director.”⁷³

Despite the reorganization underway at the national office, external rather than internal events commanded Wilkins’ attention during the summer of 1964. Within two weeks of the signing of the civil rights bill into law, violence erupted on northern streets. The riots began in Harlem and quickly spread to New Jersey, Philadelphia, Chicago, Brooklyn, Rochester and Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York. That the riots in 1964 took place in the north was an indication that the plight of blacks in other parts of the United States was every bit as desperate as that of those in Alabama or Mississippi, and arguably more angry and frustrated. The riots also were proof, if any were needed, that civil rights legislation offered no panacea for the troubles afflicting the ghettos. NAACP branch leaders in New York City and Brooklyn traveled through the affected areas with loudspeakers and sound trucks in an attempt to calm the situation. The Brooklyn branch also distributed leaflets demanding: “Cool it baby!” and saying “Violent demonstrations and looting hurt our cause — Think!”⁷⁴

For Wilkins, the answer for northern blacks was to use the ballot rather than bricks. “They know about it, and they use it, but not as effectively as the Irish, the Poles, the Italians and the Jews have used it . . . The ballot is no cure-all but it is a tool in a democratic society that no group, disadvantaged socially and economically, can afford to ignore.” His belief in the ballot was such that he also made the somewhat disingenuous assertion that black Americans could “have had such an act [as the civil rights act] years ago, if he had registered and voted to his full potential in the non-southern states.” The southern black, on the other hand, he argued, “must use

⁷³ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Leonard Carter, May 27, 1965, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 7, LOC; Report, Progress Report, Lennon/Rose to the NAACP, November 16, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A30, LOC.

⁷⁴ Report, Executive Secretary’s report to the NAACP Board of Directors, July and August, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A32, LOC.

court action, moral suasion, consumer buying influence, his slowly growing voting strength and nonviolent demonstrations."⁷⁵ The threat of violence had hung in the air for some months but all eyes had been in the wrong direction. Shortly before the civil rights act was passed, Johnson called Wilkins to discuss timing of the signing of the bill and whether, if it was signed over the July 4th holiday weekend, could "kick off a wave of trouble" in the South.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, no one fully considered the possibility that the tinder was as explosive in Harlem as in Alabama.

One of the sparks of the violence, Wilkins believed, was the emergence on the national stage of Barry Goldwater, the Republican senator from Arizona who was named the GOP's nominee in the 1964 presidential election after a bitterly fought primary campaign.⁷⁷ Goldwater was a conservative who not only argued that the Constitution did not require schools to be racially mixed, but also contended that the federal government had no business in involving itself in the desegregation process.⁷⁸ Unsurprisingly, this won him few friends at the NAACP's national office. The Association took small comfort from the fact that the senator had been a member of the Tucson branch of the NAACP in the mid-1950s; instead his libertarian approach to civil rights infuriated Wilkins. While the civil rights bill was still being debated in Congress, Goldwater told an audience in New York City that the Republicans would "cool the fires of racial strife." Wilkins immediately issued a blistering attack on the candidate: "Your position is part of the cotton batting comfort accorded this regime of blood and death by those senators now blocking even a vote on a civil rights bill."⁷⁹ Goldwater's extremism put Wilkins in an awkward position. The NAACP was historically and assiduously bipartisan, but the senator's remarks, appearing while Johnson's civil rights bill was moving through Congress, made it impossible for Wilkins to be anything other than contemptuous in his comments about Republican front-runner.

⁷⁵ Roy Wilkins, "What Now? One Negro Leader's Answer," *New York Times*, August 16, 1964.

⁷⁶ Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon B Johnson and Roy Wilkins, July 1 1964. 12.05pm, Citation no.4120. Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL

⁷⁷ Report, Report of the Executive Secretary for July and August, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40, LOC.

⁷⁸ Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 192-193.

⁷⁹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Senator Barry Goldwater, May 13, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40, LOC.

When Goldwater was nominated as the Republican candidate, Wilkins immediately sent a telegram to the main civil rights leaders warning that more demonstrations could damage Johnson's chances. In his telegram inviting the leaders to a meeting, Wilkins abandoned his usual cool tone. "There is no safety in the assumption that Goldwater cannot win the election," he warned. "He can win it and he can be helped to win if the wrong moves are made. It is of highest importance we take council at earliest moment to ensure that without modifying any essential position we do nothing to produce votes for Goldwater. The promise of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 could well be diminished or nullified and a decade of increasingly violent and futile disorder ushered in if we do not play our hand coolly and intelligently."⁸⁰ He struck a similarly dramatic tone in an article for the *New York Times*. "Nothing could be more important at the moment in the Negro civil rights struggle than refraining from any action that aids Goldwaterism. The response to the moratorium plea will be the measure of the maturity of the Negro community. No sacrifice of principle is involved, only an alteration - temporarily - in tactics. Those Negroes who mistake tactics for principles are miscast in the struggle for the race's freedom."⁸¹

It is not clear whether the idea of a moratorium was proposed first by Johnson, Wilkins or Whitney Young. Johnson was clearly worried that the protests would aid Goldwater. He also expressed concern to Wilkins that protests were detracting from voter registration efforts. Although he did not explicitly request Wilkins try to bring about a halt, the desire was certainly implicit. In response, Wilkins told the president that a meeting with the other leaders was scheduled for the following day. He promised to "attempt to get a statement agreed upon to call off demonstrations and concentrate on registration and voting."⁸² At the meeting

⁸⁰ Lewis, *Walking with Wind*, 284; Telegram, Roy Wilkins to Martin Luther King, James Farmer, Whitney Young, A Philip Randolph and John Lewis, July 22, 1964. Cited in Report, Report of the Executive Secretary to Board of Directors for July and August, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40, LOC.

⁸¹ Roy Wilkins, *New York Times*, August 16, 1964.

⁸² Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon B Johnson and Lee White, July 16, 1964. 6.50pm, Citation no. 4252. Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL; Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon B Johnson and Roy Wilkins, July 28, 1964. 11am, Citation no. 4361. Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL; Transcript, Roy Wilkins Oral History Interview, April 1, 1969 by Thomas H Baker, Internet Copy, LBJL, 8; Bruce Miroff, "Presidential Leverage over Social Movements: the Johnson White House and Civil Rights," *The Journal of Politics*, 43:1 (February 1981): 13.

convened by Wilkins at the end of July, Wilkins proposed a moratorium on demonstrations until the elections had taken place in November.⁸³ In advocating this, Wilkins was making a sharp reversal of his opinion of only a year before when he had told convention delegates that blacks could not be expected to agree to Kennedy's request for a moratorium.⁸⁴ This time, however, he was emphatic in his belief that halting demonstrations during the election campaign would be vital if Goldwater and the white backlash he represented were to be stopped.

But his proposal to halt demonstrations produced the usual fault lines: Randolph, Wilkins and Young urged a moratorium; Lewis and Farmer firmly rejected the idea; while King, according to David Garrow, took the path of least resistance in attempting, as usual, to avoid confrontation with Wilkins and found something to agree with from both sides.⁸⁵ Lewis was particularly reluctant to be seen as favoring one party or candidate over another, as such a moratorium would imply. More than that, he argued that the right to demonstrate should never be compromised for any reason. Neither Farmer nor Lewis signed the resulting statement. In his report to the board of directors in September, Wilkins said that Farmer and Lewis both agreed with the moratorium personally but the internal politics of their respective organizations would not allow them to endorse it.⁸⁶

As a compromise, the statement was less stringent than either Johnson or Wilkins would have wished, and avoided an explicit call for a moratorium suggesting instead a "broad curtailment."⁸⁷ Nevertheless, it still bore the stamp of Wilkins' desire to put an end to the demonstrations and protests. The statement signed by Young, Wilkins, King and Randolph, explained that "the present situation . . . presents such a serious threat to the implementation of the Civil Rights Act and to

⁸³ Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon B Johnson and Roy Wilkins, July 28, 1964. 11am, Citation no. 4361. Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.

⁸⁴ "NAACP Open Sessions," Margery McEllheny, *Washington Post*, July 2, 1963.

⁸⁵ Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 343; Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 424; Meier & Rudwick, *CORE*, 324. Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 200; Stern, *Calculating Visions*, 197; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 284.

⁸⁶ Report, Minutes of the Board of Directors' meeting, September 14, 1964. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 16, LOC; Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 324; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 324; Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 284.

⁸⁷ Text of Statements by Negro Leaders, *New York Times*, July 30, 1964; Also reprinted in the Report of the Executive Secretary for July and August, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A32, LOC.

subsequent expansion of civil rights gains that we recommend a voluntary, temporary alteration in strategy and procedure." In words that must have gladdened Wilkins' heart, the statement proposed "a temporary change of emphasis and tactic, because we sincerely believe that the major energy of the civil rights forces should be used to encourage the Negro people, North and South, to register and to vote. The greatest need in this period is for political action."⁸⁸ A second statement, issued alongside the first, condemned the riots, drawing "a sharp distinction between the [rioting] and legitimate protest efforts by denied and desperate citizens seeking relief." It also, however, called for "more socially sensitive police action, for machinery for continuing communications and local civilian review."⁸⁹

The disagreement among the "Big Six" attracted unwelcome attention from the press. The *New York Times* gleefully reported a "split" among the groups over the proposed moratorium. The newspaper also managed to make Wilkins look confused, at best, by repeating his comments about Farmer and Lewis' personal approval of the call and then questioning why he had made such a statement when the two leaders made such public denials.⁹⁰ When Lewis heard Wilkins' comments, he apparently said he remained silent "in the interests of unity."⁹¹ Certainly, in light of David Garrow's assertions about King's reluctance to enter into a confrontation with Wilkins, Lewis' inclination to do likewise would be understandable.

In a series of articles published before the election, Wilkins positioned himself as the moderate spokesman for black Americans. In one magazine article in which he discussed black political allegiances and voting patterns, Wilkins reiterated his belief that "the protest movement must become, more and more, a political

⁸⁸ Text of Statements by Negro Leaders, *New York Times*, July 30, 1964; Also reprinted in the Report of the Executive Secretary for July and August 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A32, LOC.

⁸⁹ "Key Negro Groups Call on Members to Curb Protests," July 30, 1964, *New York Times*; Text of Second Statement by Negro Leaders, *New York Times*, July 30, 1964; Text of Statements by Negro Leaders, *New York Times*, July 30, 1964; Also reprinted in the Report of the Executive Secretary for July and August 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A32, LOC.

⁹⁰ R.W. Apple, "Negro Leaders Split Over Call to Curtail Drive," July 31, 1964, *New York Times*.

⁹¹ R.W. Apple, *New York Times*, July 31, 1964.

movement, as the NAACP has long maintained."⁹² He also reiterated the rationale for the curtailment of demonstrations in a second article, published in the *Saturday Review*, two months before the election. The piece was part of a series of 'position papers' on different aspects of the upcoming election, and the magazine's position among a cadre of liberal, intelligent publications offered him an immediately sympathetic audience. Wilkins used its pages to highlight the many historical infringements upon lives and liberties of black Americans, but he also chose to attack black apathy and extremism.⁹³

As the rioting in the North died down, Wilkins had to address the situation in Mississippi once more. Two days after the Senate passed the Civil Rights Act, three CORE workers disappeared in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Two, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were young white men from New York, while James Chaney was black and a native Mississippian. The trio had come to work in the region as part of the 'Freedom Summer' voter registration project along with hundreds of college students, the majority of whom were white, middle class and from the North and Midwest. Mississippi was the most intractable state in the country in terms of complying with any civil rights legislation and the incident involving the CORE workers was a tragic repetition of many such events that had taken place over the years, but with far less attention.

Concern about the lack of black rights in the state was so high that the NAACP's board of directors agreed to send an investigative group to Mississippi to support the organization's branches and workers, and to "attempt to see, experience and translate to the Board what it means to be a Negro living in Mississippi."⁹⁴ The group found few "glimmers of light" in the state and their report, while containing no new information, made depressing reading. Anyone involved in civil rights activity operated in a climate of fear and intimidation, employment discrimination was endemic; and the legal and judicial structure was so corrupt that murder,

⁹² Roy Wilkins, "The Two Political Parties and the Negro Vote," Unattributed and undated but between September and November, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40, LOC.

⁹³ Roy Wilkins, "The Negro and the Candidates," *Saturday Review*, September 26, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A40, LOC.

⁹⁴ Report of the Special Mississippi Investigation Committee of the National Board of Directors of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, July 23 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A200, LOC.

bombings and violent attacks not only continued to go unpunished but were often conducted with the full knowledge and sometimes cooperation of the local police. The group urged the Department of Justice to investigate the abuse of authority by local and state officials, and make recommendations to Congress for the passage of further legislation. The report also called on the Civil Rights Commission to hold public hearings in the state to examine charges of denial of equal protection of the law.⁹⁵ Mississippi's reputation as the most dangerous state for civil rights activists had encouraged all the civil rights groups to unite under one umbrella organization, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in early 1962. COFO's primary purpose was to coordinate efforts by all the national, state and local groups working to boost voter registration in the state.⁹⁶ Although the NAACP was heavily involved in its formation (Medgar Evers was one of the founders and Aaron Henry, the Association's state president in Mississippi, was COFO's president) by 1964 SNCC was the primary driver of its activities.

The NAACP disliked SNCC's expanding role in Mississippi. It was always reluctant to participate in any program or activity in which it was forced to share or cede control to another group. Having to work within the COFO structure became increasingly onerous for its branches. Local leaders argued that COFO's programs were undermining the NAACP's efforts in Mississippi, while the other groups accused Wilkins of controlling COFOs' finances and therefore, by default, its activities.⁹⁷ When COFO announced plans that it was to bring hundreds of 'Ivy League' students to aid voter registration work in the state, Gloster Current, ever suspicious of the motives of other organizations, warned Wilkins in April that it would likely create "considerable problems" for the organization. "The COFO project, if the Bill passes, could well bend our efforts to implement the Civil Rights Bill. Are we ready for an ideological revolution? Can we permit Aaron Henry to carry the banner alone in Mississippi under COFO with an inexperienced Field

⁹⁵ Report, Special Mississippi Investigation Committee of the NAACP, July 23, 1964. NAACP Papers.

⁹⁶ Dittmer, *Local People*, 118-119.

⁹⁷ Memorandum, Laplois Ashford to Roy Wilkins, May 25, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A212; Letter, Aaron Henry to Gloster Current, May 30, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A212;; Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, John Morsell and Clarence Mitchell, July 22, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A212, LOC.

Secretary who still doesn't quite understand all the implications?"⁹⁸ There is no record of Wilkins' response to Current's questions, but there can be little doubt that he shared the opinion of his colleague. Wilkins also feared that communists were still trying to use the civil rights movement as a means of undermining the American political system.⁹⁹

The 1964 Democratic convention became the focus of the next fight when a delegation from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), a group organized by SNCC to replace the all-white, official delegation challenged the party's establishment to allow it to be seated in the convention hall. The MFDP clearly had moral authority on its side and its presence highlighted the blatant and illegal discrimination that prevented blacks taking full part in the political process in Mississippi. Johnson was determined that the convention should pass without incident and Wilkins shared that hope. Wilkins nevertheless told Johnson that the discovery of the bodies of three missing civil rights workers in Mississippi shortly before the convention began had "taken on a much more emotional load on the black side of the color line than it has before and there is simply nothing for any organization or body to do except endorse the proceedings." He then said that he "would be absolutely in an untenable position if I opposed the seating of the Freedom Party."¹⁰⁰

Johnson engineered a 'compromise' solution whereby the MFDP were offered two seats at the convention as delegates 'at-large' with the other delegates admitted as 'honored guests,' while the state's official delegation would be required to sign an oath of loyalty to the Democratic party and its platform and to agree to revise its discriminatory rules in the selection of delegates.¹⁰¹ The proposal was bitterly rejected by the MFDP and the loyalty oath was too much for the Mississippi delegation, which walked out of the convention. Nevertheless, the oath was

⁹⁸ Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, April 9, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A212, LOC; The field secretary Current refers to is Charles Evers, Medgar Evers' brother, who assumed the role on his brother's death with little support from the National Office.

⁹⁹ Draft letter, Roy Wilkins to Gloria Richardson Dandridge, undated but in response to a letter written by Dandridge on December 4, 1964. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A212, LOC.

¹⁰⁰ Recording of telephone conversation between Roy Wilkins and President Johnson, August 15, 1964. Citation no. 4940, LBJL.

¹⁰¹ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 287; John Dittmer devotes a chapter to the challenge of the MFDP in Atlantic City in detail in *Local People*, 272-302.

adopted by the convention at large, and it ensured that the 1968 Democratic convention excluded the white delegation and seated civil rights workers.¹⁰²

Some civil rights leaders saw the display of Johnson's power, and its effect on the Democratic Party as the turning point in the civil rights movement. John Lewis of SNCC wrote later: "It was a major letdown for hundreds and thousands of civil rights workers both black and white, young and old people alike who had given everything they had to prove that you could work through the system. They felt cheated. They felt robbed."¹⁰³ Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the leaders of the MDPF who had given an emotional testimony to the credentials committee about the violence and hardship she had endured simply for registering to vote, was, according to her biographer, particularly disgusted with Roy Wilkins, who is said to have told her to go home now she had made her point. His remarks angered her so much she cancelled her membership of the NAACP and often said later that "there ain't nothing that I respect less than the NAACP."¹⁰⁴

Wilkins fears of Goldwater's candidacy placed him in an uncomfortable position, but he was saved from taking a stand on the candidates by delegates at the NAACP's annual convention in June. The delegates took a decision that, Wilkins said, "marked the first time in the entire history of the organization that a partisan resolution, naming a specific candidate, has been adopted as Association policy."¹⁰⁵ Delegates called on the Republican National Convention to deny Goldwater its nomination. In an extraordinary resolution the NAACP's delegates accused Goldwater of opportunism in his "self-serving statement" supporting equal rights, particularly in light of his lack of support for civil rights legislation, and called upon the Republican National Convention to deny him the nomination and instead nominate a candidate who "represents the Republican party's philosophy of equal opportunities for all citizens."¹⁰⁶ Wilkins went further at a press conference the following month, in which, according to the *New York Times*, he departed "from the

¹⁰² Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 288.

¹⁰³ Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 291.

¹⁰⁴ Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 100. James Forman tells a similar story in his biography, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997), 388.

¹⁰⁵ Roy Wilkins, *Saturday Review*, September 28, 1964. NAACP Papers.

¹⁰⁶ M.S. Handler, "NAACP Opposes Goldwater's Bid," *New York Times*, June 28, 1964.

usual calm that characterizes his comments" and "said with heat: Whenever a candidate whose supporters are racists raises the question of racism, he invites the injection of racism into a campaign."¹⁰⁷

When the votes were counted in the November election, Johnson was returned to the White House in a landslide.¹⁰⁸ The Association claimed some credit for the large number of black voters who turned out for the 1964 presidential elections and suggested, in the Executive Secretary's monthly report to the board, that those voters had contributed significantly to the plurality of votes achieved by Johnson and Humphrey.¹⁰⁹ If, as Manfred Berg argues, the NAACP felt "obliged to watch Johnson's back" — particularly in the North where, during the primaries, the white backlash gave George Wallace's segregationist platform thirty per cent of the Democratic vote in Wisconsin and Indiana — it certainly delivered the black vote for the Johnson-Humphrey ticket.¹¹⁰ Black voters had turned out to the polls in record numbers: around six million according to NAACP estimates, with approximately eighty-eight to ninety-eight per cent of those votes cast for Johnson.¹¹¹

There was doubt at the national office about supporting a candidate so unequivocally. Gloster Current encapsulated the most prevalent fear with a warning to Wilkins that "The nonpartisan character of the NAACP must be scrupulously upheld. It is to the Negro's advantage to have a strong two-party system. Therefore, we should not look too happily upon the fact that better than ninety-five per cent of the Negro vote is currently in the Democrat's corner."¹¹²

¹⁰⁷ M.S. Handler, "Wilkins Assails Goldwater," *New York Times*, July 4, 1964.

¹⁰⁸ Johnson won by a 486 to 52 margin in the Electoral College and his share of the popular vote was the largest vote by the greatest margin and percentage won by a US President up to the point. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 183-4.

¹⁰⁹ Department of Public Relations departmental reports, Executive Secretary `Report, November 24, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A32, LOC.

¹¹⁰ Berg defines the white backlash as the anger of working and lower-middle class whites against what they perceived as governmental favoritism towards blacks. Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 209.

¹¹¹ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 213; The *New York Times* cited a similar statistic in a preliminary survey conducted by the newspaper: M.S.Handler, "Negroes a Major Factor in Johnson Victory," *New York Times*, November 5, 1964.

¹¹² Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, June 23, 1965. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A307, LOC.

Current's concern about the NAACP's close association with the Democratic Party was echoed by some of Wilkins' detractors on the board, who used his relationship with the president as a reason for him to abdicate his role as executive secretary. Jack Tanner, one of the Young Turks who continued to needle Wilkins, told an NAACP Area Conference that Wilkins "elected the President of the United States...when he declared a moratorium on demonstrations."¹¹³ A lawyer who had represented Native Americans rights activists, Tanner had held several offices with the NAACP including president of the Tacoma, Washington, branch and was a member of the national board. He called on Wilkins to resign, arguing that the NAACP "is losing ground to more militant organizations in the civil rights movement."¹¹⁴ Tanner implied that Wilkins' proximity to Johnson prevented him from leading the Association into more dynamic actions for fear of alienating the White House. Wilkins responded to the board by suggesting that such speculation damaged morale and undermined his leadership. Bishop Spottswood—who, according to Wilkins, Tanner also wanted to oust—wrote to local branch leaders to support Wilkins and called for unity within the NAACP.¹¹⁵

Wilkins made much the same case to board member Alfred Baker Lewis. He warned Lewis that such signs of dissension within the organization was damaging to morale and hampered its ability to carry out the work necessary to implement the Civil Rights Act:

At the very time the NAACP should be in high gear, the Tanner speech is undermining our unity and diverting our energies . . . Unless something is done, Mr. Tanner's speech and the follow-up at Denver is likely to guarantee, despite all efforts to the contrary, that the NAACP will be worse off at the end of 1965 than it was at the end of 1964. In other and plainer words, Mr. Tanner, whether he intends to or not, is wrecking the NAACP.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Remarks are cited in a memorandum from Roy Wilkins to the Executive Committee of the board of Directors, February 8, 1965. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 16, LOC.

¹¹⁴ Remarks, February 8, 1965. Roy Wilkins Papers, LOC.

¹¹⁵ Memorandum, Bishop Stephen Spottswood to Branch, State Conference, Youth Council and College Chapter Officers, March 1, 1965. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 16, LOC.

¹¹⁶ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Alfred Baker Lewis, February 19, 1965, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A33, LOC.

Local groups in New York City accused Wilkins of much the same sin when he intervened in a strike among New York City welfare department employees. He sent a stern telegram to leaders of both unions accusing the pickets of racism. It was a curious action, seemingly unconnected to the NAACP's broader sphere of activity and, according to one report, the opinion within the national office was that Wilkins only involved the NAACP because his wife was a senior aide to the welfare commissioner. Wilkins vehemently denied allegations made in the article and received an oblique apology. The publicity was unwelcome nevertheless.¹¹⁷

Wilkins was now so closely linked to Johnson that shortly after the election it was rumored he had been offered a cabinet post. The position was said to be part of a deal agreed with Johnson if the NAACP did not oppose the nomination of Mississippi governor James Coleman to the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.¹¹⁸ There is no evidence of such an offer or deal in the NAACP, Roy Wilkins or Lyndon Johnson archives; nor is there any evidence in the telephone recordings Johnson made of his conversations. At one point in October 1965, when Johnson was considering appointing Weaver to the cabinet, he did tell Wilkins that he was the person he would like to appoint but certainly made no offer, nor mentioned any previous offer. Even if Johnson had contemplated offer Wilkins a position in his administration he may have assumed that Wilkins would never consider leaving the Association.¹¹⁹ Wilkins firmly denied that such an offer had been made, assuring the NAACP's board that "My skills and heart are in the struggle for equality for my people through the NAACP . . . I have no intention of bowing out

¹¹⁷ Claude Lewis, "NAACP's Big Happy Family – No Holds Barred," January 24, 1965, *New York Herald Tribune*; Letter, Roy Wilkins to John Hay Whitney, Editor-in-Chief, *New York Herald Tribune*, January 26, 1965, Letter, John Hay Whitney to Roy Wilkins, January 28, 1965. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A261, LOC.

¹¹⁸ Speculation about a possible cabinet position for Wilkins first appeared in *Jet* magazine in November, 1964 following the election. At the NAACP annual conference, Max Dean, a delegate from Flint, Michigan, raised the allegation of a deal on the conference floor. "Vote of Confidence for Roy Wilkins; Nomination of Gov. Coleman Blasted," *Kansas City Call*, July 9, 1965, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box I16, LOC; "NAACP Chief Denies Cabinet Post 'Deal,'" July 1965, *New York Times*.

¹¹⁹ Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon B Johnson and Roy Wilkins, October 30, 1965. 4.03pm, Citation no. 9048. Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.

now when the Association's 55-year drive to wipe racial segregation from American life is so well on the way to realization."¹²⁰

Almost as soon as the election was over, Johnson called on civil rights leaders and met each one twice within two weeks. Prior to his second meeting with Wilkins, Johnson canvassed the opinion of the NAACP leader on who should be included, and asked him to think about how to consolidate the various civil rights divisions and committees. "I want you to use you as a critic to check it out and give me any conflicting ideas," he told Wilkins. Wilkins, ever cautious of ceding any power to other groups, told the president that a request was already being drafted for a conference and that "the move to hurry was to try to prevent any one person running to the president."¹²¹

Although the civil rights acts of 1957, 1960 and 1964 made some attempt to deal with the problems blacks faced in registering to vote, particularly in the South, they were not strong enough. Despite combined and individual voter registration drives by the NAACP, SCLC, SNCC, and CORE, blacks in the most belligerent southern states still had to undergo various tests expressly designed to ensure they would not qualify for the electoral register. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, in its hearings on voter registration held in Jackson, Mississippi, in February 1965, found that the county registrars in the state continued to discriminate against blacks through devices including the state poll tax and literacy tests even though the Supreme Court had invalidated such devices. Wilkins argued later that the civil rights groups had not fought for stronger voting rights provisions in the 1964 Civil Rights Act out of fear that the legislation would meet the fate of the its 1957 predecessor. He also suggested that Johnson wanted to assess how the provisions of the act were implemented before embarking on another major legislative battle. The president had made scant reference to voting rights in his 1965 State of the Union address, other than two lines promising to eradicate barriers to voting, and made no mention of the subject in his inaugural address, even though getting black

¹²⁰ Wilkins' letter to Spottswood is reprinted in a memorandum from Roy Wilkins to national board members, vice presidents, state conference presidents, branch and youth unit presidents, November 27, 1964. Roy Wilkins papers, Box 16, LOC.

¹²¹ Recording of telephone conversation between Lyndon B Johnson and Roy Wilkins, November 12, 1964. 11.10am, Citation no. 6348. Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL.

Americans onto the electoral rolls was one of Johnson's primary motivations in driving through the 1957 civil rights act and continued to be an objective of his administration, if not an immediate concern. However, as Wilkins said: "The South gave us no time for a breather."¹²²

In January 1965, in an effort to galvanize support for voting rights, SCLC led a demonstration in Selma, Alabama. Dallas County, of which Selma was the county seat, provided an appalling illustration of black registration: At the time of the demonstrations, of the 9,877 citizens registered to vote, only 335 were black, this in a county where blacks were in the majority.¹²³ The demonstrations continued throughout February despite the brutal response of Jim Clark, the local sheriff, and his posse of state troopers and local police. When a state trooper fatally shot a young black man during a nocturnal march, a confrontation between the civil rights activists and Alabama's segregationist governor, George Wallace, appeared inevitable. SCLC announced that, in defiance of Wallace's orders, a march would take place from Selma to Montgomery, a distance of fifty-four miles, on Sunday, March 7, a day that would quickly become known as "bloody Sunday".

As the marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge, on the outskirts of Selma, they were met by dozens of armed troopers who used tear gas, clubs and horses to subdue the marchers when they refused to disperse.¹²⁴ As the police charged at the protesters, one witness reported hearing a gunshot, then a cloud of tear gas was released but "before the cloud finally hid it all, there were several seconds of unobstructed view. Fifteen or twenty nightsticks could be seen through the gas, flailing at the heads of the marchers."¹²⁵ The situation was further inflamed when a white activist and Unitarian minister, James Reeb, was beaten to death by a white mob in Selma two days after Bloody Sunday.

¹²² Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 306; Johnson's biographer, Robert Dallek, supports Wilkins' assertion that Johnson was hesitant to introduce voting rights legislation in early 1965, *Flawed Giant*, 212.

¹²³ James C Harvey. *Black Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration* (Jackson: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973) 29.

¹²⁴ Fairclough. *Better Day Coming*, 290-291; David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1973), 74-77; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 398-399; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 225-251; Taylor Branch, *At Canaan's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster) 140-161.

¹²⁵ Garrow, *Protest at Selma*, 75.

Outraged at the violent scenes that were displayed across the world's newspapers and televisions, thousands of people throughout the United States joined in protests, marches, rallies and vigils to support the Alabama protesters. Wilkins joined the call for federal troops to support the marchers in Selma as they prepared another defiant attempt to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge.¹²⁶ When a federal judge issued an injunction against the proposed march, Wilkins accused the government of being a "partner, even if temporarily, of the Wallace storm-trooper machine." Although Johnson's attorney general, Nicholas Katzenbach, claimed later that it was he rather than the president who was hesitant about sending in federal troops, the Alabama state guard, which had been federalized, was on hand to maintain order when the fifty-mile march to Montgomery finally began on March 21.¹²⁷

Wilkins joined the marchers for the final four miles but chose to stand back and let those who had walked from Selma lead the way into the capital. He then joined the other civil rights leaders and celebrities to address thirty thousand people at the capitol building.¹²⁸ King spoke eloquently, promising that blacks "are on the move now and not even the marching of mighty armies can halt us" while the crowd enjoyed the warm spring weather. The event inspired Wilkins to unusually emotional rhetoric: "This historic march is one more evidence that in this first Emancipation year we have been busy building a house – not one made with hands. A house for our spirit, once bowed down, but now tall and free."¹²⁹ The event had a tragic conclusion however, when a white woman from Detroit, Violet Liuzzo, was shot dead by Klansmen while giving a lift to a black activist after the march. Liuzzo was a member of the Detroit branch of the NAACP and her murder left Wilkins with a "poisonous anger." Nevertheless, he recognized that the deaths of Reeb and Liuzzo "dotted the final i's and crossed all the t's on the Voting Rights Act. With martyrs, Congress found the strength to move forward."¹³⁰

¹²⁶ "Protests Spread Over the Nation," *New York Times*, March 15 1965; Farnsworth Fowle, "NAACP Urges Troops in Selma," *New York Times*, March 9, 1965.

¹²⁷ "Violence in Selma is Denounced by Political Leaders and Clergy," *New York Times*, March 10, 1965; Nicholas Katzenbach quoted in Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 337.

¹²⁸ Report, Executive Director's report to the Board of Directors, March 1965, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A33, LOC.

¹²⁹ Press Release, "March to Montgomery Hailed by Wilkins," April 3, 1964, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A272, LOC.

¹³⁰ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 309; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 211-221.

Much as he did in using the nation's grief following Kennedy's assassination to push forward the civil rights bill, Johnson made full use of the national outrage following Bloody Sunday to introduce voting rights legislation. He called Wilkins the day before addressing a joint session of Congress and told him that he would propose "a voting rights law that would redeem the bloodshed of Selma - and make sure it didn't happen again."¹³¹ True to his word, when Johnson gave his address he used the events at Selma as a moral challenge to Congress. "The Constitution says that no person shall be kept from voting because of his race or his color. We have all sworn an oath before God to support and to defend that Constitution. We must now act in obedience to that oath."¹³²

To ensure that the bill would not languish at committee stage or become trapped by a filibuster, Johnson told the assembly: "This time, on this issue, there must be no delay, or no hesitation, or no compromise with our purpose. We cannot, we must not, refuse to protect the right of every American to vote in every election that he may desire to participate in. And we ought not, and we cannot, and we must not wait another eight months before we get a bill. We have already waited 100 years and more and the time for waiting is gone. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome."¹³³ Wilkins called the speech "A moment at the summit in the life of our nation . . . I had waited all my life to hear a President of the United States talk that way. And, at that moment, I confess, I loved LBJ."¹³⁴

Johnson's instruction to his attorney general in drafting a voting rights act was simple: "I want you to write the goddamnedest toughest voting rights act that you

¹³¹ Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 306.

¹³² Lyndon B Johnson, Address to Congress: The American Promise, March 15, 1965, LBJL: <http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650315.asp>.

¹³³ *Ibid.*; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 218-219

¹³⁴ Lyndon B Johnson, Address to Congress, March 15, 1965, LBJL; "Rights Aides Hail Johnson Address," *New York Times*, March 16, 1965; Telegram from Roy Wilkins to President Johnson, March 16, 1965, WHCF, Named files, Roy Wilkins, LBJL; Wilkins with Matthews. *Standing Fast*, 307.

can devise.”¹³⁵ Katzenbach did exactly as ordered and submitted the boldest civil rights legislation since Reconstruction. The bill prohibited the use of discriminatory tests to prevent voter registration and applied to all elections. Among other revolutionary provisions contained in the legislation was a ‘trigger’ mechanism where the Department of Justice was authorized to send federal examiners into counties where the overall (black and white combined) registration or turnout for the 1964 presidential election fell below fifty per cent of eligible voters. The bill also created ‘covered jurisdictions,’ which specifically listed states and counties that were guilty of particularly egregious practices to prevent voter registration. The Act would require any of those states or counties to seek permission from the Justice Department prior to making changes to voting laws.¹³⁶

Wilkins acknowledged that these far-reaching provisions “went further than any other bill ever introduced on this subject.” But he was still not satisfied and argued that the proposed bill was “not enough.”¹³⁷ Speaking before the House Judiciary Committee in his capacity as chairman of the LCCR, Wilkins asked that all poll taxes should be abolished and that the trigger mechanism be amended to launch with a black registration rate of less than twenty-five per cent rather the fifty per cent of overall voters, in order to widen the area covered by federal examiners.¹³⁸ The poll tax had always been a particularly contentious issue for the Association. Although the Twenty-Fourth amendment, passed in January 1964 outlawed the tax for federal elections, Wilkins argued that some states and counties still used it as a barrier for local elections, and that a provision to ban the tax for all elections should be incorporated in the legislation. However, as Manfred Berg points out, a federal law prohibiting the poll tax on a state and local level could be seen as “constitutionally suspect” and the Johnson administration was reluctant to fight this issue and risk damaging the bill’s progress through Congress.¹³⁹ Lee White

¹³⁵ Katzenbach quoted in Raines, *My Soul is Rested*, 337.

¹³⁶ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 215; Watson, *Lion in the Lobby*, 656-658; Covered jurisdictions were created under section 5 of the Act. Some of those areas including parts of Virginia and North Carolina are still covered jurisdictions today. The Supreme Court is due to hear oral argument in *Northwest Austin Municipal Utility District v. Holder* (08-322), a case that challenges the constitutionality of section 5 on April 29 2009.

¹³⁷ Richard L. Lyons, “Katzenbach Mutes Clamor for More Vote Bill Strength,” *Washington Post*, March 25, 1965.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 216.

¹³⁹ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 216-217.

assured Wilkins that the NAACP's stance on the poll tax issue did not differ from that of the Administration and that "the question is solely one of the best route to the objective." It would be a mistake, however, to insist on a complete ban on the poll tax as it might delay "early passage of a thoroughly effective voting rights bill."¹⁴⁰

Given the weight of public sentiment, and Johnson's very strong support, the voting rights act was approved by 328-70 in the House and 79-18 in the Senate. Johnson signed it into law on August 6, 1965.¹⁴¹ That the more sweeping provisions survived intact was cause for celebration, as was the fact that the final bill was "stronger than the bill the Administration originally sent to Congress." The LCCR noted that even if the final version did not contain an outright ban on the poll tax "there is a provision that will ring the death knell for that shameful assessment."¹⁴² The Voting Rights Act was the culmination of an historic year for civil rights legislation that began with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As historian C. Vann Woodward wrote in the *New York Times*: "It was as if the first Reconstruction had been endowed with the 14th and 15th Amendments, the Reconstruction Acts, the Freedmen's Bureau, the Civil Rights Acts and the Ku Klux Klan Act by one session of Congress."¹⁴³

There is no doubt that without the moral imperative of Selma, the fight to enact such radical legislation would have been significantly harder. However, the role played by the LCCR, Wilkins, Mitchell and the NAACP was important in ensuring that the legislation was not diluted. True, the political climate had become so much more conducive to the idea of federal action on civil rights that Katzenbach later minimized the role that civil rights leaders played in the passage of the Voting Rights Act, arguing that the LCCR was "not so badly needed for this bill and thus

¹⁴⁰ Letter from Lee White to Roy Wilkins, May 12, 1965, Legislative background to Voting Rights Act, Box 1, LBJL.

¹⁴¹ Harvey, *Black Civil Rights*, 34.

¹⁴² Memorandum, Arnold Aronson to Cooperating Organizations, August 2, 1965, LCCR Papers, Box I37, LOC; See also Memorandum, Arnold Aronson to Cooperating Organizations, April 29, 1965; Memorandum, Arnold Aronson to Cooperating Organizations, July 1, 1965; Memorandum, Arnold Aronson to Cooperating Organizations, July 12, 1965. LCCR Papers, Box I37, LOC.

¹⁴³ C Vann Woodward, "After Watts – Where is the Negro Revolution Headed?" *New York Times*, August 29, 1965.

had little effect on its outcome."¹⁴⁴ Lee White, however, thanked Wilkins for the "excellent work being done by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights in securing support for the voting rights legislation."¹⁴⁵

The Voting Rights Act eliminated the most egregious examples of discriminatory actions that prevented black registration and clearly contributed to a significant rise in black registration. By 1969, according to Steven Lawson, approximately three-fifths of eligible black voters in the South had registered to vote. Even intractable Mississippi could record an impressive increase in the number of black voters which shot up to 59.4% in 1968 from a lowly 6.7% in 1964. Of equal importance was the effect on the number of blacks holding public office: by 1975 almost fifty per cent of black officials held municipal government posts, most of which were on city councils.¹⁴⁶ However, more subtle discrimination was harder to deal with and as rising tensions in northern cities proved, neither the Voting Rights Act nor the Civil Rights Act, while uncompromising signs of support by the federal government, were far from the solution Wilkins imagined.

Wilkins described the spring and summer of 1965 as the moment that "the civil rights movement seemed to be at the very apex of its power." The same could be said of the relationship between Johnson and Wilkins. Johnson's recognition that the problems faced by black Americans would not be solved purely by federal legislation, and his commitment, made clear in his Howard University commencement address in June 1965, to "open the door of opportunity" to blacks, led Wilkins to note that "No President before had ever been so enlightened or

¹⁴⁴ Harvey, *Black Civil Rights*, 33.

¹⁴⁵ Letter, Lee White to Roy Wilkins, May 25, 1965, WHCF files, Named file "Roy Wilkins," LBJL

¹⁴⁶ "Negro Registration in the South has Increased Dramatically", *New York Times*, May 15, 1966; Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 324; Fairclough, *Race & Democracy*, 387; Neil R McMillen, "Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi: Federal Enforcement and Black Protest in the 1960s," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol.43, No.3 (August, 1977) 369; Robert Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The African-American Struggle for Civil Rights in the Twentieth Century* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1998) p177; Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 185; Stephen G.N. Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta: The Struggle for Racial Equality in Georgia 1940-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001) 214-215; Steven F Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America Since 1941*, 3rd Ed. (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008) 118, 124; John Dittmer tells a less successful story of Mississippi in the months immediately following the passage of the Voting Rights Act where the Johnson administration was reluctant to send in federal registrars, *Local People*, 390-391;

bold.”¹⁴⁷ Steven Lawson notes that there were sometimes “protocol” problems in scheduling meetings between Johnson and the main civil rights leaders during this time because of King’s reluctance to meet the president with Wilkins and Young, who, the SCLC leader believed “took advantage of his international prestige.”¹⁴⁸

Wilkins’ attitude to King, while clearly colored by envy and resentment, is not easy to determine. Rumors surfaced in 1964 that Wilkins had offered to encourage King to retire from the movement, around the time that the FBI was said to have leaked information it had gathered on King’s extra-marital affairs. Cartha DeLoach, who was head of the Bureau’s crime records department, claimed that Wilkins had offered to help the FBI in its campaign to oust King. Wilkins claimed that, on the contrary, he had simply warned the Bureau that its determination to remove King from the public eye could only damage the civil rights movement.¹⁴⁹

Unsubstantiated allegations have been made over the years that Wilkins willingly acted as an FBI informer, in large part because of DeLoach’s claims. The FBI monitored Wilkins himself for many years as part of its hunt for hidden communists, as it did with any civil rights activist, and Wilkins was certainly fearful of any taint of communism being identified within the movement. He also maintained good relations with the Bureau – given the power of J. Edgar Hoover, the agency’s notorious director, it would have been foolhardy not to – but there is no reliable evidence that he acted as an informer. On the contrary, Yohuru Williams, in his study of Wilkins’ response to black power, cites a meeting with Johnson where Wilkins defended King against allegations made by Hoover and indicated to the president that King’s poor view of the bureau was shared by many black Americans.¹⁵⁰ David Garrow and Kenneth O’Reilly are among those scholars

¹⁴⁷ Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 311.

¹⁴⁸ Lawson, *Mixing Moderation with Militancy*, 89.

¹⁴⁹ David Garrow, “FBI Political Harassment and FBI Historiography: Analyzing Informants and Measuring Effects,” *The Public Historian*, 10:4 (Autumn 1988): 5-18; Memorandum, Cartha DeLoach to John Mohr, November 27 1964; George Lardner, “Wilkins Denied Any Link to FBI Plot to Discredit Dr. King,” *Washington Post*, May 31, 1978.

¹⁵⁰ Yohuru Williams, *A Red, Black and Green Liberation Jumpsuit* in Ed. Peniel E. Joseph, *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 177.

who doubt DeLoach's account of his conversation with the NAACP leader, arguing Wilkins' version of events was closer to the truth.¹⁵¹

Johnson's advisers were well aware of the competition of egos between the civil rights leaders, and most particularly between King and Wilkins. They were keen that Wilkins' position not be damaged — an indication of his importance to the administration. According to Lawson, Katzenbach recommended that the president not attend a banquet in King's honor at the end of 1964 because of the "power struggle" in which, the aides claimed, King and Wilkins were said to be embroiled. The Attorney General warned Johnson that his attendance might "elevate King" over Wilkins.¹⁵² As it happened, King's relationship with Johnson, in fact, declined sharply after the spring of 1965 as the SCLC leader called for a negotiated settlement of the war in Vietnam at the very time that Johnson was bent on ruling out negotiations in favor of military intervention.

Wilkins, by contrast, drew ever closer to the Johnson administration; indeed in April 1965, the State Department asked him to undertake a series of engagements in Paris, Berlin and London on the subject of race relations. During the trip Wilkins spoke to students, officials and local media on America's progress in civil rights. On May Day, he delivered a message from Johnson to a crowd estimated at about four hundred thousand in Berlin. Although transcripts of Wilkins' speeches made during his European trip are not available in the NAACP archives or in Wilkins' own collection of papers, his handwritten notes give an indication of the content of two of his speeches. Wilkins also resorted to his long-held practice of canvassing the opinions of his senior staff for their recommendations on what he should say.¹⁵³

Gloster Current suggested Wilkins first give a brief history of race relations in the United States, then expand on the tactics used by civil rights groups, and finally discuss the influence upon the movement of international affairs and the successive

¹⁵¹ David Garrow, *The FBI and Martin Luther King* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1981), 128, 271n41; Kenneth O'Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972* (New York: The Free Press, 1989) 106-107.

¹⁵² Lawson, *Mixing Moderation with Militancy*, 89.

¹⁵³ Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, April 19, 1965, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 23, LOC; Notes, handwritten speech notes for speeches at Amerika Huas, Berlin, April 30, 1965 and Chatham House, May 3, 1965, London, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 57, LOC.

improvement in executive attitudes.¹⁵⁴ Given the international audience, which may not have been well informed about the inequalities in schools, jobs, housing and voting rights, Wilkins repeated several salient and shocking statistics. More importantly however, Wilkins described what he saw as a crucial philosophical shift at work in the United States. He shaped his address by emphasizing three broad areas: the role of government, the assistance of white Americans, and “the relatively untold story” of black Americans in the fight for full equality, using his favorite device of mixing historical and contemporary examples to make his points.

The trip gave Wilkins an opportunity to display his innate patriotism. Indeed, his pride in being an American must have been a boon to the State Department. After all, here was a distinguished black leader, who could recite a litany of appalling and egregious acts visited upon his compatriots, and yet still speak with genuine faith and optimism about the steps the country was making to address discrimination. Following a list of “bestial” acts including the murders of Medgar Evers and Violet Liuzzo, Wilkins wrote that the “USA refuses to let these speak for nation.” Even the riots of 1964—which Wilkins emphasized were not part of the civil rights movement—did nothing to dent the “high hopes and rising expectations of Negro speaking for self and rejoicing in LBJ’s speaking for his cause.” Quoting from Johnson’s speech to Congress on March 15, Wilkins claimed that “in this spirit the US government is dealing out in the open, all errors and all successes in full view of the world – with the delicate and emotional and ages-old problem of race and color.” Wilkins was clearly unable to resist some rhetorical flourishes however, ending with: “I suggest that this often shocking, often heartbreaking and always thrilling struggle of the black American and of his country should compel the attention and active interest of all men everywhere who dream of a formula for a world of men upright, in both body and spirit, in the dignity of freedom.”¹⁵⁵

Not surprisingly, his visit was deemed to be a great success by State Department officials, not least because Wilkins was felt to have done much to put “alarming

¹⁵⁴ Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, April 19, 1965, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 23, LOC.

¹⁵⁵ Notes, handwritten speech notes for speeches at Amerika Huas, Berlin, April 30, 1965 and Chatham House, May 3, 1965, London, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 57, LOC.

headlines into a better perspective” and for helping to “clarify a facet of life...which has engendered much criticism” of the United States.¹⁵⁶ Still, given Wilkins’ resentment of Martin Luther King — who had visited Berlin six months before Wilkins — he must have been less than pleased with the comment of *BZ*, a German newspaper that “after the man of sensational actions and headlines, the man of persistent, detailed work came to Berlin.” Nevertheless, he must have been gratified to read “Wilkins believes in his country. He believes that it will be the home of freedom for all Americans. Roy Wilkins has spent 30 years of his life at transforming this America into reality.”¹⁵⁷

That transformation took one step closer to reality when, on June 4, 1965, President Johnson gave the commencement address at Howard University. The speech, which would come to be viewed as one of his finest, leapt ahead of the familiar commitment to ensuring equal rights. In one speech, Johnson laid the foundation of affirmative action and changed the framework of the establishment’s debate about what would be necessary to secure true equality for black Americans by acknowledging that freedom of opportunity was not enough to remedy the inequalities suffered by black Americans for generations.

Wilkins was prepared for Johnson’s comments. Shortly before making the speech, Johnson had called Wilkins to talk about an “all-out assault on the problems of race.”¹⁵⁸ It was a surprising announcement, even for a president who had already demonstrated more commitment to black equality than any since Lincoln. The speech drew unstinting praise from Wilkins and confirmed his opinion that Johnson was often ahead of the civil rights leaders.¹⁵⁹ Johnson’s speech relied heavily on a report on the collapse of the black family by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the Assistant Secretary of Labor for Policy Planning and Research, who had given a

¹⁵⁶ Letter, Elizabeth Brinton to Roy Wilkins, July 28, 1965, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 23, LOC.

¹⁵⁷ Summary of German Press Clippings, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 23, LOC.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 311; According to a schedule of telephone calls with civil rights leaders, Johnson called Wilkins on May 12, 1965 but no transcript or recording is available for that telephone conversation. Schedule of meetings and telephone calls on civil rights, Collection: Legislative Background, Voting Rights Act of 1965; Folder: Drafting of the Voting Registration Bill. Box 1, LBJL; Robert Dallek confirms that Wilkins and King endorsed the speech prior to Johnson’s address, Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 222.

¹⁵⁹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 311.

copy to Johnson a month before.¹⁶⁰ The study, which proved increasingly controversial over the coming six months, examined the alleged collapse of the black family, the disintegration of which he held responsible for the economic problems of black society. Moynihan emphasized the necessity of restoring stability to the family structure if black Americans were to advance economically.¹⁶¹ In his impassioned speech, Johnson said that the widening economic gap between whites and blacks must be addressed with affirmative action initiatives that would correct historical inequalities and help blacks compete on an equal footing.

The Howard speech provided the theme of the NAACP's annual conference in Denver, when Wilkins told delegates that the president "took the civil rights crusade beyond the opportunity stage."¹⁶² Many delegates, however, expressed dissatisfaction with the Johnson administration, particularly over the rise in black unemployment and the perceived inadequacies of Title VII, the fair employment provision of the civil rights act, which went into effect in June 1965. The NAACP's labor secretary, Herbert Hill, was among the most publicly critical of the Johnson administration's anti-poverty program arguing that "we must shed the illusion that there is a war against poverty. There is merely a BB shot against poverty."¹⁶³ Hill claimed that his view was shared by "many of the more than two thousand delegates at the NAACP convention [who] have a 'feeling of disillusionment' with the poverty program and therefore have their doubts about Title VII."¹⁶⁴ There was certainly much work to be done. Unemployment figures released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics around the time of the convention showed that nonwhite unemployment rates had increased by almost double in comparison with white

¹⁶⁰ US Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington DC, 1965); Moynihan's report still provokes controversy over forty years after its publication. *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* dedicated an entire issue to a critical assessment of the report in January, 2009, "The Moynihan Report Revisited: Lessons and Reflections after Four Decades," January, 2009, Volume 621, No. 1.

¹⁶¹ Moynihan's emphasis on the disintegration of the black family in the ghetto, the prevalence of female-headed households, and the correlation he found between those factors and the decline in household income attracted accusations of racism later in 1965. It would become such a controversial issue that the topic of the black family was conspicuous by its absence in the White House conference "To Fulfill These Rights" when it eventually took place the following year.

¹⁶² Transcript, Keynote address by Roy Wilkins to the 56th annual convention of the NAACP, Denver, CO, June 28, 1965, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A20, LOC.

¹⁶³ Lewis M Simons, "Poverty War Mere Illusion' High NAACP Aide Charges," *Washington Post, Times Herald*. June 30, 1965,

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

rates between 1947 and 1962. Although those figures preceded the civil rights legislation, they nevertheless painted a bleak picture about the inequalities the act would have to address.¹⁶⁵

As Moynihan later pointed out: “for just the reason that things were going so well, this was also the moment of maximum danger.”¹⁶⁶ Wilkins, in retrospect, agreed. “The day the President signed the Voting Rights Act, it looked as if we were bringing to an end all the years of oppression. The truth was that we were just beginning a new ordeal.”¹⁶⁷ While the legal framework supporting segregation had finally been dismantled, the picture for many black Americans was as bleak, if not bleaker, as it had ever been. The disparity between black and white unemployment, income and education had increased since the *Brown* ruling promised a brave new world of integration. Blacks held only fifteen per cent of professional, managerial, clerical or sales positions compared with forty-four per cent of whites.¹⁶⁸ One academic estimated that, looking at employment gains made by black Americans in the ten years between 1950 and 1960, it would take until 1992 for blacks to reach a proportional representation among clerical workers, and until 2017 among professionals.¹⁶⁹ Given the number of black workers involved in manufacturing, they were also disproportionately affected by the rise in automation and, for exactly the reasons Johnson addressed in his Howard University speech, possessed inadequate resources to move up the economic ladder.¹⁷⁰ The resentment caused by increasing economic disparity could not be relieved by new legislation.

That resentment boiled over five days after the Voting Rights Act was signed when a seemingly minor dispute between two young black men and a highway patrolman in the Watts area of Los Angeles exploded into four days of devastating

¹⁶⁵ Unemployment figures cited by the *New York Times* showed that in 1962 nonwhite unemployment rate was 124 per cent higher than that for whites up from 64 per cent in 1947. M.S. Handler, “Greater Poverty for the Negro Feared at NAACP Parley”, June 29, 1965, *New York Times*

¹⁶⁶ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, ‘The President and the Negro: The Moment Lost,’ *Commentary*, February 1966, 32.

¹⁶⁷ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 313.

¹⁶⁸ Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Plume, 1991) 155.

¹⁶⁹ Thomas F Pettigrew, “Complexity and Change in American Racial Patterns: A Social Psychological View,” *Daedalus*, 94:4, *The Negro American* (Fall 1965): 981.

¹⁷⁰ Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, 155; Woodward, *New York Times*, August 29 1965.

riots across approximately forty-five miles of the city. At least thirty-four people were killed, four thousand arrested and many millions of dollars of damage caused to property in the area led to widespread condemnation by government officials, the media and the general public.¹⁷¹ However, Watts' impact on the civil rights movement was even more devastating than the smoldering rubble of ruined shops and houses. The NAACP dispatched several local officials including Leonard Carter, the NAACP's field director in California, Edward Warren, president of the Association's Watts branch, and Norman Houston, president of the Los Angeles branch. Despite praise from city officials for playing a part in restoring order, they could do little.¹⁷² The riots were the dramatic, and highly visible, antithesis of non-violent direct action, and a clear sign that a sea change in the movement was underway. As Moynihan said, Watts "threw the civil rights movement entirely off balance."¹⁷³ Blacks had secured the moral high ground with exemplary behavior in the face of violence and intimidation in Birmingham, Selma and other southern cities.

Wilkins was horrified at the violence and condemned it in no uncertain terms: "rioting and looting must be put down with whatever force is required. This is the first necessity toward any resolution of the problem involved."¹⁷⁴ But he then examined the causes, not least the historical legacy of white racism. "The blind craziness of the roving Negro mobs," he stated, "was created by the blind craziness of white people over, at least, the past hundred years."¹⁷⁵ He cited the passage of California's Proposition 14, which repealed the state's fair housing law, as an important contributory factor. Wilkins recognized that the Watts riots would force the civil rights movement to juggle a war on two fronts. On the one hand, the battle to ensure enforcement and compliance of federal civil rights legislation in the stubborn South; on the other, a solution to alleviate the problems of the ghettos in

¹⁷¹ Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 296; Cook, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 178; Bayard Rustin, "The Watts 'Manifesto' & The McCone Report," *Commentary*, (March 1966) 29; Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 223. Estimates of the cost of property damage in the riots vary widely from \$35 million to \$200 million.

¹⁷² Executive Director's report, March, 1966, NAACP papers, Part IV, Box A10, LOC.

¹⁷³ Moynihan, *Commentary*, February 1966, 38

¹⁷⁴ "Inquiry on Causes Urged by Wilkins," *New York Times*, August 16, 1965. However, Whitney Young and Martin Luther King also urged using force to quash the riots.

¹⁷⁵ Wilkins and Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 313; Roy Wilkins, "Fate of Race Relations in Hands of Both Races," *Los Angeles Times*, August 23, 1965.

the North and West. Unfortunately, Wilkins later confessed that “no one was really prepared with a strategy or workable program,” including the NAACP.¹⁷⁶

Despite his acknowledgment that the movement, and the government, had let down urban blacks, and despite his ostensible acknowledgement of the various historical factors that led to the riots, Wilkins could appreciate why blacks in Watts and other urban ghettos finally snapped. He could even understand the frustration at work on the streets. He could not however comprehend the wanton destruction and looting and, ultimately, he failed to fully recognize the issues involved in the riots. The civil rights movement could not, and would not “condone or in any fashion approve rioting and looting as weapons to secure citizenship rights” — as if the Los Angeles riots were a voting rights demonstration gone badly wrong.¹⁷⁷

During 1965, Wilkins celebrated ten years as head of the NAACP. Under his watch, the Association’s membership had more than doubled, its general income had tripled, circulation of *The Crisis* had risen by two hundred per cent, and the staff had expanded from sixty-eight to one hundred and twenty five.¹⁷⁸ The NAACP had weathered the storms of the white backlash against the organization in the South, survived the challenges posed by the SCLC, SNCC, CORE and other groups, and seen momentous pieces of civil rights legislation move through Congress with increasing ease. Unfortunately, by the end of the year the tide had already begun to turn. Wilkins reported to the NAACP’s annual meeting in January 1966 that membership the previous year had fallen by approximately twenty thousand from 1964, with the steepest declines in urban centers including Pittsburgh and Philadelphia.¹⁷⁹ The fall, he suggested, could be attributed to two factors: the “abandonment”

¹⁷⁶ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 314.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 313.

¹⁷⁸ Press release, “Wilkins Nears 10 Years as NAACP Top Executive” March 26, 1965, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A318, LOC.

¹⁷⁹ Transcript, Remarks of Roy Wilkins at the Annual Meeting of the NAACP, New York City, January 3, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A15, LOC.

of the traditional door-to-door membership campaign, and a “mistaken belief that the war against racial discrimination is over and everyone can relax.”¹⁸⁰

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

Chapter Six

The Crisis of Victory

In his address to the NAACP's annual meeting in 1966, Wilkins argued that the successes of recent years in securing legislative goals and executive support should not lead to complacency. Although "we are farther on the way to our objectives than ever before," he stated, "depressing and challenging areas are to be found in many phases of the struggle." To meet these challenges, he argued, "steady and skillful use of all available tools" would be needed, "The call, however, is not just for a drum and bugle corps, but for foot soldiers and technicians," and just to emphasize the kind of tactics he advocated, Wilkins could not resist a pointed aside at advocates of direct action, "We are entering a phase that requires knowledge, patience and skill; the ability merely to holler is of limited usefulness."¹

While the NAACP had managed to repel most of the organizational challenges of the early 1960s, its finances were in a precarious state. Bailing out protestors in Mississippi had resulted in \$265,000 unpaid bail bonds.² Some of the Association's regular and more generous contributors felt that the civil rights and voting rights legislation were the culmination of the NAACP's program rather than another stage. The NAACP was not alone in its financial woes; the Urban League faced similar difficulties despite its more established connections with Foundations and other major sponsors.³ Income from the Special Contribution Fund, which was formed in 1964 but did not become fully operational until 1965, contributed around one-third of the Association's budget in its first year but the complexity of the

¹ Transcript, Remarks of Roy Wilkins at the Annual Meeting of the NAACP, New York City, January 3, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A15, LOC.

² In 1964, the NAACP estimated it would need a budget of at least \$1,500,000 in 1965 in order to maintain operations at existing levels. According to Wilkins' draft report, income for 1965 was approximately \$1,551,700. Report, Ongoing and Prospective Programs of the NAACP for 1965 that can Be Underwritten by Tax Exempt Contributions through the NAACP Special Contribution Fund, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A234, LOC; Remarks, Roy Wilkins, January 3, 1966, NAACP Papers.

³ Memorandum, Thurgood Marshall to Lyndon Johnson, January 14, 1966, WHCF Files, Named file: Roy Wilkins, LBJL.

problems requiring the NAACP's attention demanded significantly more funds than it had in its accounts.⁴

As Manfred Berg argues, the achievement of legislative goals failed to achieve the implicit expectation that such legislation would also lead to the reconciliation of the races and a resolution to the 'race problem.'⁵ Not only did that not occur, but also fractures appeared within the civil rights movement and black communities. Black frustration with economic inequalities increased as it became clear that the results of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, momentous as they were, would do little to address, at least in the short-term, many of the problems facing black Americans. The leadership of the younger civil rights groups became more militant as James Farmer of CORE and John Lewis of SNCC were edged out and replaced by younger activists who had been radicalized by their experiences as activists in rural Mississippi communities.⁶

At the opposite end of the political spectrum, Johnson too was losing patience. He was frustrated by what he perceived to be ingratitude from the black community. He encouraged Wilkins during one telephone conversation late in 1965 to call for a concerted effort to bring a halt to the demonstrations and disturbances:

Just before the campaign, we had a lot of marching going on, and you all got together and you and one or two others stopped it and we won an election. I think you're right at the point now where you need a decision of

⁴ The Special Contribution Fund (SCF) was created to allow tax deductible contributions to the NAACP. Donations to the fund could be used for litigation (including bail bonds), voter registration, research and history and public information programs. The only elements in the NAACP's program that could not be funded through SCF contributions were its lobbying activities. The fact that the tax-exempt status of the SCF allowed donations from charitable foundations had the potential to transform the NAACP's finances. Report, Ongoing and Prospective Programs of the NAACP for 1965 that can Be Underwritten by Tax Exempt Contributions through the NAACP Special Contribution Fund, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A234, LOC.

⁵ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 220.

⁶ Floyd McKisick, who replaced James Farmer at CORE was the first black student at North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Law School. Stokely Carmichael, who ousted John Lewis at SNCC studied at Howard University, actively rejecting offers from white universities; Carmichael had participated in the Freedom Summer voter registration campaign and had also been a community organizer in rural Alabama. McKisick, who was older than Carmichael, was a civil rights lawyer who had challenged segregation policies in unions and schools in North Carolina.

that type. I think our legislation has gone pretty far but our performance, particularly the Negro performance, is not up to the legislation and the ideals. We made advances this year in the field of accommodations and civil rights and so forth that I never thought we could make and particularly in the field of voting rights. We almost had the number one city in the world to be led by Negroes but the negroes just went in all directions and they changed twenty-five people on me including a good many republicans on home rule and I lost that battle and I expect I've lost the war.⁷

In response to Johnson's plea to increase voter registration, Wilkins assured the president that "last night I spoke in Los Angeles at a reorganization of our chapter there which is going to entertain our annual convention there next July...I said what you need here in LA above everything else and southern California is a voter registration drive. We're going to assign a man here to help you with voter registration and all this complaint about what happened in Hayneville, what happened there is terrible and you're going to laugh at what I say, you're going to say it's too slow but I tell you the only permanent way to change Hayneville is to get voter registration and voting going in those counties. Mr. President, I'm preaching that everywhere I go and I will organize and put manpower behind it."⁸ Johnson's commitment to civil rights was still evident towards the end of 1965. During this period he consulted regularly with Wilkins, primarily about how to improve voter registration, but also about the possibility of appointing Robert Weaver as Secretary of the newly formed Department of Housing and Urban Development.

⁷ Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Roy Wilkins, October 30, 1965, 4.03pm, Citation 9049, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL; Johnson is referring to legislation introduced in September 1965 to provide for home rule for Washington, D.C.

⁸ Ibid; On August 20, 1965, twenty civil rights activists including several SNCC members were arrested and imprisoned in Hayneville, Alabama for voter registration work. Within hours of their release from prison, two of the activists, Jonathan Myrick Daniels, an Episcopalian seminarian and Father Richard Morrisroe were murdered by Tom Coleman, with the complicity of the local police department. An all-white jury found Colman not guilty of murder six weeks after the attack. Branch, *At Caanan's Edge*, 299-305.

When, in November 1965 Wilkins was quoted in an interview with the *New York Times* suggesting that if Weaver was not appointed there could be unwelcome ramifications for Johnson in the 1966 and 1968 elections, he was quick to call Johnson to explain that he had been misquoted. He was also quick to issue a clarifying statement to the newspaper, which was printed the following day. Wilkins' remarks bordered on the unctuous in his denial of the alleged threat: "The President knows it is an empty threat. I probably never will be able to repair this with him. It probably has cost the colored people a post in the Cabinet for the first time in the 103 years they have been free. I hope he knows I wouldn't do a thing like that."⁹

However, by 1966, the president was seeking to distance himself from the civil rights movement. According to Robert Dallek, the combination of the violence in Watts and the backlash against Moynihan's report forced the president to postpone his grand civil rights conference.¹⁰ 'To Fulfill These Rights', was one of the initiatives promised in the president's Howard commencement address. It would, Johnson said, bring together scholars, experts, civil rights leaders and government officials and its aim would be to help black Americans economically by finding ways to improve employment and educational opportunities that would allow blacks to compete on an even playing field.¹¹ Grand aims indeed, but according to one historian of the conference, it would be at this conference that the liberal coalition behind Johnson's Great Society and the political impetus behind integration began to disintegrate and Wilkins found himself, willingly or not, pushed increasingly further into the conservative wing of the movement.¹²

⁹ Ben A. Franklin, "Two Negro leaders upset unless Weaver gets urban job," *New York Times*, November 20, 1965; "Wilkins softens stand on Weaver," *New York Times*, November 21, 1965; Recording of Telephone Conversation between Lyndon B. Johnson and Roy Wilkins, November 20, 1965, 2.15pm, Citation 9158, Recordings and Transcripts of Conversations and Meetings, LBJL; Weaver was appointed to the cabinet in January, 1966 with no apparent damage to the relationship between Wilkins and the president.

¹⁰ Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 224-225.

¹¹ Lyndon B Johnson, Commencement Address at Howard University, "To Fulfill These Rights," June 4, 1965. LBJL:

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/speeches.hom/650604.asp>,

¹² Kevin L Yuill, "The 1966 White House Conference on Civil Rights," *The Historical Journal*, 41:1 (March 1998): 259.

The original conference was scheduled to take place in November 1965, with four thousand attendees. After Watts exploded, it was hastily rearranged to become a much smaller planning conference at the original date, with the bigger conference to take place the following June. Unfortunately, the planning meeting was so fraught with dissension that any hint of controversy visible in the agenda of the main conference was erased. Attendees were mainly government officials and business leaders. Naturally, Wilkins attended the planning sessions but the most militant civil rights group, SNCC, chose to boycott the event.

Within two short years, the achievements of the civil rights movement, and the relevance of non-violence, were being questioned by a new generation of black activists. The complexities of the problems in urban ghettos, and the rising costs of war in Vietnam, which threatened Johnson's anti-poverty program, demanded a new response from civil rights leaders. Daniel Patrick Moynihan summed up the problem: "They [black Americans] now have enforced legal rights as never in their history, but they remain terribly weak in economic and social terms – a situation that is, if anything, more conspicuous in the face of a booming, full-employment economy now entering its seventh year of unbroken expansion."¹³ Certainly the lack of remorse displayed by those involved in the Watts riots, for example, was equally damaging for the civil rights movement. Scenes of young black man shouting "Burn baby burn" as property went up in flames was displayed with relish by the media and did little to stem the backlash against the freedom protestors.¹⁴

The economic questions raised by the urban riots presented the NAACP with a challenge of staggering difficulty and complexity. Unlike the Urban League, which had historically focused its attentions on the black labor force and as such operated on the periphery of the civil rights movement, the NAACP tackled employment and economic issues primarily in terms of discrimination and legislative redress. As Meier and Bracey argue, the Association's traditional activities were not adequate to deal with the consequences of centuries of economic inequality and racial

¹³ Moynihan, *Commentary*, February 1966, 32.

¹⁴ Fairclough. *Better Day Coming*, 297.

oppression.¹⁵ Herbert Hill was as effective in his area, labor relations, as Clarence Mitchell was on Capitol Hill and had done much to tackle employment discrimination, and pressure labor unions into opening up their chapters to black members.¹⁶ However, the NAACP did not have a clear strategy for expanding employment; indeed, the civil rights movement could do little to reform the economy in the absence of government intervention.

Johnson's announcement in early 1966 that his administration would continue to fund his "Great Society" programs, while at the same time funding the escalating war in Vietnam earned Wilkins' unstinting admiration. "Your call for carrying on domestic crusade for the Great Society projects including all aspects of anti-poverty program along with fulfilling our nation's commitment in Viet Nam is the right call and is a challenge for every American."¹⁷

Despite the escalating problems in the urban ghettos, Mississippi continued to be a source of trouble and concern for Wilkins and the Association. Unusually for the Magnolia state, by late 1965 many of those problems had less to do with white belligerence than with black militancy. As well as tensions between COFO and the NAACP the Association also had its own internal problems in the state. Charles Evers, brother of Medgar, had assumed his brother's role as field secretary for Mississippi shortly after his murder. Wilkins had strong reservations about the appointment but, for the sake of continuity, supported the appointment.¹⁸ Fuelling Wilkins' concerns was the fact that whereas Medgar was a war veteran, dedicated family man and civil rights activist, his brother was a self-confessed bootlegger and petty thief, with a nomadic lifestyle and little tolerance for diplomacy.¹⁹ One historian has argued that Evers represented a shift to a "more morally ambiguous climate." Although Evers created a loyal following in Mississippi, he managed to antagonize most of the NAACP's senior staff.²⁰ Ruby Hurley, the NAACP's

¹⁵ Meier and Bracey, "NAACP as a Reform Movement," 29.

¹⁶ Hill's contribution to black labor rights has yet to be examined in depth. See Nancy MacLean, *Achieving the Promise of the Civil Rights Act: Herbert Hill and the NAACP's Fight for Jobs and Justice*, *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas*, 3:2 (2006): 13-19 for an overview of his work.

¹⁷ Telegram, Roy Wilkins to Lyndon Johnson, January 13, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A37, LOC.

¹⁸ Dittmer, *Local People*, 177-78.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 178.

²⁰ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 360.

regional secretary for the South East, complained that Evers was a maverick who never consulted her. Gloster Current called him a “totally inept field secretary” and made a strong case for his dismissal.²¹ Wilkins was equally disparaging: the night before the signing of the Voting Rights Act, Wilkins called Larry O’Brien, Johnson’s special assistant for congressional relations and personnel, and threatened to withdraw from the event because he had discovered that Charles Evers had also been invited. According to O’Brien told Lee White that “Roy would have exploded” had Evers been invited.²²

Working without the support, and usually without the knowledge, of the NAACP’s national staff, Evers became embroiled in an incendiary situation in Natchez. Several attempts had been made on the life of George Metcalf, the NAACP branch leader in the city who had been active in COFO voter registration work. When in late August 1965 a bomb went off in Metcalf’s car — which, by remarkable luck failed to kill him — the black community united in anger, allowing Evers to step in and take control. Some of the more moderate NAACP branch members presented the city with a list of twelve demands that included the hiring of blacks for city jobs, integration of schools and hospitals, courteous treatment by police, the appointment of a black to the school board, improved housing in black areas, and the appointment of an advisory biracial council to work with city officials.²³ While waiting for the city council to discuss the demands, Natchez became increasingly tense. In a telegram to the president, Evers warned Johnson that blacks in Natchez might revolt unless their demands were met. “Although my own brother was the victim of an assassin’s gun two years ago, I have always pleaded for non-violence. But these people feel they must protect themselves against the violence, which has been used against them all their lives. One incident might put matters out of all control.”²⁴

²¹ Letter to Roy Wilkins from Ruby Hurley, September 7, 1965. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 7, LOC; Note of a telephone call from Gloster Current in New Orleans, undated. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A267, LOC; Dittmer, *Local People*, 354.

²² Memorandum, Lee White to Lyndon B. Johnson, August 12, 1965, WHCF Files, Roy Wilkins Folder, LBJL.

²³ Martin Waldron, “Natchez boycott ends as Negroes gain objectives,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1965; John Dittmer examines the Natchez boycott at length in *Local People*, 352-362.

²⁴ Telegram, Charles Evers to Lyndon Johnson, August 31, 1965. Civil Rights in the Johnson Administration, Part I, Reel 7, RSC.

Evers' call had no effect. The City council rejected the demands, inflaming the situation further; Evers then proposed that blacks boycott local businesses.²⁵ Ironically, Evers' autonomous action positioned the NAACP as the leader of the boycott even though the national office played no part in planning the protest — a fact that irritated Wilkins. Evers then called for armed resistance, warning: "We're not going to sit by anymore and let 'em beat us up and kill us. We're sick and tired of it. So we're going to pay for the guns to take care of ourselves. They'd better not come by my house late at night yelling at me. I'm armed and I'm going to defend myself."²⁶ For Wilkins, Evers' remarks were a step too far. A newspaper article speculating on Evers' future with the Association appeared soon after he made his remarks.²⁷ However, Evers pre-empted Wilkins' veiled threat to fire him when he invited Martin Luther King and leaders from other groups to Natchez without the knowledge, or approval, of the NAACP's head office.²⁸ According to Dittmer and Branch, Evers skillfully manipulated the groups to strengthen his own position, playing off one against the other, but directing the pace of the Natchez Movement himself, calling and cancelling marches at his command.²⁹ Once his position was assured, Evers rejected any further cooperation with the other groups, citing derogatory remarks about the NAACP by one SCLC official as a reason for evicting that group from the city. Evers' direction was so successful that when the boycott ended in December 1965 the city government had acceded to every one of the demands.³⁰

At the height of the Natchez boycott Wilkins was traveling in Europe, but he followed its progress via the international press. His dislike of Evers is evident in one of his weekly columns that he wrote while in Paris, in which he discussed the boycott at length without referring to Evers once. Instead, he focused on the sociological implications for black Americans of a history of being addressed as

²⁵ Dittmer, *Local People*, 356.

²⁶ Drew Pearson, "Negroes arming 'to fight back,' Mississippi NAACP head says," *Los Angeles Times*, September 1, 1965.

²⁷ Gene Roberts, "NAACP may oust Evers as aide in Mississippi," *New York Times*, September 10, 1965.

²⁸ Roy Reed, "Aide of Dr King sent to Natchez to weight the next rights move," *New York Times*, September 4, 1965.

²⁹ Dittmer, *Local People*, 357-58; Branch, *At Caanan's Edge*, 349.

³⁰ Waldron, *New York Times*, December 3, 1965.

'boy' or 'girl' throughout their adult lives, and praised the decision of the Natchez government to mandate the use of Mr. and Mrs. by city employees when addressing blacks. However, the success of the Natchez Movement's boycott forced Wilkins to retain Evers; as Taylor Branch put it: "success made Charles Evers indispensable to Roy Wilkins."³¹ Evers, it would appear, had demonstrated a useful skill in keeping together at least the NAACP's network in the state.

Even under the glare of the national and international spotlights, Mississippi was still a dangerous place for civil rights activists. For example, in January 1966, Vernon Dahmer, a former president of the Hattiesburg branch of the NAACP, was murdered when a petrol bomb was thrown into his home. Dahmer had said he would receive poll tax payments at his grocery store and pass them on to local officials as part of the voter registration process. Wilkins used his weekly column to rebuke a society in which such actions were allowed to take place. "The Dahmers and all the other martyrs in the Mississippis of this world are notches on the measuring rod of man's humanitarian growth. We who are left behind stretch taller in the degree that the dead are vindicated. We shrink in the degree that their sacrifices are ignored. The deadly punishment is not merely that we live with their murderers, but that the code of the killers becomes ours."³²

It was in this context that James Meredith — who had worked closely, if reluctantly, with the NAACP during his attempt to enrol at the University of Mississippi in October 1962 — began a 220-mile "march against fear" from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. "to challenge the all-pervasive and overriding fear" at work among black Mississippians and, by default, encourage voter registration.³³ Neither the NAACP nor any other civil rights group had any involvement in Meredith's action, which was both foolhardy and confused. However, Wilkins and other leaders rushed to a Memphis hospital when, on the second day of his march, Meredith was shot by a sniper.

³¹ Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 350.

³² Roy Wilkins, "Humanitarian Growth Measured by Martyrs," *Los Angeles Times*, January 24, 1966.

³³ Dittmer, *Local People*, 389.

Among those gathered at Meredith's hospital bedside was Stokely Carmichael, who had recently replaced John Lewis as head of SNCC. Carmichael was an unknown quantity to Wilkins, with whom he differed in almost every way. The charismatic SNCC leader was in no mood to acquiesce to any of the more moderate leaders' suggestions. Wilkins, King, Carmichael, Whitney Young and Floyd McKissick, James Farmer's successor at CORE, conferred about how to best to continue Meredith's protest. True to form, Wilkins argued that the march should be a show of support for the 1966 Civil Rights Bill that was working its way through Congress, but without much support either from the Johnson administration or the groups that had been so active during the process of passing the civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965.³⁴ Wilkins was vehemently opposed to using the march for any criticism of Johnson and his administration, and was more than willing to withdraw the NAACP's support from the march without an assurance that it would not be a forum for attacks on Johnson.³⁵

Wilkins was further disturbed at SNCC's insistence that white participation be drastically reduced and that the Louisiana-based group the Deacons for Defense be used to protect marchers along the route. The group advocated black self-defense and SNCC's insistence on their participation was a clear rejection of the philosophy of non-violence. According to Carmichael's later recollections, he anticipated that Wilkins would use this as a means of separating King and the SCLC from SNCC and CORE. However, Carmichael also wanted the SCLC on his side. Eventually, after much contentious debate about the two sticking points, King agreed to march with SNCC. Wilkins and Carmichael exchanged angry words that ended when the SNCC leader suggested that it was time for Wilkins to retire and write his

³⁴ Nicholas Katzenbach suggested to Lyndon Johnson, "Any civil rights legislation will be difficult to enact this year because even supporters of civil rights are apathetic and none of the proposals have the sense of urgency which accompanied prior legislation. Memorandum from Nicholas Katzenbach to Lyndon Johnson, March 17, 1966. WHCF Files, HU2/MC 1/5/66-4/13/66, LBJL.

³⁵ Details of the strategy meeting held in Memphis are examined from the perspective of each of the participants in their respective biographies and autobiographies: Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 491-500; Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 315-316; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 476-478; Weiss, *Whitney M Young*, 111; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 309-12.

memoirs.³⁶ Carmichael later admitted that his aim was to alienate Wilkins and Young to the point of dissuading them not to take part in the march. King's participation, on the other hand, was vital, in part because of the media attention he attracted but mainly because Carmichael hoped that King's involvement would pull him inevitably to the left of the movement.³⁷ King's increasing identification with the peace movement was already having that effect but, thanks to the Meredith march, the contradictory aims of the left and rights wings of the movement, which had previously been able to co-exist, were forced irreparably apart. The events that had taken place during the march eradicated any possibility of compromise, and forced SNCC and the NAACP in particular to claim their allegiance to separatism or integration, non-violence or violent retaliation, and increasingly, whether to fall in step behind or against the president's foreign policy in Vietnam.

Before the march resumed, a manifesto was released by SNCC and CORE, which set out the parameters by which it would be conducted. According to the statement, the march would be a "massive public indictment and protest of the failure of American society, the government of the United States, and the state of Mississippi to "fulfill these rights." To obtain those rights, the signatories called upon the president to take action on several counts: to send voting examiners into the Deep South states, order the Justice Department, FBI and US Marshals to enforce existing laws to protect civil rights activists, strengthening of the 1966 civil rights bill to include the automatic application of the jury provision, and an "adequate budget and program" to improve the lot of blacks living in northern ghettos.³⁸ Wilkins and Whitney Young both refused to sign the manifesto.

In a statement Wilkins drafted but never sent, he noted that the march should have primarily been a show of support for pending civil rights legislation and voter registration. However, as all four demands of the march's demands echoed those of the NAACP, Wilkins reaction can only be attributed to his personal animosity

³⁶ Carmichael with Thelwell. *Ready for Revolution*, 499-500.

³⁷ Carmichael's actions are reported in several histories including Carson, *In Struggle*, 207; Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul*, 314; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 476-7.

³⁸ Manifesto of the Meredith-Mississippi March, June 8, 1966 transmitted by telephone to NAACP headquarters. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A56, LOC.

towards Carmichael and his rejection of what he viewed as criticism of the president inherent in the statement. An initial draft of the NAACP's recusal, in which Wilkins cautioned: "We cannot be a party to a personal attack when the target should be the sprawling bureaucracy of government itself," certainly supports that supposition. Wilkins' evident fury at the contretemps with Carmichael led him to complain of the difficulties in cooperating with other civil rights groups. "The whole business showed the NAACP again how difficult it is to have genuine cooperation, on an equal responsibility basis, with groups that do not have the same commitments and which may very well be pursuing certain goals that have nothing to do with civil rights at all."³⁹ In the statement that was finally released to the press, Wilkins comments were far more tempered, shifting the emphasis onto the supposed lack of clarity around the objectives of the march. However, he took the opportunity to disparage the concept of black separatism that was beginning to appear among some of the more militant groups: "The first draft [of the manifesto] properly indicated the weak enforcement of the new civil rights laws, but did not specify school integration or the wiping out of employment discrimination. These two items involve integration, and one organization already has announced that was through with integration." Nevertheless, Wilkins grudgingly acknowledged that NAACP members were free to participate in the march "in the context of NAACP commitment."⁴⁰

The march resumed with Carmichael, McKissick and King leading the demonstration. Although Wilkins publicly offered lukewarm support of Meredith's objectives, he made no secret of his displeasure over the separatist rhetoric espoused by Carmichael, who, since taking over the leadership of SNCC, had been vociferous in his support of the idea of Black Nationalism. More than any other area of dispute between the two, this was a subject that was anathema to Wilkins. He stressed the Association's rejection of any hint of separatism, or "black racist notions freely and crudely expressed by some of the present shakers and movers,"

³⁹ Draft statement, Roy Wilkins, June 8, 1966, (Unsent). NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A81, LOC.

⁴⁰ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to NAACP Branch Officers, June 10, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A56, LOC.

as he colorfully described them.⁴¹ Even with this in mind, however, Wilkins must have realized that to not participate in any form was almost impossible. In an ambivalent statement, he conceded that members who wished to take part in the march were free to do so. "Such a matter concerns a man and his deep personal feelings and the decision must be a personal one," he noted, leaving the unfortunate branch officer to interpret what exactly that might mean.⁴² Wilkins was no less ambivalent in a press release stating that the NAACP supported the objectives of the march "as set forth by James Meredith" while making no mention of the new objectives set out by Carmichael.⁴³

In his weekly newspaper column, Wilkins further distanced himself and the Association from the resumed march and its new aims. "Meredith wanted to persuade people to use the ballot. Instead, 'tough talk' is being used. Meredith wanted to take a little time so that all could move forward together. Instead, such movement as is taking place is separate and suspicious."⁴⁴ When, at the conclusion of the march in Jackson, SNCC and CORE banned Charles Evers from addressing the final rally, Wilkins was incensed: "Apparently his signature on the 'manifesto' was more important than his brother's life blood for a cause about which others were yelling slogans and delivering orations."⁴⁵ Wilkins' fury had clearly not dissipated greatly in the period between end of the march and the NAACP's annual convention. In a memorandum to delegates he complained of a litany of financial exploitation and deceit inflicted upon the NAACP by other groups.⁴⁶ But he reserved the full force of his anger for a denunciation of Black Power

At a meeting in Greenwood towards the end of the march, Carmichael first used the slogan "Black Power" in public. It had an immediate and electrifying impact on

⁴¹ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to NAACP branch officers on Meredith March, Memphis to Jackson, June 10, 1966; Draft of Statement by NAACP on the Proposed Memphis Statement, June 8, 1966. Both NAACP papers, Part IV, Box A56, LOC.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Press release, 'NAACP Supports Objectives of James Meredith's March, June 11, 1966, NAACP Papers Part IV, Box A56, LOC.

⁴⁴ Roy Wilkins, "New Militants' have altered Meredith's idea," *Los Angeles Times*, June 20, 1966.

⁴⁵ "Mississippi March Results: The Balance is Favorable," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1966.

⁴⁶ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Delegates to the 57th Annual NAACP Convention, July 5, 1966, NAACP papers, Part IV, box A81, LOC; M.S. Handler, "Wilkins Assails CORE and SNCC, Hints Full Break," *New York Times*, July 8, 1966.

the civil rights movement and redefined the public vocabulary of race relations.⁴⁷ Wilkins' response to Black Power came to be one of the defining features of his leadership. Prior to Carmichael's remarks at Greenwood, Wilkins asked several members of the national office staff for suggestions for possible inclusion in his keynote address. While many of the replies focused on issues such as school and residential integration, and the NAACP's responsibility in ensuring enforcement of existing and new civil rights legislation, some of the other replies shed light on different areas of concern. Henry Lee Moon argued that school segregation had increased in the previous five years and that the NAACP should "come to grips with the educational problem as it exists." He argued that the answer lay in "not backing away from integration but rather placing major emphasis on upgrading the schools, especially those in the ghetto areas and on efforts to decentralize the ghetto." Moon then argued that the association should take a pragmatic course on integration: "It is time...that we sidetrack the fruitless pursuit of the elusive will-o-the-wisp of integration and get down to basic need." As ballast for his argument, Moon suggested that such an approach echoed a firm belief of Wilkins: "I know this has long been your position. But now is the time to re-affirm it despite the anguish of those, within the NAACP and outside of it, committed to integration at any price," a description that could surely be fully applied to Wilkins.⁴⁸

Mark Rosenman, the NAACP's youth director, suggested that "the new militancy includes strong emphasis on the area of community organization. Our youth are interested in programs that are designed so they can work in the community with its residents and 'school them' to the point where they are able to handle the particular aspects of the problem themselves.... This type of program could be more or less described as the 'maximum feasible participation of the community.'" However, Rosenman pointed out that "our youth, student and young adult units have edged back from the total emphasis they gave to this type of program last year. There seems to be a renewed call for more action and public protest." Rosenman attributed this shift to the difficulty many of the youth members had encountered in community organization work but also as another casualty of the

⁴⁷ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 229; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 481.

⁴⁸ Memorandum, Henry Lee Moon to Roy Wilkins, June 20, 1966, NAACP papers, Part IV, Box A3, LOC.

'crisis of victory.' "I think that the passage of the civil rights legislation and the onslaught of the poverty programs somewhat slowed down our pace," he wrote to Wilkins. "We, to some extent, fell victim to the notion that all that is needed is for the enemy to be conquered. The complex of legislation and poverty program caused chaos in the minds of some and a forced flight to passivity in the hearts of others."⁴⁹

John Morsell, probably the closest to Wilkins' outlook and philosophy, considered it "the ideal time for a 'militant' attack on the go-it-alone philosophy and the anti-white sentiments that underlie it." He then urged Wilkins to highlight the Association's wealth of experience and organizational expertise:

On [the] NAACP, I'll repeat the idea I mentioned the other day which is the man summoning a big press conference to announce that he is a Negro leader and he sees what the movement needs is a real organization, which he proposes to set up. It will have a competent staff of professionals and experts in a central HQ, people who know about housing, legislation, law, education, community organization, fund-raising, membership-gathering etc etc. This will be the nerve center of a far-flung structure of local units...in which volunteer citizen activity will promote the goals of the organization. In time, this new organization will become so recognized that government, business, civic agencies, news media etc will recognize it as an authority and will call upon it for aid, suggestions, information etc....goes on in similar vein...BUT OF COURSE, ASKS A REPORTER: ISN'T THERE ONE LIKE THAT ALREADY IN EXISTENCE? THE NAACP.⁵⁰

Harking back to an old debate among black organizations, Morsell urged Wilkins to "win friends among the uncommitted," stating that "the Negro must somehow clear away the myths and misconceptions of the least critical fraction of the white

⁴⁹ Memorandum, Mark Rosenman to Roy Wilkins, June 22, 1966. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A3, LOC.

⁵⁰ Memorandum, John Morsell to Roy Wilkins, June 22, 1966. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A3, NAACP Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, LOC.

population if he is to make substantial headway in the areas which require huge sums of money.”⁵¹

NAACP general counsel Robert Carter was possibly the most sympathetic to the attractions of black power. “It ought to be explained that the cry of SNCC for black power is a cry of disillusionment and despair – disillusionment that the white dominant society will not willingly make the necessary adjustments in order for the Negro to become a full-fledged equal member of our society.” An indication of how little consideration had been given to Johnson’s policy in Southeast Asia within the national office at this point was the fact that Gloster Current, was the only respondent to refer to Vietnam: “Praise the Negro soldiers and the fact that integration in the armed services makes an absence of complaints. The foreign policy issue should not be tied to the NAACP convention but the contribution of our GI’s is commendable. You could announce that the NAACP is sending a commission of three members of the Association representing Board, Convention and Staff to Viet Nam to see the Negro GI’s in the field, to let them know the folks back home care about what they are doing.”⁵²

By the time of the convention, however, Carmichael’s remarks had changed the focus of Wilkins address. The NAACP leader noted that: “In the transition period of the civil rights movement 1966 is developing into a critical year . . . For the first time since several organizations began to function, where only two had functioned before, there emerges what seems to be a difference in goals.” Wilkins then launched into a blistering attack on Black Power, taking issue first with the philosophy of armed self-defense advocated by the new militants. As he stated, the NAACP was not opposed to self-defense as such, and listed the association’s record on defending those who have protected themselves with guns. However, Wilkins argued that “proclaimed protective violence” was as likely to encourage violence as discourage it.⁵³

⁵¹ Morsell to Wilkins, June 22 1966. NAACP

⁵² Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, undated but presumably around June 22, 1966. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A3, LOC.

⁵³ Transcript, Roy Wilkins keynote address to the 57th NAACP Annual Convention, Los Angeles, July 5, 1966. NAACP papers, Part IV, Box A3, LOC.

Wilkins then went on to define in the harshest, most uncompromising way his response to Black Power. "No matter how endlessly they try to explain it, the term 'Black Power' means anti-white power. In a racially pluralistic society, the concept, the formation and the exercise of an ethnically-tagged power means opposition to other ethnic powers, just as the term 'white supremacy' means subjection of all non-white people. In the black-white relationship, it has to mean that every other ethnic power is the rival and the antagonist of 'Black Power.' It has to mean 'going-it-alone.' It has to mean separatism." And separatism, Wilkins argued, offered little to the disadvantaged but the chance to "shrivel and die...It is a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan. Black Power ... can mean in the end only black death."⁵⁴

Wilkins used the speech to give possibly the clearest characterization of the philosophy that had guided his work in the Association for over thirty years: "The end was always to be the inclusion of the Negro American, without racial discrimination, as a full-fledged equal in all phases of American citizenship. The targets were the barriers, crude or subtle, which blocked the attainment of that goal."⁵⁵ As part of that ambition, Wilkins promised that the focus of the NAACP's program would be the "power and majesty of the ballot", fair employment, the elimination of residential segregation, and the desegregation of public education. In a nod towards the rising problem of urban discontent, Wilkins also offered a vague promise to "wrestle with the complex problems of urban life, all of which include an attitude toward and a treatment of millions of Negro citizens." Finally, he made it clear that the association was not going to be persuaded to join the more militant groups in "fancy capers for the sake of capers." Wilkins' remarks emphasized his typically cautious approach: "in this unsettled time when shifts are the order of the day and when change is in the air, we can sail our NAACP ship 'steady as she goes,' with more drive to the turbines, more skill at the wheel."⁵⁶

One item conspicuously absent from Wilkins' speech was any criticism of President Johnson and his administration. As Manfred Berg says, the relationship between

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Johnson and the NAACP was an unlikely romance.⁵⁷ The NAACP had long claimed to be a non-partisan organization, but there is no doubt that the close relationship between Johnson and Wilkins, was, by this time, a source of contention among some NAACP members. Even the usually loyal *Gloster Current* implied that Wilkins' closeness to the president was harming the Association by driving away some members. Wilkins was quick to refute the implication and demanded that *Current* "demonstrate that the NAACP has lost its membership support among the Negro population because of my relationship (I deny any 'closeness') to the Johnson Administration."⁵⁸

Carmichael, McKissick and other Black Power activists were vociferous in their disdain of what they considered to be the malleable commitment of white liberals involved in the civil rights movement. But Wilkins' eagerness to disassociate the mainstream movement from proponents of Black Power, and later from the anti-war protests, was vindicated by the findings of polls that highlighted just how dramatically – and how quickly – whites had retreated from any support of black rights. The riots at Watts and elsewhere had shocked much of white America who then confused rioting with civil rights protests. By late 1966, the tide of public opinion was turning away from civil rights demonstrations. One survey reported that eighty-five per cent of whites felt demonstrations were damaging the black cause. In the same survey, when whites were asked if they were in the same position as blacks, would they feel justified in demonstrating, fifty-three per cent said yes in 1963, compared with thirty-seven per cent who disagreed. By 1966, the figures were almost reversed with fifty per cent saying demonstrations would not be justified and thirty-seven per cent suggesting they would.⁵⁹

Politically, too, the will to tackle the problems of racism waned as riots wreaked havoc in American cities. Violent upheavals took place in thirty-eight cities from

⁵⁷ Manfred Berg, "Guns, Butter and Civil Rights," in *Aspects of War in American History*, eds. David K Adams and Cornelis A Van Minnen (Keele: Keele University Press, 1997), 214.

⁵⁸ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to *Gloster Current*, March 3, 1956; Memorandum, *Gloster Current* to Roy Wilkins, March 3 1966. Both Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 7, LOC.

⁵⁹ Cited in William Brink and Louis Harris *Black and White: A Study of United States Racial Attitudes Today*, (New York: Simon and Schuster) 120.

Philadelphia to San Francisco during yet another long hot summer in 1966, followed by an equally hot and disturbed season the following year. Wilkins issued an 'alert' to branches in an attempt to quell the riots during the summer of 1967: "Don't just be against riots; be active in preventing them." He then listed several things people could do such as lobbying local political leaders to demand jobs, particularly for black youths, more play areas, community activities, better policing and the passage of the 1967 Civil Rights Act. "Talk Turkey, yes," Wilkins urged. "But do turkey, too. Keep the Summer (and fall) cool."⁶⁰

When the provision dealing with housing discrimination was diluted in the proposed 1966 Civil Rights Bill, Wilkins warned the government that it faced a tough choice about either enforcing a non-discriminatory housing policy or facing more violence in the ghettos.⁶¹ He wrote later that "the federal, state and local governments were mincing and maneuvering as the Senate had done over the 1966 Civil Rights Bill, and the separatists and firebrands were practicing the most impassioned kind of racial brinkmanship. The climate was more dangerous than I had ever seen it."⁶² That dire observation was brutally proven when a former NAACP worker, Wharlest Jackson, was murdered in Natchez in 1967. Wilkins warned: "Real trouble could erupt at any time. Negroes are determined to use any feasible weapon to halt the murders."⁶³

In 1967, the violence became personal for Wilkins when a conspiracy by an extreme militant black group, the Revolutionary Action Movement, to assassinate Wilkins and Whitney Young was uncovered by New York police. It is difficult to establish how serious a threat this was. Wilkins himself appears to have been unperturbed. Speaking at a news conference he said: "Apparently anyone who doesn't believe in machine guns is an Uncle Tom. I would like to find out why killing me would help their cause. I'm a harmless guy and I can't see why anyone would want to kill me.

⁶⁰ Draft memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Branches, undated but approximately June 15, 1966. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A61, LOC.

⁶¹ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 322.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 323.

⁶³ Roy Wilkins, "What Will the Nation Do?" *Los Angeles Times*, March 13, 1967.

Assassinations don't solve anything. It's kind of a silly approach."⁶⁴ He was less sanguine about the prospects of his safety during a tour of Mississippi in late 1966, where he was scheduled to speak in several towns across the state. Just before he left, he placed a case in a drawer at home to be opened only if he did not return from Mississippi. The case presumably contained money, to help Mrs. Wilkins through a period of probate as well as a note to be given to his wife in private.⁶⁵

When the 1966 civil rights bill failed, Wilkins laid the blame for its defeat squarely on the "rhetorical excesses of the Black Power people and the violence in the cities."⁶⁶ Despite the mainly rhetorical significance of Black Power, the new militancy offended Wilkins deeply. He particularly resented accusations that the NAACP pandered to white supporters or was out of touch with the majority of blacks. One particularly stinging rebuke came from James Meredith. Although Meredith was an eccentric loner and certainly no follower of any particular philosophy, his views commanded the attention of the press. In an article for the *Saturday Evening Post*, Meredith called the Association's national office "the 20th-century house Negro" for every American president. Although the NAACP harbored pretensions to being a mass Negro organization, Meredith added, "It does not command the emotions or respect of most younger Negroes, and the older Negro is becoming more and more disenchanted."⁶⁷ Even more damning, Meredith drew a clear distinction between the civil rights movement, which he described as a collaboration of both upper- and middle-class blacks and white liberals, of which the NAACP was a part, and the "Negro movement," which he argued was represented by a pride in black culture and traditions and with which the NAACP was most definitely not connected.⁶⁸ Wilkins response to the charges was quick but weak. He refuted Meredith's charge that the NAACP was simply a 'house Negro' for the Oval Office by citing its differences with every president since its formation in 1909. He also challenged Meredith's assertion that the NAACP was not a mass,

⁶⁴ Emmanuel Perlmutter, "16 Negroes Seized: Plot to Kill Wilkins and Young Charged," *New York Times*, June 22, 1967.

⁶⁵ Note, Roy Wilkins to Minnie Wilkins, November 10, 1966. Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 76, LOC.

⁶⁶ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 322

⁶⁷ James Meredith "Big Changes are Coming," *Saturday Evening Post*, August 14, 1966. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A56, LOC.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

nor Negro, organization by citing the number of black office holders within the organization, and the number of grassroots branches it could lay claim to.⁶⁹

Wilkins also faced a sustained and increasingly irksome challenge to his leadership by the 'Young Turks' group that had already caused some dissension amongst the board in 1964 and 1965. Jack Tanner, described by one reporter as the "sultan of the Young Turks," was one of the more persistent members of the group. He had begun his campaign against Wilkins in 1964. In a speech to the NAACP Area Conference in California in 1965 he had made a blatant call for Wilkins to step down, which Wilkins managed to deflect by engaging the support of senior board members like Bishop Spottswood. Tanner took up the fight again in 1966. In an attempt to demonstrate the isolation of Wilkins and the NAACP's leadership, he argued that part of the convention, ideally a board meeting, should take place in Watts, and be open to any that might wish to attend. Wilkins and Spottswood swiftly dismissed the suggestion with the argument that it would be logistical nightmare that would be of only symbolic importance.⁷⁰ At the convention, Tanner also attacked the complexity of the election process by which board members were elected, arguing that it was designed to thwart dissension.⁷¹ Most galling for Wilkins, however, were reports that he Tanner had described the convention as "LBJ controlled," and called upon members to make use of Black Power to advance their own interests.⁷²

Tanner failed to generate much response among the NAACP's members, who were on the whole intensely loyal to Wilkins. Nevertheless, the attention paid to his comments by the press added to the impression that the civil rights coalition, and the NAACP itself, was in chaos. Although Wilkins denied a permanent split within the movement, it was evident to all concerned that the coalition was disintegrating. When Wilkins appeared on *Meet the Press* with Carmichael and Whitney Young in

⁶⁹ Letter, Roy Wilkins to the Editor, *Saturday Evening Post*, August 11, 1966. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A56, LOC.

⁷⁰ Letter, Jack Tanner to Roy Wilkins, May 23, 1966. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A13; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Jack Tanner, May 25, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A13; Letter, Stephen Spottswood to Jack Tanner, June 16, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A13, LOC.

⁷¹ Nicholas von Hoffman, "NAACP Keeps Unity but Finds it Difficult," *Washington Post*, July 9, 1966.

⁷² "Use Black Power, Says NAACP Head," *Yakima Herald*, July 13, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A13, LOC.

August 1966, journalist Carl Rowan asked whether there was a “crisis of leadership” within the movement in which “a host of warring civil rights groups [were] each pursuing its own special interest.” Wilkins dismissed any hint of discord suggesting that differences of opinion were inevitable and that he did not foresee any split in the movement.⁷³ Wilkins words were disingenuous, at best. The argument about Black Power, while intensely rhetorical, had forced each organization into taking a position to the political left or right. (It can be argued that the SCLC occupied the center ground but King’s increasing preoccupation with urban poverty and the war in Vietnam had the effect of moving that organization leftwards.)

The Johnson administration became increasingly concerned at the growing rift. The president’s Special Counsel, Harry McPherson, described the movement as facing a crossroads where one road would lead to violence and suppression while the other route, although uncertain involved working within the system.⁷⁴ The fact that McPherson was unable to define the purpose of the less militant route indicates how quickly and how far the more militant groups had refined the parameters of the movement. McPherson also pointed out that the situation placed Johnson in an uncomfortable position in his support for civil rights: “The very fact that you have led the way toward first-class citizenship for the Negro that you are identified with his cause, means that to some extent, your stock rises and falls with the movement’s.” Within the Johnson administration, however, consensus on how to deal with the rising anger of black Americans, and the decline of the civil rights movement as a means of channeling that frustration, was hard to find. Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach disagreed with McPherson’s suggestion that Johnson should meet both established and new black leaders, arguing that “whatever appeal the extreme groups have is based upon arguments that the older leaders are the pacific captives of the administration-establishment and are thus not sufficiently militant.” He also questioned McPherson’s suggestion that the president meet with younger leaders. Katzenbach argued that the ‘Big Three’ groups could set up “militant but peaceful” groups of young people to compete

⁷³ Transcript, Statements made by Roy Wilkins on Meet the Press, August 21, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A83, LOC.

⁷⁴ Memorandum, Harry McPherson to Lyndon Baines Johnson, September 12, 1966, Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, Reel 11, RSC.

with SNCC saying “if some of the Young Turks in the NAACP were to join in a new youth organization, it might take considerable pressure off of Roy Wilkins in the immediate future.”⁷⁵

Following yet another bout of rioting during July 1967 Johnson set up a special advisory panel headed by Illinois governor, Otto Kerner, and asked Wilkin to join it. The Kerner Commission, as it became known, was instructed to find answers to three questions: “What happened? Why did it happen? And, what can be done to prevent it happening again and again?”⁷⁶ The Commission presented its report early in 1968 and delivered a damning indictment of American society. At the crux of its findings was the bald statement “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white – separate and unequal.” And for that state of affairs, the Kerner Commission laid the blame squarely on white society. “What white Americans have never fully understood – but what the Negro can never forget – is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it and white society condones it.”⁷⁷ Among the Commission’s many recommendations were a strengthened welfare system to help support black families in the poorest areas, the creation of two million new jobs, a federal subsidy of vocational training for the long-term unemployed, and the construction of six million affordable homes within five years.⁷⁸

Civil rights leaders, even those most dismissive of Wilkins, praised the Commission’s findings. Floyd McKissick was delighted. “We’re on our way to reaching the moment of truth. It’s the first time whites have said: ‘We’re racists.’

⁷⁵ Memorandum, Nicholas de Katzenbach to Harry McPherson, September 17, 1966, Civil Rights During the Johnson Administration, Reel 11, RSC.

⁷⁶ Summary of Report by National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders. *New York Times*, March 1, 1968; Judge Nathaniel Jones, who was the NAACP’s general counsel from 1969, also worked as an aide to the Kerner Commission. In his opinion, Wilkins brought the perspective of one who had been heavily involved in civil rights since the 1930s. Citing the example of blacks in the military, Jones said that Wilkins was able to present the facts in the historical context of black participation in both world wars. Interview with Judge Jones, December 16, 2007.

⁷⁷ “Summary of Report by National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1968

⁷⁸ John Herbers, “Panel on Civil Disorders Calls for Drastic Action to Avoid 2-Society Nation,” *New York Times*, March 1, 1968; Memorandum, Joe Califano to Lyndon Baines Johnson, February 28, 1968, WHCF Ex FG690, LBJL; *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, (New York: The New York Times Company, 1968).

Now's the time to seek some common truths." He also said that CORE considered the report to be such "an important moment in the history of this country, whites finally admitting racism, that we will have a full written response whereby there can commence a type of dialogue that never existed here before." Martin Luther King called the report's recommendations "timely," and congratulated Wilkins personally by saying that the pronouncement on white racism was "an important confession of a harsh truth." Wilkins naturally praised the findings. "It's a good report. If I wasn't so modest I'd say it was an excellent report."⁷⁹

There was silence, however, from the White House. Johnson was furious at the Commission's findings and saw it as a direct repudiation of his attempts to address the problems facing black Americans.⁸⁰ Using the excuse that the report needed more financial detail, Johnson initially refused to receive a copy, and said publicly that he agreed with only some of its proposals. Although no costs were detailed within the report, White House aides estimated that the proposal to create two million jobs would, alone, require an increase in the federal budget of approximately \$6 billion, while enhancing social security along the lines recommended by the Kerner panel, would require an extra \$7-9 billion. Joseph Califano, one of Johnson's aides, suggested that the president issue some kind of public acknowledgement while allowing Califano and another aide to attempt to lessen the impact of the report by leaking its findings to the press.⁸¹ When Johnson remained silent, Califano again urged the president to speak about the Commission "to indicate that you are taking it seriously and not ignoring it."⁸²

Johnson's response was a great disappointment to Wilkins, who felt that the president should have behaved in the manner of Truman when he received a similar report in 1947. Instead, Wilkins thought that Johnson "had made one of his rare mistakes in his estimation of public opinion and in his courageous, daring,

⁷⁹ Sidney E. Zion, "Rights Leaders Support Criticism of Whites," *New York Times*, March 2, 1968; Telegram, Martin Luther King to Roy Wilkins, March 4, 1968. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A237, LOC.

⁸⁰ Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 516.

⁸¹ Memorandum, Joseph Califano to President Johnson, February 28, 1968, WHCF, Ex FG690; Memorandum, Harry McPherson to Joe Califano, March 1, 1968. FG632, Box 39, LBJL

⁸² Memorandum, Joseph Califano to President Johnson, March 2, 1968, Ex FG690, LBJL

outlook, considering his background, on the whole racial situation.”⁸³ Nevertheless, during an oral history interview with the LBJ Library in 1969, Wilkins attempted to underplay the stark findings, particularly about the contribution of white racism:

I think it's indubitably true that the basically – now the report did not say that white racism, like the militants are saying today, is behind every single act that's committed – or every single Machiavellian scheme that's hatched, that white racism is here in Dakota and over here in Maryland and up here in Massachusetts, and it's behind a swimming pool here, a housing situation there, an employment situation over there or an education. It didn't say that. It simply said that the creation of the climate, which has brought about our present tension, has been because, to use the words of the report, 'of the attitude of white Americans towards black Americans.'⁸⁴

The Commission had discussed the potential impact of highlighting the complicity of white Americans in the problems of the urban ghettos at length prior to the report's release. According to Wilkins, while there was not unanimous agreement about how far white racism could be blamed, the group felt it could only point to the litany of “pervasive discrimination” across American society if it also highlighted what it saw as the root cause. He felt that Johnson should have taken a similarly honest position in accepting and acknowledging the Kerner Commission's findings but ultimately refused to be drawn into criticizing the president. “I'm not one to condemn him for it. I simply express regret that he did not welcome the Commission and go through the motions of accepting the report – with understandable lack of agreement on every single phrase, every single paragraph, every chapter.”⁸⁵ Johnson's silence about, and implicit rejection of, the report rendered the Commission's findings almost useless.

Moreover, by the time the Kerner Commission report was published, the war in Vietnam was drawing not only much of the president's attention but much of the federal budget too. Unlike its position on Black Power, the NAACP's view of

⁸³ Wilkins interview I, LBJL.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

America's involvement in Vietnam was much less clear. That the peace movement was driven primarily by the left would be reason in itself for the Association to avoid any connection with anti-war activities, given the NAACP's long-standing antipathy towards, and fear of, any hint of communist affiliation. In addition, as historian Manfred Berg argues, Wilkins and his organization were intensely patriotic, and considered military service part of the obligation of full citizenship.⁸⁶

SNCC had suddenly moved the Vietnam issue up the civil rights agenda in January 1966. Sammy Younge, a SNCC worker in Alabama, was murdered for attempting to use a white restroom. The murder crystallized the organization's anger at what it saw as the intractable racism of the United States; and SNCC used Younge's death to attack the country's role in Vietnam. The organization suggested that young black men should become involved with civil rights work as an alternative to military service. Wilkins was furious with the statement and quickly attempted to disassociate the increasingly militant group from the rest of the civil rights movement. In his weekly newspaper column he was careful to praise SNCC's work but was adamant that the statement had been made on behalf of a single organization and should not be considered representative of the rest of the movement, or of the opinion of the majority of black Americans.⁸⁷ Wilkins was correct in his assertion that the weight of public opinion was for military intervention in Vietnam pointing to strong popular support by black and white Americans shown in opinion polls for Johnson and his Vietnam policy. However, such polls indicated support only after the United States had begun military action, not before.⁸⁸ Shortly before the 1966 mid-term elections Johnson saw his approval ratings leap by ten points to fifty-six per cent, despite or possibly because of an

⁸⁶ Manfred Berg explores the NAACP's attitude to the Vietnam war in more detail in Berg, "Guns, Butter and Civil Rights" in Ed. David K. Adams and Cornelis A. Van Minnen, *Aspects of War in American History* (Keele: Keele University Press, 1997), 213-238; For more on the NAACP's response to Vietnam see also Simon Hall, *Peace and Freedom: The Civil Rights Movement and Antiwar Movements in the 1960s* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.) Simon Hall, "The Response of the Moderate Wing of the Civil Rights Movement to the War in Vietnam," *The Historical Journal*, 46:3 (September 2003): 669-701.

⁸⁷ Roy Wilkins, "SNCC Does Not Speak for Whole Movement," January 15-16, 1966. WHCF, HU2 1/20/66-5/31/67, LBJL.

⁸⁸ Neither Johnson nor some members of his administration were convinced that the public fully supported American intervention in Vietnam. Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 290-291.

intensification of bombing in the Vietnam, following a concerted campaign to defend his foreign policy.⁸⁹

Nevertheless, disquiet about US involvement in Vietnam had been voiced within the NAACP as early as April 1965, when the Flint, Michigan, branch drew up a resolution urging President Johnson to mediate “the civil war in Viet Nam” and withdraw American troops from the country. The resolution criticized the United State’s self-appointed role of ‘international policeman” and issued a sly aside that decisions were being taken by a still unrepresentative Congress.⁹⁰ The resolution drew a swift and stern rebuke from NAACP head office. A telegram from John Morsell warned that the resolution should not be publicized, as it did not represent an official policy position of the organization. He warned branch leaders, in no uncertain terms, that the officers concerned could not be “unaware of the controversial nature” of their position, and that they had no right to promote this view as an NAACP policy without the approval of the NAACP convention. Gloster Current went as far as to revive old fears of communist infiltration in an internal memorandum in which he suggested that the Flint resolution was prompted by a left-wing element and warning against branches becoming involved in “left-wing shenanigans.”⁹¹

Although the Flint resolution was inflammatory, it was not unrepresentative of the strength of feeling amongst the Association’s members. The NAACP archives hold numerous letters from the general public, NAACP members, and branch leaders asking what the Association was going to do about the war, and more particularly about the disproportionate number of black Americans who were being drafted and killed.⁹² By August 1965 Wilkins told White House aide Bill Moyers that he was

⁸⁹ Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 290.

⁹⁰ Statement by Flint branch, April 10, 1965, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A328, LOC; Telegram, John Morsell to President of NAACP branch, Flint, MI, April 14, 1965, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A328, LOC; Letter, Edwin Peets, President of the NAACP Greenwich Village-Chelsea branch to President Johnson, August 5, 1965. NAACP, Box 18, WHCF, LBJL.

⁹¹ Berg, “Guns, Butter and Civil Rights,” 215; Hall, *Peace and Freedom*, 94-95.

⁹² According to figures presented to Lyndon Johnson, as of September 30, 1966, black soldiers constituted 10.2% of Americans assigned to Vietnam. Between January and November 30 1966, black soldiers accounted for 16.3% of all deaths. Note, Clifford Alexander to Lyndon Johnson, February 14, 1967, The Defense Department attributed the high levels of black combat deaths to the fact that a higher proportion of black soldiers were serving in combat

spending a considerable amount of time in “keeping the ‘peace in Vietnam movement’ from becoming too big a factor in the civil rights movement.”⁹³ When a resolution dealing with Vietnam passed during the NAACP’s 1965 convention, Wilkins was able to regain temporary control of the issue. “In the absence of an authorizing resolution,” it stated, “units of the Association may not participate in the anti-war demonstrations. This limitation does not apply to individual members who are certainly free to follow their personal convictions but not to use the NAACP name in any way to imply Association support of an activity not authorized by the convention resolutions.”⁹⁴

Wilkins dislike of merging the civil rights and peace movements was further emphasized in a memorandum to branch and youth councils in which he warned against participation in a ‘Jamboree’ scheduled to take place in August. Listing the official schedule of the four-day event, including a workshop on how to stop the war, Wilkins concluded that “the war and peace theme is uppermost. The civil rights theme is subdued”. He told recipients that “NAACP leaders, mindful that it is difficult for the public to disassociate them [peace demonstrators] from the organization, are requested to heed this advice.”⁹⁵ Wilkins also faced criticism from members who disliked his refusal to see any connection between Vietnam and the wider civil rights issue. One respondent, representative of many on this subject in the NAACP archive, accused the NAACP’s programs of being little more than rhetoric. Such accusations earned a disdainful response from Wilkins. “I can understand your aversion to any discussion of freedom not in the context you have selected as the correct one. In this instance, the people who call themselves advocates of peace appear to be the most rigid of conformists who, like the

units. The department also said that black soldiers were more likely to volunteer for elite combat units and to re-enlist at a higher rate than whites. Cited in an Associated Press report, February 18, 1967. Both in NAACP, WHCF, LBJL. The Defense Department denied any discrimination was at work but the high levels of black unemployment and often low levels of education, which in turn prevented most black conscripts from taking deferments, were the manifestations of centuries of discrimination.

⁹³ Memorandum, Bill Moyers to Lyndon Johnson, August 30, 1965, WHCF Files, Roy Wilkins, LBJL.

⁹⁴ Draft memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Branch, State Conference, Youth Council and College Chapter Presidents, undated but approximately July 29, 1965. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A328, LOC.

⁹⁵ Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to branch and youth council presidents, NAACP papers, Part III, Box A328, Folder: Vietnam War, 1964-65, LOC.

Communists, tolerate no deviation whatsoever from the handed down line.”⁹⁶

Wilkins’ reply to one outraged member is representative of the tone of many such exchanges: “We are free to admit that whereas we know something beyond polemics and slogans as far as the civil rights struggle is concerned, we know little except slogans so far as foreign policy and particularly, Southeast Asian policy, is concerned...We cheerfully permit others who feel they are competent in this field to take positions on foreign policy (which they can do as individuals, since their errors will affect no one but themselves).”⁹⁷

Moderate leaders of the civil rights movement like Wilkins and Urban League head Whitney Young, both of whom had close personal ties with Johnson, understood the political bartering system involved in achieving legislative goals and what might be at stake in rebelling against that system. As Young told Martin Luther King in March 1966: “Johnson needs a consensus...if we are not with him on Vietnam, then he is not going to be with us on civil rights.”⁹⁸ The riots in Watts and other cities made him increasingly exasperated with the civil rights movement. As white support for the freedom protestors dwindled, Johnson, ever the pragmatist knew he had to balance his support for civil rights with the need to retain white support, particularly as the 1966 mid-term elections approached.

Wilkins efforts to disassociate the civil rights movement from the anti-war movement faced its most serious challenge in April 1967, when Martin Luther King, in an impassioned and powerful speech in New York City, made a clear moral case for merging the two issues. First, he recalled the optimistic prospects offered by Johnson’s domestic agenda:

It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor – both black and white – through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the build up in Vietnam and I watched the program broken and eviscerated as if it were some idle political plaything

⁹⁶ Letter, Henry S. Smith to Roy Wilkins, January 15, 1966; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Henry S. Smith, January 25, 1966, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A88, LOC.

⁹⁷ Letter, Roy Wilkins to Henry S. Smith, January 25, 1966, NAACP papers, Part IV, Box A88, LOC.

⁹⁸ Hall, *Peace and Freedom*, 87; Weiss, Whitney Young, 158.

of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that American would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube.⁹⁹

King then attacked the disproportionate number of poor black men drafted into service. Echoing arguments made about black participation in earlier conflicts, he said: "We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem." King called on the government to declare a unilateral ceasefire to open the way for a negotiated peace but he also called upon religious leaders to protest the war through words and actions, and, in the case of ministers of draft age, choose to become conscientious objectors. "Every man of humane convictions must decide on the protest that best suits his convictions, but we must all protest."¹⁰⁰

Shortly after King's speech, the NAACP board stated publicly, for the first time, its position on Vietnam. For the most part, the Association simply reiterated the 'separate issues' doctrine, leaving national staff to defend an increasingly unpopular position to its members. John Morsell's comments to one respondent are indicative of the many replies he issued during this time. "While we agree that unity is an important value for our movement, we do not think that the movement is well served if the price of unity is to be quiet when one thinks that a serious mistake is being made. For us to have said nothing with regard to Dr King's making civil rights progress dependent upon peace in Viet Nam would have been a disservice to the cause."¹⁰¹

⁹⁹ Speech, Dr Martin Luther King Jr to a meeting of Clergy and Laity Concerned About Vietnam at Riverside Church, New York City, April 4, 1967. The Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute:

http://www.stanford.edu/group/King/publications/speeches/Beyond_Vietnam.pdf.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.; SNCC had issued a similarly militant rebuke of America's policy in Vietnam in January 1966, which Wilkins refuted with equally strong language in his weekly column arguing that, while he disagreed with the principles of SNCC's condemnation of the war, the document was the result of "the snail's pace of racial justice in the United States." Wilkins, January 15-16, 1966. WHCF, HU2 1/20/66-5/31/67, LBJL.

¹⁰¹ Letter, John Morsell to Max Berg, April 28, 1967. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A88, LOC.

In his newspaper column, Wilkins argued that King was speaking for himself, and possibly the SCLC, but certainly not the civil rights movement as a whole. He argued that for most black Americans domestic issues, not foreign policy, was the major concern, and that they "are far from giving overwhelming support to the view that the civil rights movement is as closely tied to the war in Vietnam as some spokesmen assert." Wilkins cited other situations, notably World War II, where black Americans had seen the civil rights program 'de-emphasized.' Wilkins argued that they had continued to fight for civil rights while giving full support to the country's war efforts, for which one of the rewards, he suggested, was the desegregation of the armed services.¹⁰² However, what reward blacks could expect as a result of their participation in the Vietnam War was ambiguous.¹⁰³ Wilkins was right to some extent in suggesting that the views of black and white Americans on Vietnam were far from clear. A Harris poll taken in May 1967 showed the only nine per cent of all Americans agreed with King's stand on Vietnam, and just twenty-five per cent of blacks.¹⁰⁴ Also, despite numerous letters from irate members, there is little evidence that the membership as a whole were preoccupied with Vietnam. The issue was much clearer, however, for the NAACP's leadership. Wilkins was, as ever, anxious not to antagonize Johnson. He distanced the Association from King and continued to claim that civil rights and the peace movement were two entirely separate issues.¹⁰⁵

However, Wilkins' doctrine that the peace and civil rights movement were entirely separate began to sound increasingly disingenuous. It was difficult to ignore the racial disparity in the way the war was being conducted, and its effects on the attempt to alleviate urban poverty. Blacks accounted for twenty per cent of all draftees in 1966. Perhaps because they made up only 1.3 per cent of total draft board membership, blacks were drafted at the rate of sixty-four per cent compared with thirty-one per cent of eligible whites.¹⁰⁶ It was also increasingly difficult to explain away the NAACP's apparent unwillingness to monitor these racial aspects

¹⁰² Roy Wilkins, "King Spoke for Self, Not for Civil Rights Movement," *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1967.

¹⁰³ Berg, "Guns, Butter and Civil Rights," 215.

¹⁰⁴ Harris poll, May 22 1967 referenced in a memorandum from Fred Panzer to President Johnson, May 20 1967. HU2 1/20/66-5/31/67, Box 4, LBJL.

¹⁰⁵ Berg, "Guns, Butter and Civil Rights," 213-238

¹⁰⁶ Hall, *Peace and Freedom*, 10.

in the way it had investigated discrimination during previous wars. Its silence as the war intensified was deafening. Manfred Berg uses the harshest terms to describe Wilkins' stance during this time: "In essence, the NAACP secretary was demanding that black men fight and die in Vietnam so that civil rights leaders could put their "loyalty, heroic service and sacrifice...on the bargaining table."¹⁰⁷

A report by Gloster Current on remarks made by Dr King, Stokely Carmichael and others at an anti-war rally in April 1967 recognized the seriousness of King's latest intervention. His comments were also a telling illustration of the level of paranoia among the NAACP leadership about anti-war movement. "The extremists will stop at nothing to create havoc and confusion and involve Negroes, perhaps in rioting to create the impression that Negroes are tired of money being siphoned off for war purposes," wrote Current. Recognizing the political disparities now at work within the civil rights movement, Current told Wilkins that "Whether we wish to acknowledge it or not, we have a resurgence of the left such as we have not had since World War II. NAACP branches are going to be invaded and urged to get aboard the peace movement." In response, Current suggested, the NAACP should "mount an offensive to give the American people the facts and to urge youth and Negroes in the communities to pay no attention to the fools. There ought to be an off-the-record meeting of the Negro press and key well chosen Negro leaders to decide how to deal with what seems to be in the offing."¹⁰⁸

When news that Martin Luther King had been murdered in Memphis, riots broke out in forty cities across the countries and the National Guard was called out to restore order in cities including Detroit, Chicago, Memphis and Washington, DC. As well as another bitter demonstration of black frustration and rage, the riots – and King's death – effectively put an end to any pretence of common cause between the main civil rights groups.¹⁰⁹ As soon as King's death was announced, Wilkins immediately issued a statement saying the Association was in "a state of shock," and like many others, was "angry and bewildered." Nevertheless, he

¹⁰⁷ Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, 226.

¹⁰⁸ Memorandum, Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, April 16, 1967, NAACP papers, Part IV, Box 89, LOC.

¹⁰⁹ Ben A. Franklin, "Race Crisis (Cont'd): A Mood of Tension and Violence," *New York Times*, April 7, 1968; Fairclough, *Better Day Coming*, 320.

attempted to calm the situation. "If those blacks who are really angry will stop and think for 24 hours . . . violence would have been the last thing King would have wanted."¹¹⁰ Wilkins hoped that King's death would prompt greater civil rights activity. "It is to be hoped that this tragedy will help move the American people to prompt action to expunge racism from our national life. If such action is taken forthwith, the sacrifice of this great and good man will not have been in vain."¹¹¹ Stokely Carmichael, on the other hand, predicted more violence, warned, with some truth, that King was "the one man of our race that this country's older generations, the militants and the revolutionaries and the masses of black people would still listen to."¹¹²

Even in the midst of these events, Wilkins reiterated his patriotic support for Johnson and his vision of the American Dream. Shortly after Dr. King's murder, Wilkins led the US delegation at the UN Conference on Human Rights in Tehran in April 1968. The international repercussions of King's death were obvious in the tributes and eulogies offered by delegates. But they were also obvious in the hostility directed towards the United States by some of the African and Arab delegates. Undaunted, Wilkins told delegates about "my country's glittering future for all Americans – black men and white, Indians, Protestants, Catholics, Jews and non-believers. Such a statement is justified by the confidence that the President of the nation, its courts system, and belatedly its national legislature, are fully committed towards this ideal. The whole country will follow, as many of its regions are now doing."¹¹³ According to one member of the US delegation, Wilkins' comments, and his presence, repelled much criticism of the United States' racial problems that might have been expected at the conference.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ "N.Y. Reaction to Slaying," *Christian Science Monitor*, April 6, 1968.

¹¹¹ "President Condemns Violence, Says US is Shocked, Saddened," Associated Press, *Los Angeles Times*, April 5, 1968.

¹¹² Carson, *In Struggle*, 288.

¹¹³ Remarks, Roy Wilkins at the UN Conference on Human Rights, April 20, 1968, Tehran, Iran. Republished in Roy Wilkins, *Talking it Over with Roy Wilkins* (Norwalk, Connecticut: M&B, 1977), 61-66.

¹¹⁴ Memorandum from Ernest Goldstein to Lyndon Johnson, April 26 1968, WHCF, HU2, Box 56, LBJL; While the American delegation escaped criticism over the United States' civil rights record, it did not escape attacks over the country's policies on South Africa, Israel and

The landscape of the civil rights movement changed dramatically during 1968, propelled in large part by King's death. The Civil Rights Act, which contained fair housing provisions that had been removed from the civil rights bill that failed to pass Congress in 1966, stalled in March of that year but was passed by the House on April 10 ensuring fair housing policies would now be enshrined in law.¹¹⁵ While SNCC had been the most confrontational of the civil rights groups for some time, CORE was increasingly under pressure from new recruits, black and white, attracted by the militant rhetoric of younger leaders rather than by its historical commitment to non-violence.¹¹⁶ Even the moderate Whitney Young was facing a crisis of confidence in his views about integration. According to his biographer, he was undergoing "a sufficient reorientation of perspective leading to something new," led by a growing conviction that the only practical solution to social problems was to develop the black community even if it meant embracing some of the principles of Black Power.

Both Wilkins and Young spoke at CORE's annual conference in Columbus, Ohio in July 1968. For Wilkins, it was an opportunity to reinforce his own concept of Black Power. "If the concept which emerges is that of the building of a separate nation, the mood, the beliefs and the tradition of the NAACP would dictate no cooperation on that theme." But he suggested that the civil rights groups cooperate in building black pride and community strength.¹¹⁷ According to newspaper reports, Wilkins' remarks were not received with much enthusiasm, unlike Young's address the following day. In a move that clearly moved Young closer to the militants, he declared that "the Urban League believes strongly in that interpretation of Black Power which emphasizes self-determination – pride – self respect – participation and control of one's destiny and community affairs." Those words drew cheers and shouts of "Brother's come home" from delegates.¹¹⁸

Portuguese colonialism. Joe Alex Morris, "Human Rights Parley Delegates Assail US," April 25, 1968. *Los Angeles Times*.

¹¹⁵ Dallek, *Flawed Giant*, 534.

¹¹⁶ Meier and Rudwick, *CORE*, 428-429.

¹¹⁷ Earl Caldwell, "Wilkins Appeals for Negro Unity," *New York Times*, July 7, 1968. P1; Jean M. White, "Wilkins Opposes Black Separatism," *Washington Post*, July 6, 1968. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A45, LOC.

¹¹⁸ Weiss, *Whitney Young*, 183.

Young's surprising change of heart prompted a bout of introspective analysis at the NAACP's headquarters. In an analysis of the speech, John Morsell suggested to Wilkins that the time had come to "spell out what is really contained in all the romantic slogans about Black Power, negritude, 'Our own separate culture' and so on."¹¹⁹ The NAACP's membership was also beginning to challenge its leadership. The Association's annual convention in Atlantic City was possibly the most turbulent in the organization's history. As well as security scares, rival meetings, and "suspicious looking" attendees, a number of youth delegates walked out of the convention following a demand that the convention agree to the incorporation of a youth and college division, with the right to conduct its own operational affairs including finance and public relations.¹²⁰

Nevertheless, as Yohuru Williams argues in his important reassessment of Wilkins response to Black Power, by the late 1960s even Wilkins was becoming more sympathetic towards Black Power goals and programs.¹²¹ According to Williams, Wilkins's attitude towards Black Power began to change when he served as co-chair of the commission set up to investigate the shooting of two members of the Black Panther party, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, by Chicago police in December 1969.¹²² Although Wilkins publicly maintained his disapproval of Black Power, Williams believes that Wilkins privately attempted to find common ground with its advocates and defended them against the excesses of the FBI.

Each of these developments was disturbing enough, but 1968 grew progressively worse for Wilkins. While he was traveling abroad Lewis Steel, a young lawyer on the NAACP's legal team, had written a controversial article for the *New York Times*

¹¹⁹ Memorandum to Roy Wilkins from John Morsell, July 9, 1968. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A45, LOC.

¹²⁰ Summary of 1968 NAACP Convention Security Measures, submitted by Clarence Mitchell, July 26 1968. NAACP Papers, Part V, Box A7, LOC; Thomas A. Johnson, "N.A.A.C.P. Youths Quit Convention," June 29, 1968, *New York Times*.

¹²¹ Williams, *Red, Black and Green Liberation Jumpsuit*, 181-189.

¹²² The commission's findings, published in May 1973, strongly condemned the government for its role in the murders and charged that the justice system at all levels failed to protect its citizens.

magazine.¹²³ In the article, called 'Nine Men in Black who Think White,' Steele attacked the Warren Court's commitment to an equal society. In a hasty act driven by fear that the article publicly undermined the very foundation of the NAACP's activities – that of legal action – the Board of Directors fired Steel, prompting the Association's entire legal staff to resign in a very public and bitter exchange.¹²⁴

According to Judge Nathaniel Jones, the NAACP's legal counsel between 1969 and 1977, Wilkins thought the Board had acted precipitously, but he supported its decision anyway. Although Jones quickly took control of the legal department "it was a long time before the toxins in the air cleared." The episode also prompted criticism from many NAACP members. One correspondent, representative of many letters in a similar vein, expressed anger at the actions of the board of directors rather than at Wilkins. Nevertheless, Wilkins did not escape approbation. He was accused of allowing internal politics, character assassination and personal vilification to undermine the Association's direction. John Davis, director of the New York conference of branches, told Wilkins that "under your leadership the hallmark of our staff has become mediocrity."¹²⁵

A major disappointment for Wilkins had already occurred with Johnson's announcement in March that he would not stand for re-election in the November election. In one action, Wilkins had lost his greatest ally and any chance of securing any further civil rights legislation. However, that disappointment was amplified when Richard Nixon became president at the end of the year. Although Nixon had not been an enemy of the NAACP's, Wilkins had little expectation that the new president would honor the same commitment to civil rights as his predecessor.

123 Lewis M. Steele, "Nine Men in Black Who Think White," *New York Times*, October 13, 1968.

¹²⁴ Press Release, October 14, 1969, Roy Wilkins Papers, Box 31, LOC; Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to National Board Members, Presidents of State Conferences, Branches, Youth Councils and College Chapters, and Field Staff. October 24, 1968. NAACP Papers, Part IV, A11, LOC; Letter, Robert Carter to Roy Wilkins, October 28, 1968. Letter, Roy Wilkins to Robert Carter, October 29, 1968. Memorandum, Roy Wilkins to Board of Directors, October 31, 1968; Letter, Roy Wilkins to Eugene Reed, November 6, 1968; The Substantive Issue in the Steel Case, Unattributed, December 6 1968. All NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A11, LOC; Judge Nathaniel Jones, interview by author, December 12, 2007, New York City; Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 331-332.

¹²⁵ Letter, John F. Davis to Roy Wilkins, December 4, 1968. NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A11, LOC.

Nixon invited Wilkins to the White House shortly after the inauguration, which Wilkins declined to attend, where he told the NAACP leader: "If I do anything wrong, I want you to tell me." Wilkins was less than convinced about his sincerity.

It had only been four years since the glory of the Civil Rights Act, but 1968 effectively signed the death knell for the civil rights movement that had secured that victory. Wilkins was now sixty-seven years old and had suffered with ill health intermittently for the past thirty years. While he still refused to consider retirement, he did take a decision to reduce his speaking engagements by appearing only at branches that could demonstrate a sustained and healthy membership. "If a Branch does not carry on a program that tackles the needs of the community, it will not get members and it ought not to get Wilkins to help it 'save face' and 'cover up' its shortcomings," he told branch officers.¹²⁶ He had resisted several internal attempts to remove him from the Association and had survived most of his detractors in other groups, at least in terms of retaining organizational strength but with no succession plan in place questions were beginning to be raised about who should succeed Wilkins and what the organization's direction should be in the coming decade, a decade in which the next steps were far from clear.

The period between 1968 and Wilkins' retirement in 1977 highlighted both the positive and negative aspects of Wilkins' career. School integration, to which Wilkins and the NAACP had devoted so much attention, continued to prove elusive. Moreover, the difficulties inherent in securing integration in public schools led to questions within the black community about whether integration was necessary, or even desirable, at all. In Atlanta, for example, by 1973, over two-thirds of the city's schools remained segregated, albeit in some instances through choice. The failure of school integration in the city prompted the local NAACP branch to abandon its demand for a racially balanced school system in a city where black pupils already comprised around eighty per cent of the public school population. It settled instead for an agreement that no public school would have less than thirty per cent black students. The branch also agreed that black teachers would be

¹²⁶ Draft memorandum, Roy Wilkins to branch officers [undated but sometime in 1967, NAACP Papers, Part IV, Box A80, LOC.

appointed to administrative posts in the school system, including the position of superintendent. The settlement infuriated Wilkins, who called it a "second Atlanta compromise," and promptly suspended the branch for going against the Association's integrationist policy.¹²⁷ The move by the Atlanta branch, which was not alone in taking a pragmatic approach, could have instigated a debate within the NAACP about its position on integration but Wilkins did not encourage any such discussion, arguably to the cost of the organization.

Wilkins' later years were also marred by his relationship with President Nixon. Although relations between the two had been relatively cordial since the 1950s, any black support had evaporated by the time voters went to the polls in 1968. Nixon's election to president was an acute disappointment to Wilkins who mourned the absence of an ally like Lyndon Johnson in the White House. The president-elect invited Wilkins to his inauguration but the invitation was refused. According to Dean Kotlowski, Nixon regarded blacks as so firmly entrenched in the Democratic camp that he abandoned any attempt to court the constituency even while claiming to keep an "open door" on black issues.¹²⁸ When Nixon proved to be inconsistent in forcing compliance with school desegregation, Wilkins made his disgust clear. He accused the president of sanctioning "the breaking of the law" and even of being an enemy of "little black children."¹²⁹ Wilkins said that when Nixon took office, he told the NAACP leader that he should let him know if he did anything wrong. "I spent the next five years doing so," Wilkins added.¹³⁰

As had occasionally proved the case in the past, life outside the United States was more welcoming to Wilkins. He moved into that space allocated in the cultural memory for the elder statesman, and the white establishment with which Wilkins

¹²⁷ Tuck, *Beyond Atlanta*, 212-213; Raymond Wolters *Race and Education, 1954-2007* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 128; The first Atlanta Compromise refers to a speech given by Booker T. Washington in 1895 in which he argued that blacks should pursue vocational skills rather than political power and 'social equality' but that whites should bear responsibility for just treatment of black Americans.

¹²⁸ Dean J. Kotlowski, *Nixon's Civil Rights: Politics, Principle, and Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 20.

¹²⁹ Jack Nelson and Ray Rogers, "Wilkins Blasts School Desegregation Decision," *Los Angeles Times*, July 4, 1969; C. Gerald Fraser, "Wilkins Puts Nixon with Foes of Black," *New York Times*, May 26, 1972; Kotlowski argues that Nixon's efforts on school desegregation actually made him a the "greatest school desegregator in American history." Kotlowski, *Nixon's Civil Rights*, 37.

¹³⁰ Wilkins with Matthews, *Standing Fast*, 333.

had had such an ambiguous relationship recognized his contribution with numerous honorary degrees, testimonial dinners and medals — including the Presidential Medal of Freedom, presented by Lyndon Johnson.¹³¹ In addition to representing the United States at the first United Nations International Conference on Human Rights, in Tehran in the spring of 1968, Wilkins led a US delegation to Monrovia in 1972, and visited Italy and Germany to assess whether the military's desegregation policy was being successfully implemented. Shortly before traveling to Liberia, he visited South Africa where his remarks at a press conference in Johannesburg caused some controversy when it appeared that he was opposed to a withdrawal of American businesses from South Africa. Nevertheless, despite the accolades and testimonials, his continued tenure at the Association proved increasingly difficult for all concerned.

Shakespeare's famous words about the death of the Thane of Cawdor in *Macbeth*: "Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it," provide an apt description of Wilkins' last years at the NAACP. His retirement was a protracted and painful process that highlighted both the best and worst aspects of his tenure at the Association. Bishop Spottswood, an old ally of Wilkins, died in 1974, and his place on the board was taken by Margaret Bush Wilson, an attorney from St Louis who was no advocate of Wilkins and fully intended to persuade him to retire.¹³² After some years of speculation, and increasing demands among some board members that he should step down, Wilkins finally agreed to leave in 1976. However, his agreement was dependent on being allowed to remain as titular head until the NAACP's annual conference in 1977, which was to take place in St Louis, Wilkins' birthplace. His refusal to retire until this point caused an increasing amount of tension amongst the board of directors. Matters were exacerbated when he took the fight to the floor of the 1976 annual convention. In his keynote address to delegates, Wilkins displayed an uncharacteristic lack of graciousness, by accusing the NAACP's board of waging "a campaign of vilification" against him. The accusation was extraordinary — not simply because of the forum in which he chose to make it

¹³¹ The Presidential Medal of Freedom is America's highest civilian award. President Truman established the award in 1945 to recognize particularly meritorious civilian service in World War II.

¹³² Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*, 326; NAACP Parley is Expected to Focus on Internal Disputes, Thomas A. Johnson, *New York Times*, June 26 1977

but also for its apparent public disloyalty to the Association he had led for so many years.

Wilkins had entered into more than one dispute with board members over the years but never so publicly and so bitterly. However, although his address appears unusually disloyal, it was also an illustration of his strategic talents. He understood his audience in a way the board of directors failed to comprehend. Whatever his difficulties within the national office, Wilkins was enormously popular with the NAACP's rank and file, who supported his request and pressured the board to do the same. No succession plan had been put in place, so when the time finally came for Wilkins to leave the prospect for upheaval was enormous. The continuity of the NAACP's executive structure had been remarkable. There had only been three Secretaries since 1920. James Weldon Johnson was succeeded by Walter White in 1931. Wilkins, of course, became secretary in 1955 following White's death and so provided an essential link in the chain of continuity that had been in place for almost sixty years. Each secretary had been promoted from within the organization and so had a deep knowledge of its complex structure.

However, for all Wilkins' apparent diffidence, he possessed a highly sensitive ego. He had spent many years jealously protecting his position from both internal and external challengers, and his identification with the NAACP had become so ingrained that he was unable to contemplate encouraging a successor. Of all the likely candidates within the Association, John Morsell was possibly the one most likely to have been considered a logical successor by Wilkins. Certainly he had taken on an increasing amount of executive responsibility and, given his closeness to Wilkins, would have continued leading the NAACP in much the same way. Unfortunately, Morsell was diagnosed with cancer in 1973 and died the following year. Gloster Current was made Administrator when Wilkins' retirement was announced but does not appear to have been considered as a serious candidate for a permanent replacement.

The board cast its net outside the organization for the first time in its history. Benjamin Hooks, a lawyer, was appointed to succeed Wilkins in 1977. He survived several bruising clashes with the board of directors and retired in 1993. Unfortunately, since Wilkins' retirement the office of Executive Secretary has

witnessed more than its fair share of difficulties. Hooks' successor, Benjamin Chavis, lasted just sixteen months before being dismissed under a cloud of allegations that he had misappropriated funds to make an out-of-court settlement in a sexual harassment lawsuit. Since Chavis' departure in 1994 there have been six directors, some of whom cited difficulties in dealing with the board of directors as the primary factor for their leaving the Association.

Despite these difficulties, the NAACP is today still the largest civil rights group in the United States and still commands the attention of the nation's leaders. Mere survival, however, is not enough in determining the success of an organization. Many critics and even friends of the Association suggest it has lost its way since the glory days of the civil rights movement when it had a defined sense of purpose. A new president, Benjamin Todd Jealous, appointed in September 2008, has promised to continue the fight in areas that would be familiar to Wilkins, such as the disproportionate rate of incarceration of black men, voter registration, and educational disparity. However, Jealous also acknowledges the decreasing salience of race as a political issue, and has promised to forge coalitions with other minority groups, particularly Hispanics, who face similar issues of discrimination.¹³³ Wilkins' dream that the NAACP would eventually become unnecessary is still just a dream, but its remit could become broader than he could have imagined.

¹³³ According to 2006 figures, Black Americans make up 13.4% of the total population while Hispanic or Latinos comprise 14.8%. B02001.Race – Universe: Total Population. 2006 American Community Survey, U.S. Census Bureau: <http://factfinder.census.gov/>

Conclusion

How does one assess the contribution of “the most boring man in the civil rights movement,” as Roy Wilkins was once described? The perception that Wilkins was dull, staid and unadventurous has encouraged many historians to dismiss the part he played in the civil rights movement. More importantly, some of the qualities ascribed to him have, by default, colored assessments of the NAACP. The obituaries and eulogies that appeared after his death in September 1981, surely a time when one could expect only the best remarks, do little to dispel such an opinion. All spoke of his steady leadership and his quiet, calm and reasoned persona. Presidents, members of Congress, and even some of his old adversaries among the civil rights leaders, such as Roy Innis, the strident new leader of CORE, spoke of his long dedication to the cause. Some made reference to his productive working relationship with President Johnson. Others referred to his early investigative work and his arrest in 1932 as evidence that this urbane, reserved man had, at one point in his life, borne some of the marks of the firebrand activist. All describe a personality at odds with a movement as suffused with high emotion and fervor as that for civil rights. The more effusive eulogists called Wilkins “a giant” or a “towering figure” and “a rock of ages.”¹

Of course there were the inevitable comparisons with Martin Luther King. One editorialist said that King was the heart of the movement, while Wilkins was its mind.² A reviewer of Wilkins’ autobiography echoed much the same sentiment in talking about the March on Washington in 1963, stating that although “the day belonged to the dreams of Martin Luther King, Jr., the agenda belonged to Roy Wilkins.”³ However, Joseph Rauh, who worked with Wilkins at the LCCR, encapsulated the difference between the two leaders most succinctly: “I guess you

¹ Warren Brown, “US Civil Rights Leader Roy Wilkins Dies at Age of 80,” *Washington Post*, September 9, 1981; Eugene Robinson, “Roy Wilkins Eulogized by Veterans of Rights Wars,” *Washington Post*, September 12, 1981; Albin Krebs, “Roy Wilkins, 50-Year Veteran of Civil Rights Fight, is Dead,” *New York Times*, September 9, 1981; William J Drummond, “Roy Wilkins: He Stood for Reason and Good Sense,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 14, 1981; Lee May, “Roy Wilkins, Giant of Civil Rights Movement, is Dead,” September 9, 1981, *Los Angeles Times*; “Roy Wilkins: Fighter for Equality,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 1981.

² Roy Wilkins: Fighter for Equality, *Los Angeles Times*, September 9, 1981.

³ Melvin Drimmer, “Roy Wilkins and the American Dream: A Review Essay,” *Phylon*, 45:2 (Second Quarter 1984): 160.

can say Martin was the front man who changed public opinion. But Roy was the one who was able to use that shift in public opinion to bring about legislation and legal rulings that benefited blacks, as well as any number of other people... Roy wasn't the... one out front. He was the one in the back who got things done."⁴

Rauh's comment deftly defines Wilkins' role, but it also sums up the dilemma inherent in analyzing that role. Wilkins' extreme reticence and his acute detachment make him a difficult subject to assess. Many of the eulogies, however, go some way to explaining the puzzle that was Roy Wilkins. To some extent, the question is one of legacy. Wilkins was certainly considered to be one of the most important black leaders during the period of his tenure and his moderate views made him a particularly appealing ally for both the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Nevertheless, he quickly disappeared from the 'folk memory.' At the time of his death, Wilkins had been out of public life for less than five years but he had already been forgotten by some of the very people he had worked to help. That may have pleased him: as Nathaniel Jones said, Wilkins believed that the business of the NAACP was to go out of business.⁵ However, Wilkins has never been "rediscovered."

In truth, Wilkins invariably suffers by comparison with any number of his contemporaries. Even before he became Executive Secretary of the NAACP in 1955, newspaper profiles invariably described Wilkins as a "quiet fighter." Later, as he assumed the top job, commentators praised his talent for strategy and ability to negotiate the corridors of power, but the role of the man described rarely had the definition of, for example, that of Martin Luther King. King's public persona was easy to understand; he was the philosophical force who symbolized the moral imperative of the civil rights movement. Malcolm X, another of the most potent symbols of black politics although not directly involved in the civil rights movement, articulated black anger and presented a clear counterpoint to King. Whitney Young, and his predecessor Lester Granger, of the Urban League, shared

⁴ Brown, *Washington Post*, September 9, 1981.

⁵ In Brown's obituary, a black man from Marshall, Texas is quoted as saying that many of his twenty-year old daughter's contemporaries had not heard of Roy Wilkins or the NAACP. Brown, *Washington Post*, September 9, 1981. Ibid; See also, Ted Post, "We Ought Not to Need the NAACP, Says Its Chief," *New York Post*, June 14, 1949. NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A611, LOC.

some of the problems of a lack of public recognition that plagued the NAACP. However, unlike the NAACP, the Urban League had not established itself as an instigator of protest and was therefore deliberately worked behind the scenes. Wilkins held an ambiguous position somewhere between these poles.

The importance of Wilkins' upbringing in a predominantly white neighborhood cannot be overestimated. It not only informed his conviction that an integrated society was just and achievable, it also reinforced his awareness that blacks made up a small and vulnerable minority of the United States, and so advancement strategies had to be developed within that context. One of the aspects of the lynchings in Duluth that so exasperated the young Wilkins was the apathy of local blacks, which prevented them from joining forces, in the face of an overwhelming white majority, to fight against racism in the area.⁶ Wilkins made frequent references to the economic and political weakness of blacks, particularly when defending himself against accusations of being overly cautious in promoting boycotts, for example. His devout belief in the power of the ballot also stemmed from his belief that blacks needed white allies.

At the risk of straying into the territory of a psychobiography there is also a strong argument to be made that Wilkins' upbringing informed his style of leadership. Among the voluminous literature on leadership, attachment theory, which refers to the emotional ties established (or not) by an individual to a primary caregiver during early childhood and the effect of those ties on leadership potential, has gained credibility in the complex process of identifying and defining leadership qualities.⁷ The premature death of Wilkins' mother, the absence of his father, and

⁶ Lutz and Ashton, *These Colored United States*, 172-173.

⁷ Popper, *Charismatic Leaders*, 732-735. Attachment theory was first proposed by psychiatrist John Bowlby in 1969, see *Attachment and Loss, Vol.1, Attachment* (New York: Basic Books, 1969) and *Attachment and Loss, Vol. 2: Separation* (New York: Basic Books, 1973). Bowlby's theory was expanded by psychologist Mary Ainsworth who developed an empirical research procedure known as the 'strange situation' to test a child's style of attachment, where a child is observed at play for a short period of time during which caregivers and strangers leave and enter the playroom. The child's response to the entrance and exit of the caregiver and their interaction with strangers indicate one of four models of attachment ranging from secure to disorganized or disoriented. See M. Ainsworth, M. Blehar, E. Wates and S. Wall, *Patterns of Attachment: A Psychological Study of Strange Situations* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Erlbaum, 1978). Adherents of this theory argue that an 'internal model' is formed during the attachment process that governs how an individual responds to others in adult life. Attachment theory has subsequently been combined with other studies

the responsibility he clearly felt for his siblings combined to form a set of experiences that test the assumptions of those theories. However, the stern but loving home provided by Wilkins' aunt and uncle gave him the stability, confidence and ambition necessary for his future role, and, while Wilkins was clearly uncomfortable with close relationships both personally and professionally, also helped him avoid some of the more excessive traits of a leader such as President Clinton, whose early years bear some resemblance to Wilkins'.⁸

Despite the scholarly attention devoted to both the civil rights movement and leadership and organizational theory, there is scant research applying theoretical models to civil rights leadership. While many of the most respected leadership studies focus on presidents or other political leaders the research still offer some insight in defining Wilkins' leadership style according to empirical parameters. Sociological models of organizations and leaders are particularly helpful in this respect. Wilkins can be best examined within the context of sociological models, in particular William Whyte's "Organization Man" and Max Weber's bureaucrat. He was an almost perfect example of Whyte's construct, the 'Organization Man', who experienced a sense of belonging to an organization, rather than simply working for it. This sense of organizational attachment has also been identified by Abraham Zaleznik as one of the traits of a manager rather than a leader. Zaleznik argues that managers define their role in an organization as curatorial whereby they perpetuate and strengthen an existing institution. Leaders, on the other hand, never fully belong to an organization. Their perception of identity is not connected to a role or an organization. This latter description would certainly apply to Martin Luther King or Malcolm X, both of whom were connected to but not defined by their

that examine the closeness, or otherwise, of the parental-child relationship and the effect on the motivation to be a leader to determine the characteristics and potential for leadership. See B.J. Avolio and R.N. Kanungo (Eds.), *Charismatic Leadership: The Elusive Factor in Organizational Effectiveness* (San Francisco: Jossey-Boss, 1988), cited in Popper, *Charismatic Leaders*, 740.

⁸ President Clinton's father died shortly before Clinton was born. His mother left her son with her parents for four years while she studied to become a nurse. On her remarriage when Clinton was four, the family moved to another part of Arkansas to establish a new life. Stanley Renshon has published several thorough psychological studies of Clinton's leadership. The influence of the president's childhood is examined in Renshon's book, *High Hopes: The Clinton Presidency and the Politics of Ambition*, (New York: Routledge, 1998), 145-182. See also, Stanley A. Renshon, "A Preliminary Assessment of the Clinton Presidency: Character, Leadership and Performance," *Political Psychology* 15 (June 1994): 375-394.

organizations. Wilkins by contrast, was so embedded into the organizational culture of the NAACP that the institution and the man defined each other.⁹

Wilkins exemplifies a further part of Whyte's findings even more strongly. Whyte argued that the organization man was the manifestation of a 'social ethic' that was defined by a belief in the efficacy of the group rather than the individual.

According to the social ethic construct, the individual can achieve far more through collaboration with others than alone, not necessarily in a submissive, conformist sense, but rather in the sense of producing a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts.¹⁰ This clearly represents Wilkins' fundamental philosophy of the power of the group in effecting social change.

Wilkins often appeared to take a detached, intellectual approach to integration and the fight for equality. He felt deeply that black Americans should enjoy the same economic and social opportunities as their white counterparts — his writings and speeches are testament enough to that — but his approach was almost academic; for Wilkins, desegregation and discrimination was irrational. This detachment should not be confused with disinterest or a lack of anger. Over the course of his career, there were many examples of his rage at yet another unjust act, most of which he expressed through his newspaper column or his speeches. However, no matter how egregious the act, Wilkins invariably looked towards a legislative remedy as the ultimate solution. He abhorred the proposition of violence as a response to injustice even while he acknowledged the occasional necessity for armed self-defense. Therefore, the only rational and effective way to address inequality, as far as Wilkins was concerned, was to ensure that rights were protected through legislation and court rulings. His detachment allowed Wilkins to serve as the conduit between civil rights activists demonstrating on the streets of Selma, for example, and the white power structure. He shared with Johnson and Clarence Mitchell an understanding of the complexity of the legislative process and was particularly adept at negotiating and navigating the corridors of power. His

⁹ Zaleznik. "Managers and Leaders," 8-9; Zaleznik's hypothesis can be challenged however when applied to corporations for example, Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, Steve Jobs, founder and CEO of Apple, and Bill Gates of Microsoft, all of whom are closely identified with their relative organizations.

¹⁰ Whyte, *Organization Man*, 12.

acknowledgement of the white power structure extended far beyond Louis Lomax's accusations that he, and some of his peers, were motivated by a desire to belong to that power structure. In Wilkins' case, while access to the White House and invitations to President Johnson's ranch clearly flattered his ego, such access offered him a more effective position from which to persuade. From that position, he was able to translate the anger of the blacks protesting in Birmingham into words that a white congressman from Ohio, for example, could understand. Despite the accusations of Dixiecrat politicians that the NAACP was a hotbed of militancy, Wilkins' moderation also presented an unthreatening face to those in power who had the ability to implement change. It is hard to imagine Stokely Carmichael, for example, testifying in front of a congressional judiciary committee and leaving with anything more than an argument. The strength of King, Farmer or Carmichael was in shaping the external debate about, and moral force of, civil rights, which Wilkins could then use to exert pressure on Congress and the White House.

He was helped in this endeavor by the rise of television. While it offered no favors to Wilkins personally he was perhaps fortunate to lead the NAACP at a time when the medium was becoming a ubiquitous presence in American homes. Newsreel images of the violence in Birmingham, Selma, Little Rock and so many other places vividly demonstrated in thirty seconds what had taken decades of congressional testimony, letter writing campaigns, and lobbying to emphasize. Nevertheless, those images needed explanation and translation. While King provided the inspiring rhetoric, Wilkins provided the historical context for the black experience and a practical framework for action that worked within the limitations of the existing power structure. Television also provided Wilkins with a new platform from which to expound the Association's strategy even if more captivating characters and stories often eclipsed his words. Unfortunately, as one reviewer of Wilkins' autobiography argued, "Bureaucrats do not make heroic copy," and that was certainly true of Wilkins.¹¹ However, it is debatable whether Wilkins was content to labor in the background while others took their place in the limelight. His ego demanded recognition but he never appeared to be entirely comfortable in the public eye. The title of this thesis, "Leading from the Back," could imply that

¹¹ Drimmer, "Wilkins and the American Dream," 160.

Wilkins was primarily a follower rather than setting direction. While that is true to some extent, particularly when compared with his peers, he was constrained not only by the Association's members but by its board of directors. Wilkins' style of leadership was defined by the organizational culture of the NAACP. Unlike the SCLC, which developed around King's charismatic leadership, the NAACP was already firmly established by the time Wilkins joined its staff, and, as its more flamboyant leaders such as Walter White, Du Bois and Thurgood Marshall demonstrated, a

single leader could not define the organization. On the contrary, the structure of the Association provided the ideal background for Wilkins' pragmatic approach to civil rights. Although the NAACP was never a mass organization, it did have the broadest reach of any civil rights group. In keeping with the analogy of Wilkins as 'organization man,' the Association was like a highly dispersed corporation, with Wilkins as Chief Executive Officer rallying the workforce and encouraging them to work within a broad set of parameters to achieve a common objective.

For all Wilkins' later, albeit nuanced, pronouncements supporting direct action protests, and his attempts to foster a culture of mass action protest within the NAACP's branches, that was not where his ability lay. Wilkins' skill was to combine a bureaucrat's capacity for organization and process with the thinking of a strategist and, arguably, he was most successful in marrying those skills at the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights rather than at the Association. Wilkins found his natural home at the LCCR. If he was a bureaucrat at the NAACP, he was a strategic mastermind at the LCCR. In fact, Wilkins appears almost more comfortable leading the LCCR than the NAACP —perhaps because he was constrained by the board of directors and membership. August Meier and John Bracey, whose studies of the NAACP remain the most comprehensive to date, argued that the NAACP's leadership of the LCCR marked a "radical transformation" of the Association's lobbying efforts; moving from a strategy that made use of personal contacts to one that mobilized the available resources of the many groups and organizations that participated in the LCCR's programs.¹² While Wilkins was reluctant to enter into coalitions with the main civil rights groups unless the NAACP was able to control the program, the LCCR allowed him to forge

¹² Meier and Bracey, "NAACP as a Reform Movement," 22.

a broad alliance of sympathetic groups that supported the Association's goals and had no wish to dominate its program. Wilkins was the one of the main driving forces of the LCCR, and through his leadership, was able to gather together a powerful lobby of diverse groups which, through a concerted effort, brought pressure to bear on Congress. Wilkins once described the necessity of being a good strategist in the broader experience of being black in America. "The Negro has to be a superb diplomat and a great strategist. He has to parlay what actual power he has along with the good will of the white majority."¹³ This was where Wilkins' skill lay. He understood and therefore knew how to use the white power structure.

The LCCR provided the ideal forum for this talent. Working in collaboration with Clarence Mitchell and Arnold Aronson, Wilkins devised a series of lobbying strategies that relied on a detailed knowledge of the intricacies of congressional power. He had a politician's grasp of congressional procedure. More than that, he was able to judge which members of Congress were open to persuasion, which were vulnerable at an election, whose seats were safe enough to allow them some latitude, and which were beyond any coaxing. He was less successful in managing the process of amendments. Congressional amendments were both the bane and the balm of legislation, although in the case of civil rights, it was more often the former. In the battles for each of the major civil rights bills, Wilkins spent much political capital either fighting for or against an amendment, most often the contentious Part III of the 1957 civil rights bill, which became an equally contentious component of subsequent bills. The contribution of the NAACP and LCCR, under his leadership, in securing the passage of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1964, and 1968, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act stand as his greatest legacy.

The NAACP had been such a dominant force in civil rights during its long legal campaign that the changes brought about by the emergence of direct action protests threw it off balance. Obviously, with the *Brown* order still to implement and segregation still a fact of life in much of America, there was obviously no lack of purpose. But while there are numerous examples of memoranda from Wilkins in which he proposed amendments to existing programs or new areas of activity,

¹³ Claude Lewis, "Wilkins, Master Rights Strategist," *New York Herald Tribune*. March 28, 1965, NAACP Papers, Part III, Box A318, LOC.

none of his suggestions proposed an action as daring as the Freedom Rides, for example. Neither did they propose mobilizing the Association's members in a widespread boycott in the manner of that seen in Montgomery in 1955-56. In his defense, there was no reason for Wilkins to imagine, in 1935 or even 1950, that such protests could be successful. On the contrary, his experience told him that such protests were dangerous and, because of the political and economic weakness of blacks, ineffectual. Soon after the Montgomery boycott began, Wilkins did encourage the Association to support the protest, and the NAACP provided legal and financial assurances to the protestors, and continued to encourage direct action protests. As each new wave of previously unimaginable demonstration occurred Wilkins committed the NAACP's support. Nevertheless, the success of such protests never challenged Wilkins' devout belief in the power of legislation and litigation to achieve his ultimate goal of equal rights.

If navigating the white power structure was his greatest success, what was Wilkins' greatest failure? Roger Wilkins, Roy Wilkins nephew, argued with some justification that it was his uncle's failure to engage young people. This was borne out time and again throughout Wilkins' career despite several instances early on where he had attempted to persuade the NAACP's leadership to expand its youth activities. The Association certainly did not ignore the potential offered by younger members. It established its youth department in 1934, with a national officer to direct its activities. Those activities however were rarely developed specifically to engage students and young people; they were often simply adjuncts of adult programs. This remained the case even when direct action protests, for which youth members provided much of the energy, began in 1960. Youth members also had to contend with conservative branch leaders who sometimes contradicted Wilkins' instructions to support the protests. Historians of the movement have, so far, overlooked the Association's youth program, and a detailed analysis of this department would be a valuable addition to the literature about the Association. What can be said, however, is that if Wilkins had made a more determined effort to override the more conservative local leaders and grant the youth chapters more autonomy within the NAACP, he could have created a secure and solid foundation of members for many years to come.

Wilkins' fear of fostering action that he would be unable to control, and, even more, his absolute rejection of Black Power, hampered his ability to listen to young militants. The new generation of activists represented a groundswell of black rage that had not been assuaged by the legislation that Wilkins had believed in so profoundly. The young militants saw little or no practical benefit to legislation such as the Voting Rights Act, and argued that Wilkins and his ilk had squandered their political capital on civic rights at the expense of economic advancement. As one commentator remarked, Wilkins had become the victim of 'generational cruelty.' Even without the inevitable tides of generational change, Wilkins' remarks about Black Power earned him the enmity of younger blacks. For them, Wilkins represented an unacceptable accommodation to the white power structure. Wilkins' proper, urbane manner and his position as one of the establishment, prompted disdain from these younger activists. Singer Gil Scott-Heron encapsulated the younger generation's view of Wilkins in his song, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, released in 1971. "There will be no slow motion or still life of Roy Wilkins strolling through Watts in a Red, Black and Green liberation jumpsuit that he had been saving for just the proper occasion."¹⁴

An interesting poll hidden in the Johnson archives sheds some light on how Wilkins was, or more to the point was not, perceived by blacks living in urban ghettos—the constituency that had, arguably, benefited least from legal and legislative successes. A study was made of 496 black men arrested during the 1967 riot in Detroit in which they were asked to list their favorite black leaders. King led the poll by a wide margin, followed some way behind by Stokely Carmichael with Adam Clayton Powell, Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X sharing lower ratings. Wilkins was not mentioned at all. It can be argued that prisoners in Detroit might not have formed any part of Wilkins' support base. Still, the results provide a clue to how removed he was, or perceived to be, from severe urban problems.¹⁵ His attitude to areas such as Watts suggests an interesting contradiction. The NAACP's branches gave the organization a presence in local communities across the nation that was almost unmatched by any other group, yet Wilkins and his colleagues in

¹⁴ Gil Scott-Heron, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, RCA Victor Europe, CD, 1988.

¹⁵ Memorandum, Willard Wirtz, Secretary of Labor, to unnamed recipients, August 8, 1967. WHCF, HU2/ST, LBJL.

the national office were uncomfortable in dealing with the unemployed of the Detroit, for example, in ways that did not apply when dealing with the unemployed of rural Mississippi.

The very detachment that had served Wilkins and the cause of civil rights so well during the pursuit of legislation and litigation made him ill-equipped to represent the black ghettos. Any transformative social movement relies upon a combination of forces to succeed. The civil rights movement exemplifies this more than most, and any assessment of Roy Wilkins' contribution has to be made with that consideration in mind. This is particularly true when considering the organization that Wilkins led for so many years. His long stewardship of the Association should have created a strong organization equipped to deal with future challenges. However, although he was so clearly entwined with the NAACP, this strong identification eventually worked against him. While Wilkins was very obviously the figurehead of the NAACP during his tenure, it is an organization that outlasts any one leader, no matter how strong or how tenacious. Unfortunately, he refused to acknowledge this until it was almost too late. By repeatedly ignoring calls for his resignation that had begun in the 1960's, and not developing a succession plan, Wilkins damaged the very organization he had spent his life attempting to strengthen.

At the height of the civil rights movement, the NAACP had over thirteen hundred branches across the United States and its membership reached a peak of over five hundred and thirty-four thousand in 1963. That number has fallen gradually and today is approximately three hundred thousand.¹⁶ Although that is a precipitous drop from the buoyant days of the 1960s, the Association has still outlasted its more dramatic rivals. Of the many groups that emerged during the civil rights movement, only the Urban League, whose history is analogous to the NAACP, could now be described as a peer organization. While the mere survival of the NAACP is not necessarily a vindication of Wilkins' strategic skills — organizational survival is a hallmark of both large corporations and political parties, whose fortunes rise and fall, often regardless of who is in charge — the organizational

¹⁶ There are approximately 1700 NAACP branches in the United States, Japan, Germany and Korea today.

structure he maintained and extended is still in place helped in part by the Special Contribution Fund, established in 1964 to allow the Association to seek and accept funds from philanthropic organizations, and which stabilized its finances despite the loss of revenue from declining membership numbers.

Although the NAACP, which celebrated its centenary in February 2009, is still organizationally strong, it is more uncertain of its identity today than at any time in its history. Some of the troubles which plague the organization such as internal bickering and precarious finances were evident even while Wilkins was in office. More serious is the lack of a coherent program, particularly following the success of the momentous civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965 when Wilkins' failed to recast the NAACP's strategy as many of its fundamental goals were achieved.

The election of Barack Obama as President of the United States in November 2008 arguably represents the apotheosis of Wilkins' vision of an integrated America. A growing body of opinion —particularly in conservative circles —describes a post-racial America, and claim that civil rights has run its course, that King's dream of a color-blind society has been achieved. In which case, has Wilkins' own dream been realized? While Obama's election might be an optimistic sign, it would be naïve to imagine that three hundred years of racial discrimination has been erased without a trace. Indeed, the Urban League's annual equality index still shows disturbing gaps between black and white in 2009. According to its most recent report, blacks are "twice as likely to be unemployed, three times more likely to live in poverty and more than six times likely to be incarcerated."¹⁷ Black Americans have also been disproportionately affected by the sub-prime crisis, and tenuous economic gains have been quickly lost. Measures such as voter ID laws, which require all voters to show photographic identification, usually a driving license, in order to vote, are viewed by some as having an implicit racial component.¹⁸ As these

¹⁷ *The State of Black American*, 2009. March 2009. The National Urban League.

¹⁸ Those opposed to voter ID laws argue that the requirement has a disproportionate impact on minority groups because they tend to be poorer, may lack the necessary documents to obtain a driving license or other form of identification or, in the case of black Americans, deterred by the memory of historical efforts to prevent voter registration. See *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 42:1 (January 2009) for an examination of the issues surrounding Voter Identification laws.

discrepancies suggest racial discrimination still exists but has become much less overt and therefore more complex to tackle.

In dealing with the complexities of modern race relations, is there a place for the firebrands and preachers? The heirs of those such as Dr. King who spoke passionately and eloquently about the plight of black Americans, and who inspired ordinary people to undertake extraordinary deeds? Or is the way forward that of the ‘realistic radical’ — urbane and sophisticated organizers, exemplified by President Obama and Deval Patrick, Governor of Boston, who follow in the tradition of Whitney Young, Mayor Harold Washington of Chicago, Vernon Jordan, and, of course, Roy Wilkins — who believe in working with the existing power structure to effect change?¹⁹ Wilkins’ pursuit of the legal framework that now underpins contemporary equal rights was his greatest achievement. That he pursued those rights at the expense of the economic advancement of blacks was arguably his failure. It will be the leaders who share his pragmatism — and his ability to work within the corridors of power — that must now maintain and police that framework, and address the disparities that remain.

Historians are beginning to appreciate and describe how important the NAACP was during the most active years of the civil rights movement. This mushrooming interest in the NAACP is encouraging but where is Wilkins in the flood of reassessment? Even his own Association appears to ignore his contribution; a set of stamps celebrating “civil rights pioneers” released by the NAACP to mark its centenary features Walter White, Medgar Evers, Daisy Bates, Charles Houston, Mary White Ovington, Ruby Hurley and Joel Spingarn among others, but not Wilkins. However, the fact that the NAACP is able to celebrate its hundredth birthday is due in large part to Wilkins. Thanks to Roy Wilkins, the Association was able to function and play its role within the movement. Enabling it to do that required managerial and political skills of the highest order even if he appeared to be high-handed and autocratic at times. Wilkins held the NAACP together during

¹⁹ The term ‘realistic radical’ was coined by community activist Saul Alinsky in his book, *Rules for Radicals: A Pragmatic Primer for Realistic Radicals*, 1971, Reprint (New York: Vintage 1989). Alinsky argued that young radicals should organize along the pragmatic lines of coalition rather than revolution and rhetoric and is said to have influenced both Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton.

one of the more challenging periods in its history but more than that, he maintained a coherent organization that today is still courted by politicians of all stripes. The question about whether Wilkins was a talented strategist or simply a brilliant bureaucrat should be reframed to acknowledge his political strengths. His supreme political skills were used as much within the organization to ballast it against internal and external challengers as it was in the halls of Congress. Whatever the NAACP achieved, and may achieve in the future, must be attributed in no small way to Roy Wilkins' leadership.

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Archival Collections

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, WASHINGTON, D.C.

The Library of Congress is the custodian of the NAACP Papers, the largest single collection held by the library. It is also the repository of several other important civil rights collections. For this study, I have reviewed the following collections:

The Papers of the NAACP

Arthur Spingarn Papers

Papers of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights

LYNDON B. JOHNSON LIBRARY, AUSTIN, TEXAS

White House Central Files

Commission on Civil Rights (Box 375)

Civil Rights (Box 4, 7, 20, 22, 23, 24, 33, 56, 652)

Equality of the Races (Box 2-57)

Named Files (Roy Wilkins, NAACP, Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Confidential File (Box 39)

Legislative File (Boxes 1-2, 289-291)

Administrative Histories:

Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division (Parts 9-10)

Office Files of the White House Aides

Bellinger, Cecil.

Califano, Joseph A.

Cater, Douglass.

Gaither, James.

McPherson, Harry C.

Panzer, Frederick.

Reedy, George E.

White, Lee C.

Oral Histories

Califano, Joseph A.

Clark, Ramsey

Evers, Charles

Farmer, James

Katzenbach, Nicholas

Marshall, Burke

McPherson, Harry

Mitchell, Clarence

Rauh, Joseph L., Jr.

Valenti, Jack

Wilkins, Roy
Young, Whitney, M. Jr.

The Johnson Library has also made available a substantial number of recordings of telephone conversations made by President Johnson. The recordings are available online at:

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/Dictabelt.hom/content.asp>

A selection of oral history transcripts are also available online via the Johnson Library:

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/johnson/archives.hom/biophage.asp#anchor27458>

BEINECKE RARE BOOK & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY, YALE UNIVERSITY, NEW HAVEN, CONNECTICUT

Walter and Poppy Cannon White Papers (Box 8, 12)

James Weldon Johnson Papers (Box 24, 25)

MOORLAND-SPINGARN RESEARCH CENTER, HOWARD UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, D.C.

Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection

Carter, Robert

Current, Gloster

Farmer, James

Kennedy, Judge Joseph J.

King, Celes

Mitchell, Clarence

Morsell, John

Spingarn, Arthur

Wilkins, Roy

Williams, Robert F.

ROOSEVELT STUDY CENTER, MIDDELBURG, THE NETHERLANDS

The Roosevelt Study Center is a research center devoted to modern American history. It houses a large collection of microfiche copies of Presidential archives as well as the archives of some organizations involved in the civil rights movement.

Records of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference

Papers of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)

Papers of W.E.B. Du Bois

John F. Kennedy

Civil Rights During the Kennedy Administration, 1961-1963 Part 1

Civil Rights During the Kennedy Administration, 1961-1963 Part 2

President John F. Kennedy's Office Files: These files incorporate the working files of President Kennedy. The parts reviewed for this work were:

Special Correspondence, Speech, Legislative and Press Conference Files
 Staff Memoranda
 Departments and Agencies File
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FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION
 Roy Wilkins: <http://foia.fbi.gov/foiaindex/rwilkins.htm>

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, CAMBRIDGE, UK
 Cambridge University Library holds microfiche of Parts I-III of the NAACP Papers.

Papers of the NAACP

BRITISH LIBRARY

Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File

The British Library holds a set of microfilm of press clippings collected by the Tuskegee Institute Department of Records and Research in Tuskegee, Alabama. The news clippings cover the years 1899 to 1966 and were compiled from over 300 American and international newspapers. The collection focuses primarily on African-American issues.

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Websites

A number of websites related to the civil rights movement have emerged in recent years. The following list represents some of the best sites, which offer researchers immediate access to valuable resources such as oral histories and contemporary video and sound recordings relevant to the history of the movement:

The Civil Rights Digital Library:

<http://crdl.usg.edu/voci/go/crdl/home/>

Civil Rights Documentation Project:

<http://www.usm.edu/crdp/>

Voices of Civil Rights:

<http://www.voicesofcivilrights.org/>

Civil Rights Movement Veterans:

<http://www.crmvet.org/>

Oral Histories of the American South:

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/sohp/>

Documenting the American South:

<http://docsouth.unc.edu/fpn/texts.html>

Greensboro Voices:

<http://library.uncg.edu/depts/archives/civrights/index.asp>

Mississippi Oral History Program:

<http://www.usm.edu/oralhistory/collections.php>

Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive:

<http://www.lib.usm.edu/~spcol/crda/>

Mississippi Sovereignty Commission Digital Archives:

http://mdah.state.ms.us/arrec/digital_archives/sovcom/

Massive Resistance in Virginia:

<http://www.vahistory.org/massive.resistance/images4.html>

Race and Place: An African-American Community in the Jim Crow South

<http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/afam/raceandplace/index.html>

Television News of the Civil Rights Era:

<http://www2.vcdh.virginia.edu/civilrightstv/>

Television News and the Civil Rights Struggle - The Views in Virginia and Mississippi"

<http://www.southernspaces.org/contents/2004/thomas/4a.htm>

Media and the Voting Rights Act of 1965:

<http://www.paleycenter.org/media-and-the-voting-rights-act-of-1965>

Presidential Campaign Commercials: Civil Rights:

<http://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/issue/civil-rights>

Museum of Broadcast Communications: Civil Rights:

<http://www.museum.tv/educationsection.php?page=76>

The Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany

<http://www.aacvr-germany.org/>

Miller Center Presidential Recording:

<http://millercenter.org/academic/presidentialrecordings>

John F. Kennedy Presidential Library:

<http://www.jfklibrary.org/>

Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library

<http://www.lbjlib.utexas.edu>