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

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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 St 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

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[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

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[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

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*(*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

[18]William 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

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[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 ghettoes. 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.