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

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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.