

**University of Birmingham**

**The leadership and origins of the NAACP**

**1898-1948**

**Heroic liberals and conservative elitists?**

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**Doctor of Philosophy.**

**American and Canadian Studies Department**

**12 September, 2020**

**University number: [REDACTED]**

**Word count: without footnotes: 65,036**

**Word count with footnotes, 76,382**

**Word count with Bibliography and Appendix, 88,192**

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Department of American and Canadian Studies at the University of Birmingham has been very supportive, particularly Gavin Schaffer, Nathan Cardon and Michelle Chresfield. I am grateful for the help of librarians and archivists across England and the United States. The most useful collection was in Washington D.C., where the Library of Congress has a unique archive of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). One could handle the original documents directly, including those signed by Dr King. Special thanks go to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in Harlem, now part of the New York Public Library. Archivists at the Joseph P. Healey Library of the University of Massachusetts went to great lengths to find archive sources. Staff at the University of Nottingham Hallward Library provided access to a rare complete set of *The Crisis*. The Bodleian at Oxford included the Vere Harmsworth collection. None of this would have been possible without help from the Disabled Students Agency. Excellent assistance was provided by Afia Masood and Corin Ward. Finally, special thanks to my wife Judith who made it possible, sometimes in very difficult circumstances.

## **ABSTRACT**

My dissertation appraises the development of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People from its origins in the 1900s to the beginning of the Cold War in the 1940s. I trace the NAACP's roots to the nineteenth century campaign for Abolitionism and the growth of American Imperialism. The NAACP leadership had a reputation as an elitist or middle-class organisation but I found its membership to be diverse though the working-class was under-represented. It included supporters of conservatism, liberalism and socialism. The Association underwent changes which were driven by social trends during the 1920s and 1930s. Movements in US society were migration, industrialisation and urbanisation. Foreign policy also affected the NAACP, as the US fought several wars, some of an imperialist nature.

Social class and imperialism are at the root of my thesis; they represent an original interpretation of the NAACP. I expected my work in archives to reveal a middle-class, moderate organisation but the evidence produced a more complex picture. Individual leaders were changed by circumstances, especially Moorfield Storey, W.E.B. DuBois and Walter White. They appeared to have completely different beliefs; I show they were united by their approach to anti-imperialism and anti-colonialism. I argue that the NAACP combined liberal ideals with conservative, elitist attitudes. Socialist members persistently tried to reform the organisation but failed. The trend to American Imperialism threatened to put American liberals on the wrong side of history. Moorfield Storey was determined to prevent this.

## **GLOSSARY**

|       |   |
|-------|---|
| ABA   | American Bar Association.                                   |
| ABB   | American Blood Brotherhood.                                 |
| AFL   | American Federation of Labor.                               |
| ACLU  | American Civil Liberties Union.                             |
| AMEZ  | African Episcopal Zion Church.                              |
| ANLC  | American Negro Labor Congress.                              |
| BSCP  | Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.                        |
| CIC   | Commission on Interracial Cooperation.                      |
| CIO   | Congress of Industrial Organisations.                       |
| CP    | Communist Party.  |
| ILD   | International Labor Defense.                                |
| JCNR  | Joint Committee on National Recovery.                       |
| LOC   | Library of Congress.  |
| LSNR  | League of Struggle for Negro Rights.                        |
| NAACP | National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. |
| NACWC | National Association of Colored Women's Clubs.              |
| NNC   | National Negro Congress.                                    |
| UAW   | United Auto Workers.  |
| UNIA  | Universal Negro Improvement Association.                    |
| WPA   | Works Progress Administration.                              |

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## INTRODUCTION

Of Equality: As if it harmed me, giving others the same chances and rights as myself—as if it were not indispensable to my own rights that others possess the same.

Song of Myself, 50 by Walt Whitman<sup>1</sup>

The headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is in Baltimore. It serves over 500,000 individual members organised in 2,200 branches across North America, Japan and Germany.<sup>2</sup> The NAACP is a large, well-established campaigning organisation, which has an annual budget approaching twenty-five million dollars.<sup>3</sup> The Association has had a continuous existence since 1910 and remains significant, enjoying respect from the African American community and beyond. This was demonstrated when President Barack Obama addressed its National Convention in 2008.<sup>4</sup> His speech concerned priorities for the Association and he argued that civil rights alone would not solve the race question. The President touched on an issue which has caused disputes since the founding. He quoted Dr. King, ‘the inseparable twin of racial justice is economic justice. It matters little if you have the right to sit at the front of the bus, if you can't afford the bus fare; it matters little if you have the right to sit at the lunch counter, if you can't afford the lunch’. The President argued that its mission needed to be ‘all-embracing’ and should include the ‘social and economic equality of rights of all persons’.

African Americans’ lack of opportunity has been an intractable problem for the NAACP, causing internal conflicts. Members have argued since the founding about the role the NAACP should play. Traditionally, its aim was confined to civil rights and equality before the law. This would not include social or economic change to American society.

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, (1809-1892) *Collected Poems*. [www.poets.org](http://www.poets.org).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.influencewatch.org/non-profit/naACP/>

<sup>3</sup> NAACP Annual report, 2016. p.27.

<sup>4</sup> Conference of 2008, Cincinnati, Ohio. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aip0BAWrdLw>

## White supremacism and segregation

To understand the NAACP one must examine its place within American society. In the period 1898 to 1948 race relations were affected by a series of social and economic challenges. The basis of the NAACP was resistance to white supremacist beliefs which underpinned the policy of segregation. The Association was founded in 1910 against a background of demographic change, white supremacism and racial violence. The first challenge was a severe economic depression in agriculture between 1893 and 1897.<sup>5</sup> This was partly responsible for triggering the movement of African Americans northwards that became known as the Great Migration after tens of thousands of people left the South. Scholars St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton observed the arrival in Chicago between 1910 and 1920 of fifty thousand African Americans.<sup>6</sup> Many moved into overcrowded, segregated areas like the South Side, which became known as 'Bronzeville'.<sup>7</sup> Thousands arrived in Harlem, making it the largest Black city in the world.<sup>8</sup> In 1920 its Black population was 84,000 and by 1940 the figure was over 250,000.

The city of Baltimore provides an example of whites responding to mass migration from the rural south towards the industrialising north. It was the first local authority in the country to introduce legal, formal segregation of residential areas, claiming to act on public health grounds.<sup>9</sup> In 1910, a local ordinance divided the city into Black and white zones, preventing African Americans from moving into majority white areas. Springfield, Illinois also received a group of migrants. In 1907 white labour unions in the city were engaged in major industrial disputes and African Americans were accused of breaking strikes by taking

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<sup>5</sup> William B. Hixson, *Moorfield Storey and the Abolitionist Tradition*. (New York, 1972), p.26.

<sup>6</sup> St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, *Black Metropolis. A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*. (Chicago, 1945), p.58.

<sup>7</sup> Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: Great Migration and how it changed America*. (New York, 1991), p.63.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan Gill, *Harlem. The four hundred year history from Dutch village to capital of Black America.*, (New York, 2011), p.282.

<sup>9</sup> Garrett Power, 'Apartheid-Baltimore Style; the Residential Segregation Ordinances of 1910-13', *Maryland Law Review*, Vol.42, No.2, pp.288-328, p.294.



the jobs of union members.<sup>10</sup> In 1908 racial attacks broke out, creating a crisis which would in time inspire the creation of the NAACP.<sup>11</sup> This raises questions concerning the founding because there was a long delay before the NAACP was formally created. During this period Mary White Ovington an early leader negotiated tirelessly the entry of various groups into the organisation.

The key questions in my thesis were concerned with the development of the NAACP. Among them was the role of the historian in studying the NAACP. My aim throughout was to understand what historian Richard J. Evans has called ‘the inner being of the past’. He argued that ‘the past could not be judged by the standards of the present. It had to be seen in its own terms...To try to understand the past as the people who lived in it, understood it’.<sup>12</sup> My research into the origins of the Association challenged scholarly interpretations and required an adjustment of views. I expected to find in the NAACP an organisation with an entirely middle-class leadership, but the archives confounded expectations. The term middle-class proved an inadequate description, as the founders were intellectually and socially diverse. The delegates at the founding conferences in 1909 and 1910 ranged from wealthy conservatives to campaigning socialists, Christians and Jews, while most were educated white males. The General Committee had forty-five members, of whom eleven were women. Professors, doctors and college presidents were over-represented compared with the general population.<sup>13</sup>

Until 1911 the NAACP had only a few hundred members, organised in branches in Boston, New York and Chicago. They were predominantly from the New England social

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<sup>10</sup> Lemann, *Promised Land*, p.16.

<sup>11</sup> William E. Walling, Report in *The African American Independent*, September 3, 1908. Eastern Illinois University, [www.eiu.edu/past\\_tracker/](http://www.eiu.edu/past_tracker/).

<sup>12</sup> Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History*. (London, 1997), p.19.

<sup>13</sup> Charles F. Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP, Volume 1, 1909-1920*. (Baltimore, 1973), p.305.

elite, with connections to the nineteenth century movement for the abolition of slavery.<sup>14</sup> The leaders of this group included liberal businessman Oswald Garrison Villard and lawyer Moorfield Storey. Villard coined the phrase ‘New Abolitionism’ to describe the NAACP. My research revealed numerous family links with the abolitionist movement, which encouraged nostalgia for the idealism of the nineteenth century. A minority were active socialists and members of the Socialist Party of America. They formed a small group within the founders, causing long-term tension. Conflicts appeared between the conservative attitudes of leaders such as Oswald Villard and Moorfield Storey; others were predominantly liberal, radical or socialist. This group was led by William English Walling and Mary White Overton. Shifts occurred amongst them as members changed position, with some entering and leaving the organisation, such as Ralph Bunche and W.E.B. DuBois.

A persistent internal dispute threatened to split the Association in the 1930s; it concerned the relative importance of social class and race in the NAACP’s campaigns. Walter White and his deputy Roy Wilkins in all their campaigns emphasised the need to focus efforts on civil rights, ending segregation, achieving a ban on lynching and securing the right of African Americans to vote freely. Their opponents on the Left favoured social and economic reform to improve the African American standard of living. The attitudes of members shifted during the 1930s and 1940s in response to the impact of social change, especially migration. The effect of the Second World War on the NAACP was another significant part of my study. The Great Migration during the first half of the twentieth century brought millions of African Americans from the rural south and changed the nature of the NAACP. Movement from the south to cities meant many African Americans changed from a rural society to an urban proletariat engaged in industrial work. The NAACP had limited support in Chicago, as many African Americans were initially in low-paid employment as

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<sup>14</sup> Gary Dorrien. *The New Abolition: W.E.B. DuBois and the Black Social Gospel*. (New Haven, 2015), p.34.

labourers or domestics, although new opportunities appeared during the 1930s and 1940s in the cities' new steelworks. African Americans in northern cities suffered from overcrowded housing and discrimination in employment, conditions vividly portrayed by socialist campaigner Upton Sinclair in his book *The Jungle* and also his 'muckraking' journalism.<sup>15</sup> The scholar James Grossman argues that in Chicago the 'Structures of class...were at least as important as race in shaping social relations in the early twentieth century'.<sup>16</sup> A Black diaspora found a home in Chicago and the other great cities of the North.<sup>17</sup> In addition this change was followed by another transformation, as the new arrivals took advantage of the cities' education system.<sup>18</sup> Assisted by the NAACP a middle-class was created in the new African American suburbs.

The leaders represented part of an ideological struggle which would continue for decades, although conservative attitudes usually prevailed in this cautious organisation. My study of the archives produced a new, original view of the NAACP, using sources which had not been quoted by previous historians in this field. The importance of primary sources was decisive.<sup>19</sup> They revealed the NAACP was far more divided than historians have previously portrayed.<sup>20</sup> Sources indicated a greater role was played in the founding by anti-imperialism than has been apparent; this gave the NAACP a global view with radical aspects which has been neglected by the historiography.

I consulted the full range of secondary works on the NAACP and found that few scholars have attempted to produce an overarching account of its history. One was Charles Flint Kellogg, who had a close association with the NAACP leadership, having grown up in

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<sup>15</sup> Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle*. (New York, 1906).

<sup>16</sup> James Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*. (Chicago, 1989), p.8.

<sup>17</sup> St. Clair Drake, *Black Metropolis*, p.58.

<sup>18</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*, p.7.

<sup>19</sup> Evans, *In Defence*, p.18.

<sup>20</sup> Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle against Racism in America 1909-1969*. (New York: Routledge, 2007). Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement*. (New York, 2009).

the segregated rural town of Great Barrington, Massachusetts, hometown of W.E.B. DuBois and an area popular with NAACP leaders. Kellogg's History of the NAACP is a detailed account of the years 1909 to 1920 which was published in 1967 but is incomplete.<sup>21</sup> This was the first attempt at an organisational history of the Association. Kellogg points out that the NAACP was created at a time of oppression for African Americans, one which he called 'a new slavery'.<sup>22</sup> He failed to develop the theme of differences within the organisation and ignored the challenge of socialism to NAACP leadership. Instead, he emphasised personality clashes between Oswald Villard and the brilliant intellectual W.E.B. DuBois.<sup>23</sup>

Gilbert Jonas wrote a major history of the NAACP, one authorised by the organisation, who allowed him free access to the archives. Jonas was a retired former employee of the NAACP and had been a member for fifty years. He regarded the organisation as his own 'extended family'.<sup>24</sup> His account is written from an unusual point of view as, 'a white man in an overwhelmingly black organisation'.<sup>25</sup> Jonas gives a detailed description of the NAACP from the founding. He writes as an insider, a loyal supporter and an 'intimate' of the leadership, who was speaking from 'within the bureaucracy'.<sup>26</sup> His book was welcomed by Julian Bond, a senior official of the Association, who added a positive foreword.<sup>27</sup> Bond describes Jonas as a 'participant and an activist' who was looking back at his career with 'the benefit of a lifetime spent in progressive politics' and makes his work, in effect, an official history with its inevitable benefits and drawbacks.<sup>28</sup>

Gilbert Jonas was working within the liberal traditions of the NAACP and gives the impression that it was a wholly united organisation. I found that the Association was deeply

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<sup>21</sup> Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*. James Mercer Langston Hughes, *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP*. (Berkeley CA, 1962). Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*. Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*.

<sup>22</sup> Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*, p. ix.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.112.

<sup>24</sup> Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*, p.1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

divided over issues of socialism, communism and social class.<sup>29</sup> The most relevant modern work is by Patricia Sullivan who gives a full, detailed account of the branches and the leadership in her extensive history, but does not mention anti-imperialism and only alludes to Moorfield Storey in passing.<sup>30</sup> My judgement is that Storey was a central character of the founding and the NAACP's first twenty years of existence.

The career of Moorfield Storey has been neglected by all these works. The only work to give a thorough account of his role is that of William B. Hixson, published in 1972.<sup>31</sup> Storey had an extensive influence on the development of the NAACP, demonstrating the role of the white elite. This small group planned and established the NAACP as a bi-racial alliance. Storey's aim as one of a few founders was to protect the principles of the United States Constitution, democracy, equality and the rule of law. His ideas were stimulated by his experience of anti-imperialism in opposition to the 1898 Spanish-American War. This is not reflected in the secondary works available. Three organisational histories briefly mention his career but fail to make a connection between his time in the NAACP and the national role he played in the Anti-Imperialist League, during the early 1900s.

The NAACP's development needs to be seen in a wider context. The modern civil rights movement is usually described as having lasted from the Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. Board of Education at Topeka, Kansas*, 1954 by way of the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and ending with the signing of the Voting Rights Act in 1965. The scholar Jacquelyn Dowd Hall argues that this narrative distorts events and the multiple roles played by Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>32</sup> She identifies a crucial period for civil rights from the late 1930s to the

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<sup>29</sup> Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*. p.117.

<sup>30</sup> Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, p.13.

<sup>31</sup> Hixson, *Moorfield Storey*.p.3.

<sup>32</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, 'The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past'. *The Journal of American History*. 91 4 March (2005), pp. 1233-1263, p.1234.

1970s.<sup>33</sup> My argument is that the founding of the NAACP in 1910 broadens the definition of the civil rights campaign much further. I date the start of the campaign in 1898 when the Anti-Imperialist League was created. This was a period when the emerging civil rights struggle combined with a foreign war which bitterly divided US public opinion. The scholar Paul Kramer has written extensively on this period and identified the connections between imperialism and white supremacy.<sup>34</sup> Moorfield Storey asserted the central position of American ideals of democracy and equality, which inspired the creation of the Association. The end of the campaign was, as Dowd Hall suggests, marked by the passing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

### **Historiography**

Sources for this topic are rich and varied with biographies for several senior members: Mary White Ovington, W.E.B. DuBois and Walter White. Oswald Villard and Joel Spingarn receive limited attention in two works dating from the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>35</sup> They do not provide recent interpretations or results of new research. Excellent work has been done on a few individuals such as Charles Hamilton Houston and Ida Wells-Barnett. Houston's achievements in litigation for the NAACP emphasise the yawning gap between the Association's legal strategy and the African American majority, who were struggling to survive the Great Depression of the 1930s.<sup>36</sup>

The NAACP was changing in the 1920s although the secondary sources do not fully reflect the development of the organisation; James Weldon Johnson's achievements as Executive Secretary have been neglected. Johnson was a conservative Republican who had joined the NAACP in 1916. He was also a talented poet and intellectual who produced

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1235.

<sup>34</sup> Paul A. Kramer, *Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the US and the Philippines*. (Chapel Hill NC, 2006), p.2.

<sup>35</sup> Michael Wreszin, *Oswald Garrison Villard. Pacifist at War*. (Bloomington, IN., 1965).

<sup>36</sup> Genna Rae McNeil, *Groundwork: Charles Hamilton Houston and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. (Philadelphia, Penn., 1983). Alfreda M. Duster, ed., *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells-Barnett* (Chicago, 2020).

important works of African American cultural history such as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912). By 1920 Johnson had been accepted as the first African American executive secretary of the NAACP, despite resistance from the Board of Directors.<sup>37</sup> His successes included building membership in the South for the first time, resulting in an organisation that was 95 per cent African American.<sup>38</sup> Board member and NAACP founder Charles Edward Russell had written to warn colleagues, ‘a white-controlled Board and Secretary were necessary in order that the NAACP not isolate itself from the sources of power in American society; otherwise it could cease to exist’.<sup>39</sup> Johnson’s appointment followed a succession of four white secretaries and marked the beginning of the white elite’s loss of influence.

The dominant theme of the 1920s was the emergence of a ‘New Crowd’ which was an elite group of able African Americans who gradually took over control of the organisation by occupying most of the NAACP’s senior positions.<sup>40</sup> Previously these were all held by whites, with the sole exception of W.E.B. DuBois. Johnson was followed by his assistant Walter F. White in 1918, who benefited from legal advice given by the African American academic Charles H. Houston (1895-1950), the son of a Washington D.C. lawyer.<sup>41</sup> He attended an elite school as one of a small group of African American students present on a quota system. Houston had a conservative background and he volunteered as an army officer in 1917, serving in France. He experienced racism from US soldiers who threatened to lynch him. After Harvard law School he rose to become Dean of Howard University Law School and editor of the *Harvard Law Review*. The scholar Beth Tompkins Bates makes a significant

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<sup>37</sup> David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography*. (New York, 2009), p.399.

<sup>38</sup> Sondra Kathryn Wilson ed. *In Search of Democracy. The NAACP Writings of James Weldon Johnson, Walter White and Roy Wilkins (1920-1977)*. (New York, 1999), p.15.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p.14.

<sup>40</sup> August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, eds. *Along the Color Line. Explorations in the Black Experience*. (Champaign, Ill., 2002), p.94.

<sup>41</sup> McNeil, *Groundwork*, p.24.

observation about the ‘New Crowd’ and this phase of the NAACP’s development. She asserts that Walter White led his supporters into an alliance with the Left wing of the labour movement during 1939, but Bates’ interpretation requires amendment and clarification, as White’s change in approach took place on a large scale only during the war years after 1942.<sup>42</sup> The Executive Secretary was an early example of an African American taking over a post previously held by whites. This takeover was repeated in the Chicago branch, originally led by white founders and social workers Jane Addams and Sophonisba Breckenridge. In the 1930s the militant Black journalist A. Clement MacNeal took charge of the branch and clashed repeatedly with Walter White’s conservative approach.<sup>43</sup>

The 1920s and 1930s saw Communism exerting a gravitational force on American society and on the NAACP in particular. Its influence came from Marxist ideas which seemed to provide explanations for the condition of America, especially during the Depression. Dialectical materialism was discussed by Harvard graduates like W.E.B. DuBois, while simpler versions of communist ideas appeared at protest marches and demonstrations. Historians Mark Naison, Mark Solomon and Robin D.G. Kelley provide a sympathetic portrait of a left-wing movement in American history.<sup>44</sup> Their works are valuable for the historiography of the NAACP, providing a corrective to other sources by their range and coverage. These scholars used less well-known sources such as *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson*, an account of an African American who was born in poverty in rural Georgia, briefly joined the NAACP but later became an active Communist Party organiser.<sup>45</sup> I took a special interest in such sources, which I found on my visits to the Schomburg Center For

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<sup>42</sup> Beth Tompkins Bates, ‘A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941’. *The American Historical Review*. 102, 2 (April 1997). pp. 340-377, p.373.

<sup>43</sup> See Chapter Four.

<sup>44</sup> Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*. (Chicago, 1983). Mark Solomon, *The Cry was Unity. Communists and African Americans 1917-1936*. (Jackson, Miss., 1998). Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression*. (Chapel Hill N.C and London, 1990).

<sup>45</sup> Nell Irvin Painter, ed. *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South*. (Harvard, Mass., 1979).



Research In Black Culture, part of New York Public Library in Harlem.<sup>46</sup>

My work on relations between the CPUSA, the NAACP and the National Negro Congress led to original conclusions. The best example was the Scottsboro case, actually a series of cases pivotal to the development of the NAACP and its rival CPUSA in the 1930s.<sup>47</sup> Study of a memoir by Haywood Patterson, one of the Scottsboro Boys, gave me an original viewpoint.<sup>48</sup> I used relatively obscure sources on the activities of activists like Angelo Herndon, Harry Haywood and Claudia Jones.<sup>49</sup> Some were, like Hubert Harrison and Marcus Garvey, migrants from the West Indies driven to America by poverty and lack of opportunity. They became radicalised in Harlem by the Communist Party.<sup>50</sup> Angelo Herndon was a young communist and labor organiser who was active in rural Georgia during the 1930s.

The Scottsboro narrative has been repeated many times, but I found relevant sources on the role of the NAACP which appear to have been overlooked. I revealed the range of attitudes among NAACP leaders, giving a new significance to the issues of social class and communism. Walter White reviled the CPUSA as an alien, revolutionary movement led by a foreign body, the Communist International (Comintern) controlled from Moscow. Communist participation in the case of the 'Scottsboro Boys' would, White complained, 'only hamper the proper conduct of the defense'.<sup>51</sup> His views anticipated the McCarthyite philosophy of the Cold War, which regarded the CPUSA as a foreign influence.<sup>52</sup> Scholar Robin D.G. Kelley had a different view, believing Communist Party members to be persuaded by the 'cultural and legal baggage' of Alabama's African Americans.

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<sup>46</sup> Angelo Herndon collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NYPL. Sc Micro R-981, Reel 22.

<sup>47</sup> See Chapter Five.

<sup>48</sup> Haywood Patterson and Earl Conrad, *Scottsboro Boy*. (New York, 1951).

<sup>49</sup> C.B. Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist, Claudia Jones*. (Durham NC, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning For Freedom. Black Women, American Communism and the Making of Black Left Feminism*. (Durham, N.C., 2011), p.27.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, p.62.

<sup>52</sup> Theodore Draper, *The Roots of American Communism*. (Chicago, 1957), p.226.

The Communists worked with one eye on policy directives from Moscow and the other eye on conditions at the grassroots among Alabama sharecroppers, coalminers and steelworkers.<sup>53</sup> The CPUSA tried to reconcile the conditions of life in the Deep South with the policies of the Communist International based in Moscow. Communist policy was similar to the NAACP in one respect, despite their mutual loathing. This was anti-imperialism, a theme taken up by W.E.B. DuBois over six decades in his work on Africa.<sup>54</sup> Anti-imperialism played a fundamental part in the founding of the Association. Moorfield Storey was opposed to imperialism from the Spanish-American War of 1898 onwards, because of his belief in equality. He took this idea with him into the NAACP.

Scholarly works exist on the origins of the NAACP and among the best known is the biography by Kenneth R. Janken. It was entitled, *Walter White, Mr NAACP* and describes White's personality in great depth, for example when 'passing for white' and enjoying the deception.<sup>55</sup> In *W.E.B. DuBois: A Biography* by David Levering Lewis, the author elucidates the unifying theme of DuBois' life, which was the desire to resolve the problem of racism.<sup>56</sup> Scholar Gary Dorrien has written extensively on the influence of abolitionism. He argues that the NAACP's conservatism was strengthened by Christian influences from several denominations, Black and white.<sup>57</sup> The Reverend William H. Brooks of St. Mark's Methodist Episcopal Church was at the founding conference, as were Bishops Alexander Walters and Reverdy Ransom both of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church.<sup>58</sup> Francis J. Grimke was a mixed-race Presbyterian minister and Robert W. Bagnall was an Episcopalian rector who was soon to be NAACP Director of Branches. Kelly Miller and Archibald Grimke were

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<sup>53</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p.170.

<sup>54</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., ed., W.E.B. Dubois, *The World and Africa: An Enquiry into the part played in world history by Africa*. (Oxford, 2007). p. 11.

<sup>55</sup> Kenneth R. Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White. Mr. NAACP*. (New York, 2003), p.2.

<sup>56</sup> Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois*, p.713.

<sup>57</sup> Dorrien, *The New Abolitionism*, p. 22.

<sup>58</sup> Carolyn Wedin, *Inheritors of the Spirit: Mary White Ovington and the founding of the NAACP*. (New York, 1997), p.107.

two active supporters of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and John H. Haynes was a radical Unitarian. Black churches were the only mass organisations in the US controlled by African Americans and they had a reputation as social conservatives.

The most valuable sources for my research have been the local studies of NAACP branches. These provide a corrective to the national view from the New York headquarters.<sup>59</sup> Peripheral figures have received the attention of scholars, such as civil rights lawyer Raymond Pace Alexander of Philadelphia. Memoirs are available of several leading figures, including Roy Wilkins and Walter White.<sup>60</sup> Mary White Ovington wrote several accounts of the founding and early years.<sup>61</sup> The most significant contribution to the literature is arguably that of W.E.B. DuBois, author of ground-breaking works on science, literature, history and sociology. His most influential work was *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) which introduced ideas of the global 'Color Line' and the divided natures of African Americans.<sup>62</sup>

Primary sources on the role of women in the founding mentioned a white member of the social elite Mary White Ovington, while Jane Addams and Sophonisba Breckinridge are barely mentioned. I redressed the balance of previous secondary accounts, which seemed to underestimate the part played by women. Scholar Kevin Gaines argues that the culture of middle-class African Americans was transformed during the 1900s. There was a marked development of the role of Black women, who became more confident through membership of the Black churches and the creation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Leaders such as Ida B. Wells-Barnett (1862-1931) and Mary Church Terrell (1863-1954) were able through activism to build up a 'position of respectability from which to

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<sup>59</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*. p.60.

<sup>60</sup> Roy Wilkins with Tom Matthews, *Standing Fast; Autobiography of Roy Wilkins*. (New York, 1982), p.1.

<sup>61</sup> Ralph E. Luker ed. Mary W. Ovington, *Black and White sat Down Together. The reminiscences of an NAACP Founder*. (New York, 1995), p.1.

<sup>62</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (Chicago, 1903), p.12.

speak publicly' about their grievances.<sup>63</sup> Women also developed a moral authority in their campaigns, an approach that was necessary because of racial slurs on their character.<sup>64</sup> Black organisations favoured a traditional approach to the role of women in the home, which helped to strengthen the conservatism of the NAACP. Women's organisations concentrated on core issues by their campaign against lynching and the humiliation they faced on segregated Jim Crow railroad carriages.

My review of the sources revealed that the Association had generated a vast amount of formal documentation and private correspondence between leading members. These are available in the Manuscript Records Department of the Library of Congress. They consist of over five million NAACP items, stored in eight thousand boxes, a collection which continues to grow. Other files are available in the Schomburg Center and the University of Massachusetts in Boston. The Moorfield Storey papers are in The Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston including thirty-six cased volumes. NAACP sources are also stored at Nottingham University Library, the British Library and the Vere Harmsworth Library at the Bodleian in Oxford. I have used each of them, concentrating on those primary sources which I discovered had not been fully exploited in general histories of the organisation. Major examples include correspondence by Walter White, found in the records concerning Scottsboro, Alabama. My research was directed at the ideological divisions and class conflicts which troubled the NAACP. I found significant documents on these topics had not been quoted despite the large number of books and articles in existence.<sup>65</sup>

The vastness of the archives was a challenge, making it necessary to be selective. I was led by the sources in certain directions, such as a study of Walter White, because of the pivotal role he had in the organisation. The NAACP branches in Chicago, Detroit, New York

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<sup>63</sup> Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1996),

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.xix.

<sup>65</sup> See Chapter five.

and Philadelphia were particularly important because of their wealth of sources, many connected with White. This gave me access to a range of viewpoints, from the national executive down to the branches, which helped to bring them both into focus. I made an extensive survey of the communications of Walter White, his personal writings, letters and publications, as well as messages between branches. In doing so I narrowed my approach to this broad archival landscape. I brought to the forefront tensions between the conservative ideology of the New York office and an increasingly working-class branch politics. I limited the archival scope intentionally, quoting internal discussions which had not been brought out by other scholars such as Dan T. Carter.<sup>66</sup> My intention was to understand the values of NAACP leaders and the pressures they were under in their work.

The historians August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick observed the effect on the NAACP of the conservative message that came from the leadership. Once regarded as radical the Association was in the 1920s ‘lumped together’ with others as ‘a conservative institution’.<sup>67</sup> The NAACP’s conservative strategy was a combination of persuasion, propaganda and litigation. It aimed to turn the racist legal system against itself by using the Supreme Court. I used ideas derived from the Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci to explain this, especially the idea of ‘hegemony’. The concept of hegemony allowed me to understand the way sources could be used to explain the behaviour of the NAACP. This proved useful as an explanation of American society. Hegemony describes the powerful position of white supremacists, with which the NAACP had to struggle. The concept of hegemony has been modified by the scholar Stuart Hall, who argued that it was a crude idea which had to be refined. In his new analysis of social conflict between opposing interest groups, he argued victory would always go to the group which finds a new ally. In a time of crisis the decisive

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<sup>66</sup> Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*. (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 2007).

<sup>67</sup> August Meier and Elliott M. Rudwick, *From Plantation to Ghetto: An Interpretive History of American Negroes*, (New York, 1966), p.199.

force 'will not be composed of a single homogeneous class'.<sup>68</sup> Contrasting groups may consent to work together, although their interests may be in conflict for much of the time.<sup>69</sup> In 1909 when the NAACP was conceived, white supremacy had almost complete control of the national conversation, so the only hope for African Americans was an alliance with a small number of sympathetic whites such as Oswald Villard and Moorfield Storey. W.E.B. DuBois and the Niagara Movement were regarded as essential allies for the NAACP, partly because he was acknowledged to be 'the foremost colored scholar of his age'.<sup>70</sup> This alliance between the races would prove to be lasting and successful.

My dissertation is presented in eight chapters. Chapter One analyses the influence of the abolitionist and anti-imperialist movements on the founding of the NAACP. The president, Moorfield Storey, played a unique role in unifying these two themes within a single, interracial organisation dedicated to African American equality. The founders who were led by Storey and Villard, had socially conservative attitudes, including a distrust of socialism. They believed in equality before the law and equality of opportunity, though not equality of outcome. They were driven by opposition to white supremacy and lynching.

Chapter Two explains how the NAACP split during the 1920s. Moorfield Storey continued to play a leading role in the Association, taking charge of its programme of litigation. Storey's presence represented continuity with the ideas of the founders. Nevertheless, divisions appeared in the organisation partly based on social class. Racial violence spiralled out of control, in Chicago in 1919 and Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921.<sup>71</sup> Failure of the anti-lynching bill in 1922 called into question the strategy of the white leadership of the NAACP. The African American 'New Crowd' gradually replaced the white incumbents

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<sup>68</sup> Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci and the Study of Race and Ethnicity'. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, (June, 1986) Vol.10, 5. pp. 5-27, p.16.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>70</sup> NAACP: LoC *Proceedings of the National Negro Conference*, May 14, 1910. Admin File, Part 1, Box 1, A1, p.2.

<sup>71</sup> Scott Ellsworth, *The Ground Breaking. The Tulsa Race Massacre and an American city's search for justice.* (New York, 2021). p.19.

who had control of the senior executive positions of the NAACP. Further divisions appeared over attitudes to the war with Germany.

Chapter Three examines a turning point in the history of the NAACP. Members were dissatisfied with the NAACP's white leadership and a new African American elite began to take control of the organisation, led by James Weldon Johnson and Walter White. Wealthy whites still provided much of its funding but an increasing proportion came from subscriptions. A few donations came from philanthropists like John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie and Julius Rosenwald.<sup>72</sup> Educational achievement propelled the middle-class who came to dominate the NAACP. Chapter Four analyses the many challenges facing the NAACP by the 1930s, especially from the left wing of politics. Declining membership brought about a budget crisis. The leadership appeared to radicals like Abram Harris and W.E.B. DuBois to have no answers to the economic depression.

Chapter Five focuses on a cause celebre of the 1930s known as The Scottsboro Boys. A great many primary and secondary sources exist on this subject however, by concentrating on the attitudes revealed by the NAACP leaders, I was able to discover evidence which had not been cited before. This revealed for the first time the NAACP leaders' attitudes to the Black working class. The activities of International Labor Defense increased ideological pressure on the NAACP by outmanoeuvring them in the Supreme Court.<sup>73</sup> Chapter Six concerns enemies on both political extremes of left and right, who threatened to crush the NAACP between them. Their ideologies were in profound conflict with each other and the Association retained its commitment to traditional American values of democracy and the Constitution. Extremists were hostile to the legal system and to the NAACP. The Association remained a moderate organisation which abhorred violence and remained loyal to the rule of

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<sup>72</sup> Peter M. Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*. (Bloomington Ind., 2006), p.94.

<sup>73</sup> Gerald Horne, *Powell v. Alabama. The Scottsboro Boys and American Justice*. (New York, 1997), p.30.

law. Chapter Seven concerns a new generation of legal experts, who followed the traditions of Moorfield Storey. He remained active until 1929. Nathan Margold and Charles Houston were inspired to plan a patient legal campaign which would last for the next twenty years. Their strategy put a premium on the professional legal skills of Thurgood Marshall and other lawyers deployed before the Supreme Court. The result was a programme of litigation which built on the principles of Moorfield Storey.

Chapter Eight concerns the social problems related to discrimination, housing and employment during wartime, which were more intense than they had been in peacetime. Walter White worked to solve these problems in cooperation with labour unions and used tactics which were new to him, for example the planned march on Washington in 1944 to end discrimination. This was in cooperation with the left-wing union leader A. Philip Randolph. In 1941 White had supported a strike by the UAW/CIO against the Henry Ford Corporation in Detroit. In 1944 he toured the Pacific region talking to US troops and was inspired by anti-imperialism.<sup>74</sup>

My dissertation's main argument is original in its emphasis on the central role of Moorfield Storey in the development of the NAACP as a civil rights campaign. As a lawyer and experienced activist he combined elements of conservatism and liberalism. These were underpinned by his belief in democracy. He explained his beliefs to an audience of the Anti-Imperialist League in Boston, where he linked the attack on imperialism with the fight against racism, saying, 'The theory that the white races are necessarily superior to those of skins of a richer hue and that white men, therefore, have a divine mission to conquer and govern all others have been rudely shattered'.<sup>75</sup> In 1910 at the founding he was well placed to lead the NAACP as its first president. In this capacity he led the Association's programme of litigation which would prove to be the heart and soul of the NAACP to the present day.

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<sup>74</sup> Walter White, *A Man called White. The Autobiography of Walter White*. (New York, 1948), p.288.

<sup>75</sup> Moorfield Storey, *The Philippine Problem Today*. (Boston, Mass. 1907), p.3.



## CHAPTER ONE: The Founders 1890-1940.

I am going to tell my story as if Negroes were ordinary human beings.

W.E.B. DuBois: *Black Reconstruction*.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter concerns the role of Moorfield Storey in the founding of the NAACP, an aspect which has been neglected by scholars. The chapter also considers the part played by abolitionism, anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism. The NAACP was influenced by liberalism, although its character was conservative. These elements determined the mixed character of the Association and their role is explored in my accounts of the founding conferences and the people who attended.

The roots of the NAACP's founding lie in foreign policy. A turning point was reached with the conquest of the Philippines in 1900 when Congress decided to break its promise of liberty for the Filipino nation. Mark Twain was amongst many who denounced US intervention. 'I have seen that we do not intend to free, but subjugate, the people. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem'.<sup>2</sup> Foreign adventures continued in the years that followed, with similar aggression in Haiti, Mexico and other countries in Central America. My thesis is original in its focus on anti-imperialism and on Moorfield Storey, who I regard as a neglected leader of the NAACP. At a late stage in my research I became aware that Storey was a key figure in the origins of the Association. He was a leader of the Anti-Imperialist League and the NAACP from 1910, yet secondary sources contain few references to him. Charles F. Kellogg, for example, ignored Storey's work in opposition to imperialism.<sup>3</sup> He failed to recognise that Storey's career is at the roots of the NAACP. These are to be

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<sup>1</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860 -1880*. (New York, 1935). Preface. p.1.

<sup>2</sup> Morton Cohen, 'Mark Twain and the Philippines'. *Journal CMVASA*, p.28.

<sup>3</sup> Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*, p.124.

found within the Anti-Imperialist League, which inspired the Association.<sup>4</sup> The connection between Storey's role in the League and the NAACP has been neglected. Anti-imperialist ideas had a profound effect on the NAACP as demonstrated in the Chicago Conference of 1899 when the League adopted a platform which anticipated the NAACP's beliefs. Moorfield Storey gave clear leadership to the organisation during its early years, based on his experience of opposing imperialism. Imperialism was at this time a new concept debated by liberals and obscure left-wing intellectuals such as Russian socialist Vladimir Lenin.<sup>5</sup> Storey and W.E.B. DuBois campaigned against imperialism throughout their careers, although their motives were different.

Three connected ideas help explain the development of the NAACP: white supremacism, imperialism and classical liberalism, each of them influencing the new organisation. White supremacism was arguably a dominant force in US culture from the 1900s onwards. Imperialism was connected to white supremacism and swayed American foreign policy. Classical liberalism was the prevailing ideology among the founders of the NAACP, who had, however, contradictory views. The most important individuals in the leadership were Moorfield Storey, Oswald Garrison Villard and Mary White Ovington. Storey had been the leading personality in a campaign against America's aggressive war with the Spanish Empire. Descended from a family of lawyers, Storey had had the finest legal and classical education available in Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup> After Harvard Law School he became an expert on the Constitution and Contract Law. His liberalism emphasised the need for peace, equality and the rule of law. Storey came late to the campaign for racial equality, after he had retired from the law, but he was motivated by a Harvard tradition that privileged, educated men and women had a duty to take part in politics. 'The greater any man's education...the

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<sup>4</sup> Wedin, *Inheritors of the Spirit*, p.122.

<sup>5</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Imperialism, the Highest Stage of Capitalism*. (Moscow, 1916), p.1.

<sup>6</sup> Hixson, *Moorfield Storey*, p.35.

greater his obligation'.<sup>7</sup> The alternative was, he feared, that the 'rogues would take over' the government and lead the working classes to destroy the democratic system.<sup>8</sup> In 1898 Storey addressed supporters of the Anti-Imperialist League on Christian themes, denouncing war and the doctrine of 'might makes right'. Storey protested that 'our country, of whose civilization we have been wont to boast, has forsaken the policy of peace with all mankind...War is the worst of human calamities'.<sup>9</sup> He correctly predicted that US intervention would lead to unforeseen consequences, such as annexation of the Philippines and a 'race war' against the people of the region.<sup>10</sup> Storey's defence of equal rights was set out again in a speech to law students in 1910.<sup>11</sup> He argued that American civilisation depended on respect for law, while the alternative was the rule of force and violence. His views had a strong moral aspect, influenced by abolitionism. Mark Twain supported the anti-imperialist cause and denounced foreign wars. 'I have seen that we do not intend to free but subjugate the people. We have gone there to conquer, not to redeem'.<sup>12</sup> Despite important supporters Andrew Carnegie, William Jennings Bryan and William McKinley, the campaign eventually failed.<sup>13</sup>

In spite of his liberal ideas the NAACP under Moorfield Storey's leadership was a conservative body with a narrow definition of civil rights. He was wary of labour unions and critical of strikes.<sup>14</sup> Storey urged all workers to honour their contracts, arguing that a contract

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<sup>7</sup> Moorfield Storey, *Politics as a Duty and as a Career*. (New York, 1889). p. 4. [www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Moorfield Storey, 'Nothing to Excuse Our Intervention'. The Anti-imperialist League President's Speech at the Massachusetts Reform Club April 8, 1898 in *The Advocate of Peace* No.60 (May, 1898), p.1.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Moorfield Storey, *Obedience to the Law. An Address at Pettigru Law College, Columbia, S.C.*, June 9, 1919. (Boston, 1919), p.1.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, 'Mark Twain and the Philippines', p.28.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen Kinzer, *The True Flag. Theodore Roosevelt, Mark Twain, and the American Empire*, (New York, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> The New York Times reports a speech of August 28, 1919: 'TO MAKE STRIKES CRIMES'. That is the Proposition Moorfield Storey urges before the Bar Association. Boston meeting applauds Moorfield Storey's proposal to make strikes criminal offences. [www.nytimes.com/1919/08/28/archives/to-make-strikes-crimes](http://www.nytimes.com/1919/08/28/archives/to-make-strikes-crimes).

was sacred even to ordinary workmen. He sympathised with employers, believing they needed protection from labour unions, since they were generally property owners who had much to lose. Storey was highly critical of a threat by four labour unions in 1919 to disrupt the entire nation's railroad system. Their aim was to force Congress to make an immediate change in legislation for their benefit. Storey was horrified and in response he compared the consequences of such a strike with the effects of a hypothetical German invasion of the United States.<sup>15</sup> He argued that the strike was undemocratic and would cause economic chaos. Thus militant actions must not, could not, be tolerated, but equally, he condemned the lawlessness of a lynch mob who violated the rights of 'the poor Negro' victim.<sup>16</sup>

In the United States violence was common during industrial disputes. Storey believed that all sides must obey the law without exception. He complained that the law was often broken by strikers who attacked employers' lives and property. The use of labour as a weapon must be prohibited, he argued, since militant unions aimed to 'make war on the public'.<sup>17</sup> The rule of law was absolute and it was 'not to be flouted by any individual or minority'.<sup>18</sup> His opinion of unions was a harsh one, which left little room for justified industrial action.<sup>19</sup> He gave a legalistic argument in support of his view, arguing that no-one had a right to strike. What the labourer had was merely a right to leave his job within the terms of his contract, or to re-negotiate it with his employer. Returning to first principles, he asserted that all men are equal under the Constitution and an employee has no right to stop working 'at pleasure' His rights end with his employment. He has no right to damage his employer, or to prevent his employer from taking on new staff. Strike action 'meant cutting off the supplies of food upon which the citizens of great cities depended, depriving children

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<sup>15</sup> Storey, *Obedience to the Law*. p.6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.17.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>19</sup> Moorfield Storey, 'The Right to Strike', *The Yale Law Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (December, 1922), pp. 99-108, p.100.

of milk, hospitals of ice and other necessities, and inflicting upon their fellow-citizens hardships of all kinds'.<sup>20</sup> He concludes by calling for new legislation to prevent strikes,

The right to strike is only the right to quit work without being liable to punishment for so doing, and that right may be taken away at any time by the legislature which, finding it grossly abused and the public suffering thereby...may restore the criminal law and make it again a criminal offense...The safety of the public is the supreme law.

The supremacy of contract law was expressed in the judgements of the Supreme Court.

The NAACP's tendency toward social conservatism is explained by the social status of the leading members. The Association's funding came mainly from a few donors who had accumulated great wealth, including Andrew Carnegie and Julius Rosenwald. In 1914 more than half of the NAACP's annual budget of eleven thousand dollars was donated by eighteen white donors.<sup>21</sup> However, the archives contain numerous receipts for donations of two dollars or less. The NAACP was punctilious in recording all donations.

Storey's role as leader of the Anti-Imperialist League was central but he is almost forgotten.<sup>22</sup> As President of the Anti-Imperialist League and National President of the NAACP he had a unique position from 1910 until his death in 1929, uniting the twin causes of anti-imperialism and anti-racism. Storey believed the US Constitution was in danger from a foreign policy which threatened a future of costly wars, lost freedom and excessive spending on a powerful new navy. His fears focused on the principle of due process. Nothing was more important than obedience to the law and the Constitution.<sup>23</sup> Civil rights and equal opportunity were core beliefs of the NAACP but respect for the law was essential to Moorfield Storey. Liberals feared the consequences of an aggressive foreign policy, which involved the US Army in alleged war crimes during the savage American-Filipino war of 1899-1902. Storey referred to their crimes as 'Marked Severities' of the Army and

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p.102.

<sup>21</sup> Dorrien, *The New Abolition*. p. 272.

<sup>22</sup> Hixson, *Moorfield Storey*, p.45.

<sup>23</sup> Storey, *Obedience to the Law*, p. 5.

campaigns vigorously against them.<sup>24</sup>

As special counsel for the Senate Committee on the war he investigated and prepared indictments for the guilty men. He joined the Anti-Imperialist League, condemning the US as 'hostile to liberty' and guilty of 'criminal aggression'.<sup>25</sup> The US was accused of violating its own principles by starting 'an unjust war' against the Filipinos while claiming to spread liberty. Opposition to the war and American methods found passionate leaders across the country including Andrew Carnegie, former President Grover Cleveland and President William McKinley. The ideal of equality was violated by the ruthless treatment of the Filipino people. Moorfield Storey contributed to liberalism by extending civil rights to include Filipinos, African Americans and humanity in general.

Supporters of liberalism were disturbed by the increase in racial violence and prejudice at the turn of the century, fearing a civil war between the races spreading from the South. Civil war was described by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who inspired the Enlightenment thinking of the NAACP. He defined a lawless condition of society as a time of 'continual fear, danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, nasty, brutish, and short'.<sup>26</sup> Storey had lived through the American Civil War as a young man working in Congress from 1867-69 and he feared this was happening again. White supremacy was a growing force at the turn of the century and liberals were apprehensive of a race war coming to the North, brought by such racist leaders as Senators Ben Tillman and James K. Vardaman.<sup>27</sup>

The 1900s saw the 'nadir' of race relations, as the scholar Rayford W. Logan pointed

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<sup>24</sup> Moorfield Storey, *Secretary for War Elihu Root's Record; The Marked Severities in Philippine Warfare*. (Boston, 1902), p.1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Hobbes, 1588-1679: *Leviathan, or the Matter, Form and Power of a Commonwealth*. (London, 1967), p.186

<sup>27</sup> James M. McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy from Reconstruction to the NAACP*. (Princeton, N.J., 1975), p.309.

out.<sup>28</sup> In 1915 bills on a racist ‘eugenics’ theme were introduced in the legislatures of New York, Indiana, Michigan, Massachusetts and Kansas reflecting hardened racial prejudice. These proposals were designed to prevent mixed marriage and the practice known as ‘miscegenation’.<sup>29</sup> A pattern of organised discrimination in the South reduced the electoral representation of African Americans, causing voter turnout in elections to fall sharply between 1890 and 1920.<sup>30</sup> The right to vote was threatened by a long-term movement for disfranchisement, led by the states of Mississippi and Alabama. In 1896 Louisiana had registered 130,000 African American voters but two decades later only 1,342 African Americans voted.<sup>31</sup> Between 1870 and 1901 twenty-two African Americans sat in Congress and no more than eight of them were in office at any one time. The last Black representative in this period lost his seat in 1901.<sup>32</sup> African American spokesman James Weldon Johnson protested at these developments during the 1910 NAACP conference ‘For now, the Negro is disfranchised by law in every state of the Far South’.<sup>33</sup> Southern states had by 1909 prevented many African Americans from voting or serving on juries, thus cancelling out much progress made under Radical Reconstruction.<sup>34</sup> Supreme Court judgements such as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) legitimised segregation as a theory of ‘separate, but equal’ provision for the races.

The power of white supremacy was demonstrated by the appearance of a discourse defending the illegal disfranchisement of African Americans. White supremacists claimed that African Americans were by their nature unsuited to freedom. The ‘liberal’ President Woodrow Wilson, a rabid racist from Virginia, described them as childlike. They were said

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<sup>28</sup> Rayford W. Logan, *The Betrayal of the Negro from Rutherford B. Hayes to Woodrow Wilson*. (New York, 1997), p.79.

<sup>29</sup> B. Joyce Ross, *J.E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP*. (New York, 1972), p.17.

<sup>30</sup> Thomas C. Leonard, *Illiberal Reformers, Race, Eugenics & American Economics in the Progressive Era*. (Princeton, N.J., 2017), p.50.

<sup>31</sup> Leon F. Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow*. (New York, 1998), p.225.

<sup>32</sup> Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching 1909-1950*. (Philadelphia, 1980), p.16.

<sup>33</sup> James M. McPherson ed. Speech by James Weldon Johnson, *The Proceedings of the National Negro Conference, 1909*. (New York, 1969). p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the U.S. From the NAACP to the New Deal*. Vol.3. (New York,1951), p.926.

to be ‘unpractised in liberty, unschooled in self-control...insolent and aggressive...a host of dusky children untimely put out of school...they were a danger to themselves as well as to those whom they had once served’. He welcomed new laws which ‘would put them under new restraints’.<sup>35</sup> The NAACP fought back, challenging Wilson and the prejudiced white public.<sup>36</sup>

White supremacy was the source of ‘Jim Crow’ segregation and lynching. The NAACP campaigned against these evils. Racial violence reached Springfield, Illinois by 1908 and Baltimore soon afterwards. The scholar Howard N. Rabinowitz argues that the urgent issue after the Civil War was the social exclusion of African Americans from the public sphere by whites.<sup>37</sup> The first reaction of defeated whites was to exclude them from all institutions, leaving African Americans to plead for access to schools, theatres and railroads on whatever terms they could obtain. The necessary condition for African Americans to use services was separation.<sup>38</sup> Segregation has been debated by Rabinowitz and C. Vann Woodward, who have defined its nature, timing and extent. It was a white supremacist policy designed to achieve the maximum possible physical separation between the races.

Woodward defined this process in terms of legislation passed by the states, emphasising the period following 1900 when several states passed laws enforcing segregated waiting rooms in railroad stations.<sup>39</sup> Only then did a rigid code come into existence that ‘lent the sanction of law to a racial ostracism that extended to churches and schools, to housing and jobs, to eating and drinking’.<sup>40</sup> This was a formal definition which concentrated on statutes and the express will of governments; he argued that legislation provided clarity for the historian of race relations. A law enforcing segregation was for Woodward the ‘key

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<sup>35</sup> Woodrow Wilson, ‘The Reconstruction of the Southern States’, *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1901. pp.1-15, p.6.

<sup>36</sup> U.S. Supreme Court: *Guinn & Beal v. The United States*, 1915. [Guinn & Beal v. United States :: 238 U.S. 347 \(1915\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center.](#)

<sup>37</sup> Howard N. Rabinowitz, *The First New South, 1865-1920*. (Arlington Heights, Ill., 1992), p.134

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.135

<sup>39</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*. (Oxford, 2002), p.97.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Rabinowitz, *The First New South*, p.134.



variable' in evaluating race relations. He believed that segregation was applied inconsistently before 1900.<sup>41</sup> Rabinowitz argued that segregation was established well before 1900 throughout the South, based on custom and practice. However, Woodward concluded that by 1919 there was a clear 'trend towards racism in the North'.<sup>42</sup> Racial violence and segregation had spread northward, causing a crisis in the cities, worst of all in Chicago. This posed an increasing challenge to the NAACP, who had limited funds and members.

All African Americans risked humiliation by their everyday encounters with 'Jim Crow'. However, the impact of segregation differed between social classes. The African American elite had ways of modifying or escaping the effects of racism. They were able to retreat into their own narrow social circles in prosperous suburbs of New York, Philadelphia and Atlanta. Excellent opportunities were available in education.<sup>43</sup> One of the finest schools in America was the segregated Dunbar School in Washington D.C, named after a colleague of W.E.B. DuBois. Its principal was among the first Black graduates of Harvard College. Almost all the teachers were graduates and several had earned doctorates. My view of segregation is that in the South, laws for 'Jim Crow' were superfluous because race relations were based on customs which were well understood by all. In the North segregation was defined by statute for a mobile population which was changing rapidly in the cities. This put pressure on the NAACP leadership to deal with obvious injustice and inequality.

A group of white supremacist politicians used racism to divide the population and bolster their own popularity. This is described by the historian John W. Cell as a 'master race' or 'Herrenvolk' policy.<sup>44</sup> Senator Ben Tillman of South Carolina (1847-1918) was a leading proponent, while Thomas E. Watson of Georgia (1856-1922) had reversed his liberal

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<sup>41</sup> Rabinowitz, *The First New South*, p.134.

<sup>42</sup> Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, p.114.

<sup>43</sup> Alison Stewart, *First Class; the Legacy of Dunbar, America's First Black Public High School*. (Chicago, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> John W. Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy*. (Cambridge, 1982), p.119.

views and joined racists who were campaigning in favour of lynching.<sup>45</sup> The rule of law was endangered by racial violence and Moorfield Storey was determined to protect the Constitution. The purpose of the NAACP was a continuation of the struggle against imperialism. Race riots and lynchings increased during the 1890s and liberals feared the Constitution was being undermined. Each case of lynching was an extra-judicial killing and a violation of due process. The murder of Jesse Washington, at Waco, Texas was witnessed by a large crowd who were openly photographed, yet no-one was charged with any offence. The NAACP's role was to gather evidence in such cases, encourage prosecutions and publicise evidence in *The Crisis*. W.E.B. DuBois wrote a powerful denunciation in a special supplement of the magazine.<sup>46</sup> This incident bears out the NAACP's definition, that the distinctive character of lynching was the approval given it by the local community.<sup>47</sup>

Moorfield Storey had recognised the danger to the rule of law before the NAACP existed. A threat to American liberalism was personified by Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana, a Republican and leader of the white supremacist movement who was also a supporter of imperialism and progressivism. Beveridge defied liberal opinion, demanding an aggressive war in the Philippines on the grounds of Anglo-Saxon racial superiority. His imperialist strategy used bases in Guam, Puerto Rico, Hawaii and Panama to give the US Navy the potential for global reach. A well-known naval officer, Captain Alfred T. Mahan, inspired the 'two-ocean' strategy designed to reach across the Pacific as far as Asia, projecting military force, trade and American values.<sup>48</sup> The Filipino people were referred to by Senator Beveridge as an inferior mixture of 'Malays and Spanish'.<sup>49</sup> The senator argued from supremacist assumptions that they were incapable of self-government, regardless of any possible education or aid they might be given. Racists heaped abuse on the Filipinos, whom

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<sup>45</sup> C. Vann Woodward, *Tom Watson - Agrarian Rebel*. (Eastford, CT., 1935), p.150.

<sup>46</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Crisis*, Special Supplement: 'Waco Horror' July 1916.

<sup>47</sup> John R. Shillady, *Thirty Years of Lynching. 1889-1918*. (New York, 1919), p. 8.

<sup>48</sup> Alfred T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power on History 1660-1783*. (Washington D.C., 1890), p. 1.

<sup>49</sup> Storey, *Secretary of State for War Elihu Root's Record*, p.3.

they labelled, ‘barbarous, superstitious, lazy and cruel’.<sup>50</sup> Historian Barbara Tuchman however, observed that the Filipino nation had already fought a thirty year-long, desperate campaign for freedom from Spain, lately under Emilio Aguinaldo, who became their first president.<sup>51</sup>

Moorfield Storey saw parallels between the treatment of Filipinos and African Americans. His liberal views placed civil rights at the centre of politics regardless of race, creed or colour, while he believed that human rights were universal. ‘All men, of whatever race or color, are entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness’.<sup>52</sup> This was not an easy case to argue, as white supremacy was widespread even among other opponents of imperialism. A notorious example was racist Senator Ben Tillman.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Storey gave the NAACP a coherent message to put before the public. He continued to demand freedom for the Filipinos for twenty years and was a key figure in the debate. As legal counsel for a voluntary Philippines Investigating Committee during the American-Philippines War of 1899-1902 he presented detailed evidence of US Army war crimes. These included aggression, murder, torture, and destruction of property.<sup>54</sup> Storey condemned the policy whereby American troops drove local people from their homes and cleared the population by driving them by into ‘re-concentration camps’.<sup>55</sup> He challenged the US Senate using his expert knowledge of the law and mastery of detail. A key claim was that wounded, unarmed prisoners were murdered by order of US Army officers in breach of the laws of war. Storey wrote to the President to protest, citing evidence ‘from Mr. Root’s letter to the President of July 12, General J.H. Smith gave the following oral instructions:

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<sup>50</sup> *New York Times* January 10, 1900. [Archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com). (Retrieved NYT Archive July 10, 2019).

<sup>51</sup> Barbara Tuchman, *The Proud Tower; Portrait of the World before the War*. (London, 1967), p.141.

<sup>52</sup> Henry Steele Commager, ed. *Documents of American History, 9<sup>th</sup> Edition: Platform of the American Anti-Imperialist League*, Chicago. (New Jersey, 1935), p.11.

<sup>53</sup> Kinzer, *The True Flag*, p.138.

<sup>54</sup> Storey. *Secretary of State for War Elihu Root’s Record*, p.3.

<sup>55</sup> Statement by Moorfield Storey to the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, p.151.

I want no prisoners. I wish you to kill and burn: the more you kill and burn, the better you will please me". Further, that he wanted all persons killed who were capable of bearing arms and in actual hostilities against the United States, and did, in reply to a question by Major Waller asking for an age limit, designate the limit as ten years of age.<sup>56</sup>

The Anti-Imperialist League responded to this challenge, which threatened American faith that it was a morally superior, 'exceptional' nation. Leaders of the League met at Faneuil Hall in Boston, Massachusetts, a venue used for many years by supporters of the Abolitionists. Liberals denounced US foreign policy as unprincipled aggression. Their heroes from the previous generation were the abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison and Charles Sumner. Garrison was grandfather to Oswald Garrison Villard. The NAACP's campaign style and rhetoric were inspired by Christian anti-slavery campaigners who had been active in New England during the nineteenth century.<sup>57</sup> Moorfield Storey worked with the activist Albert E. Pillsbury (1849-1930). Pillsbury was a Harvard lawyer, a former Massachusetts Attorney General and a senior member of the state legislature. He was the leader of The Boston Committee to Advance the Cause of the Negro, a bi-racial civil rights group which was absorbed by the NAACP in 1911. His uncle was Parker Pillsbury, a minister expelled by his church because of his radical actions against slavery.<sup>58</sup>

Abolitionism remained firmly embedded in the NAACP. Connections between the campaign for abolition and the NAACP were noted at the time by contemporaries. Oswald Villard made the comparison asserting, 'Ours, too, is a battle for democracy, pure and undefiled'.<sup>59</sup> The NAACP leaders revealed their conservative temperament by looking to past causes for inspiration. The scholar Gary Dorrien argued that the founders were, 'spiritual

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<sup>56</sup> Storey, *Secretary of State for War Elihu Root's Record*, p.3.

<sup>57</sup> Wreszin, *Oswald Garrison Villard*, p.4.

<sup>58</sup> Leonard L. Richard., 'Parker Pillsbury: Radical Abolitionist, Male Feminist'. Review Article. *Civil War History*. Vol.47, No 2, June 2001, pp.170-171, p.171.

<sup>59</sup> Oswald G. Villard, *The Objects of the NAACP*. (Chicago, 1912), p.3.

descendants of the abolitionists and Radical Republicans'.<sup>60</sup> Their characteristic style can be seen in the writings of white intellectual John J. Chapman, who was a supporter of the NAACP. His eloquent account of a lynching in 1911 at Coatesville, Pennsylvania was published in *Harper's*, a magazine read across the country.<sup>61</sup>

When I read in the newspapers of August 14, a year ago, about the burning alive of a human being, and of how a few desperate, fiend-minded men had been permitted to torture a man chained to an iron bedstead...burning alive...while around about stood hundreds of well-dressed American citizens, both from the vicinity and from afar, on foot and in wagons...no one man to name the name of Christ.<sup>62</sup>

Abolitionism represented continuity for the NAACP. The Association's founders were inspired by its high moral tone. Abolitionist leader William Lloyd Garrison and the NAACP's Charles E. Russell displayed similar rhetorical styles in their speeches, despite a fifty-year gap between the two campaigns. Garrison addressed an abolition meeting in 1854 at a New York church, where he displayed his uncompromising style. He was an absolutist who argued that to accept the existence of slavery anywhere within the United States violated the fundamental principle that 'All men are created equal'. The absolutist theme re-appears as the slogan 'No union with Slaveholders!'<sup>63</sup> In his Boston newspaper, *The Liberator* he continued, 'Any compromise would accept Satan as God of the Universe. When I say that Freedom is of God and Slavery is of the Devil, I mean just what I say...No compromise with slavery!'<sup>64</sup> The phrase 'No Compromise' was his leitmotif. Charles E. Russell had a similar, quasi-religious view, calling the NAACP the 'greatest power there has ever been for righteousness'. The Association had been 'Chosen' as 'an instrument for the New Abolition,

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<sup>60</sup> Dorrien, *The New Abolition*, p.63.

<sup>61</sup> Richard Stone., ed. *Unbought Spirit: A John Jay Chapman Reader*. (Chicago, Ill., 1998), p.2.

<sup>62</sup> John J. Chapman, *Harper's Bazaar*, Volume 43, Issue 12, December 1909.

<sup>63</sup> Library of Congress: *The Liberator*, January 6, 1860: Issue 1.

<sup>64</sup> The Schomburg Center, Harlem: William L. Garrison. *No compromise with slavery: an address delivered to the Broadway Tabernacle Church* February 14, 1854.

for the completion of the work...on foundations laid by Garrison and John Brown'.<sup>65</sup> Russell had the same style as William Lloyd Garrison, with his plan to build 'a temple of democracy' in America, providing 'absolutely equal rights' for all citizens.<sup>66</sup> A natural development for the NAACP was to describe its supporters as 'The New Abolitionists'.<sup>67</sup> This was encouraged by Oswald Garrison Villard, as the two campaigns were characterised by the Christian sympathy for suffering African Americans.

Traditional accounts of the NAACP's founding start with the Springfield race riots of 1908. *The Race War in the North* was William E. Walling's eyewitness account.<sup>68</sup> He was a wealthy landowner and an author of books and articles on socialist themes.<sup>69</sup> Walling was shocked by the revelation of white racism outside the South and the failure of local authorities to prevent disorder. The rioters were led by street railwaymen and factory workers.<sup>70</sup> Significantly, Walling looked to the past for a solution. Only the historic movement to abolish slavery seemed to match the scale of the race problem, so he declared that, 'the spirit of the abolitionists...must be revived and we must come to treat the Negro on a plane of absolute political and social equality'.<sup>71</sup> He appealed for a 'large and powerful body of citizens to come to their aid'.<sup>72</sup> His account aroused the conscience of Mary White Ovington, a wealthy New Yorker and volunteer social worker whose tireless campaigning gathered a small group of concerned citizens.

Ovington supported the founding of the NAACP from its earliest days, working at first alone and then with Doctor Henry Moscovitz, a Jewish immigrant from Romania.

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<sup>65</sup> Abolitionist John Brown was hanged for treason. Rival biographies by DuBois and Villard led to a breach.

<sup>66</sup> NAACP: *Proceedings of the Sixth Annual Conference*, May 6, 1914, Baltimore. Admin File, Part 1, Box 1, A1.

<sup>67</sup> Dorrien: *The New Abolition*, p. 65.

<sup>68</sup> William E. Walling, Report in *The African American Independent*, September 3, 1908, Eastern Illinois University, [www.eiu.edu/past\\_tracker/](http://www.eiu.edu/past_tracker/). (Retrieved October 3, 2016).

<sup>69</sup> William E. Walling, *Socialism: A Survey of the World-Wide Revolutionary Movement*. (New York, 1912).

<sup>70</sup> Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois*, p. 254.

<sup>71</sup> William E. Walling, Report in the *African American Independent*, September 3, 1908. p. 1.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Scholar Carolyn Wedin, her biographer, argues that Ovington was unique in connecting many diverse groups with the NAACP coalition.<sup>73</sup> Recruitment of significant African Americans was essential if the NAACP was to succeed. Ovington had good relationships with African Americans of different classes and backgrounds. In her social life she had regular contacts with social workers, Christian leaders and socialists. She had a unique position in relation to a range of people. Charles Edward Russell, a friend, was a socialist journalist, a Pulitzer Prize-winner and the author of *Why I am a Socialist* (1910).

An informal group of established African American families in Brooklyn, known as the Cosmopolitan Club, met regularly and invited Ovington to one of their meetings. At a function in 1908 the racially mixed group was addressed by white and African American speakers, including clergy. A discussion was followed by dinner.<sup>74</sup> Reporters from a William Randolph Hearst newspaper suddenly appeared, uninvited, in the restaurant. The newspaper reports described the dinner in lurid terms, filling their accounts with innuendo about a white woman acting as ‘high priestess’ in a revealing outfit, seated among a group of Black men. A torrent of obscene, abusive mail swept over Ovington after the story was printed, forcing her to move out of her house. She made a comment afterwards on the power of segregation and racism ‘What was news was that colored and white had sat down together in a public restaurant’. Ovington complained that when a white woman sat next to a Black man, immediately, ‘a sober dinner became an orgy’.<sup>75</sup> A report appeared in *The Savannah News* with the racist comments ‘Worst of all was the high priestess, Miss Ovington...who affiliates five days every week at her home...she could have had a hundred thousand Negroes...had she waved the bread tray. But the horror of it is she could take white girls into that den’. The event was also widely described as a ‘miscegenation dinner’ revealing the widespread

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<sup>73</sup> Wedin, *Inheritors of the Spirit*, p.107.

<sup>74</sup> Luker ed. *Black and White Sat Down Together*, p.32.

<sup>75</sup> Mary White Ovington, *Autobiography: The Walls Came Tumbling Down*. (New York, 1947), p.45.

obsession with ‘racial purity’.<sup>76</sup>

African American lives had gradually worsened after Union troops were withdrawn from the South in 1877. This process was aided by the New England opinion that racial issues could be safely consigned to the former confederacy states.<sup>77</sup> C. Vann Woodward argued that a myth of the ‘New South’ created by publicist Henry Grady persuaded the North that the ‘race problem’ was best left for the South to deal with.<sup>78</sup> The people of New England were slow to come to the aid of African Americans below the Mason-Dixon Line. Founding the NAACP required two major conferences at the New York Cooper’s Union Hall.

In 1910 sympathisers were sent an invitation by Oswald Villard, which was described as ‘A Call’ (to an Abraham Lincoln Memorial Conference). This conference established the NAACP with a headquarters on Fifth Avenue, New York. A clear structure of a General Committee and an Executive Committee ensured discipline, authority and accountability under the firm control of Oswald Garrison Villard. He believed there was an intolerable conflict between civil rights and a growing white supremacist movement. In a reference to Abraham Lincoln, Villard asserted ‘This Government cannot stand half-slave and half-free, any more than in 1861...There must be a renewal of the struggle for civil and political liberty’.<sup>79</sup> He was a commanding figure from the earliest days of the organisation. As a wealthy owner of an iron ore mine, director of two insurance companies, member of several exclusive clubs and owner of *The Nation* newspaper, he was at the heart of the social elite. Villard was one of the leading figures in the Association. The scholar, James Campbell observed that this was a group which was, ‘mostly white men and women, relatively wealthy, well-educated with family backgrounds rooted in abolitionism’<sup>80</sup>. Villard had socially

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<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.46.

<sup>77</sup> McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy*, p.309.

<sup>78</sup> Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, p.40.

<sup>79</sup> Oswald Garrison Villard, ‘*The Call*’ to a Lincoln Emancipation Conference, quoted in full by Kellogg in *A History of the NAACP*. Appendix A. pp.298-299, p.298.

<sup>80</sup> James Campbell, *Crime and Punishment in African American History*. (London, 2012), p.122.



conservative attitudes towards African Americans and the working classes, supporting the established African American leader Booker T. Washington. Villard had his own prejudices and used racial slurs, complaining that at the Conference, ‘the whole *Colored crowd* was anti-Washington’.<sup>81</sup>

Villard’s financial resources and influence were indispensable to the NAACP. He used them to control African Americans who were considered radical, such as Ida Wells-Barnett and William Monroe Trotter. He had a conservative attitude to mixed marriages, arguing in an official document ‘For colored people want to marry colored people and whites want to marry whites, the exceptions being few’.<sup>82</sup> His system of committees created at the conference ensured control of the new organisation, with white majorities on each one and members chosen by himself.<sup>83</sup> Villard’s racial attitudes made him wary of the brilliant intellect of W.E.B. DuBois, an independent character who refused to accept the powerful white man as his line manager.<sup>84</sup>

Controversial topics had to be discussed in conference and some difficult topics had to be avoided. The founders had to control debates on subjects which were too controversial and divisive, for example sexual relations between the races and a response to racial violence. Ida Wells-Barnett had strong views on both these issues. She led the 1909 conference debate on lynching and had a record of encouraging African Americans to defend themselves with deadly force. An example of her approach was her support for Robert Charles from New Orleans, who shot dead four policemen.<sup>85</sup> Wells-Barnett lacked the patience for a legal approach in the long-term. She clashed with Mary Ovington and passed a scathing judgement

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<sup>81</sup> Quoted in Lewis, *DuBois*, p.259, my emphasis.

<sup>82</sup> NAACP Annual Report for 1913, p.10. [www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org). (Retrieved October 20, 2017).

<sup>83</sup> Harmsworth Library, Oxford: *Platform of the National Negro Committee 1909*. Reel 1, frame 8918.

<sup>84</sup> Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice*, p.34.

<sup>85</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law*. (Public Domain, 1892), p.33.

in her autobiography.

This movement, which has lasted longer than almost any other...has fallen far short of the expectations of its founders. The reason is not far to seek. It has kept Miss Mary White Ovington as chairman of the Executive Committee. Miss Ovington's heart is in this work, but her experience has been confined solely to New York City and Brooklyn...She has basked in the sunlight of the adoration of the few college-bred Negroes who have surrounded her...but has made little effort to know the soul of the black woman.<sup>86</sup>

Wells-Barnett was deeply cynical about the U.S. legal system, so it was impossible for her to support the NAACP for any length of time.<sup>87</sup> A few months after the conference she resigned from the Association. *The Crisis* was created at her suggestion, but she was disappointed when DuBois was given control of it. She never found a permanent role in the NAACP.<sup>88</sup>

The NAACP liberal leadership took its ideas from several sources. They responded to white supremacy using the language and concepts of Classical Liberalism including those of the British intellectuals Adam Smith and J.S. Mill.<sup>89</sup> Their Liberalism was characterised by a concern for liberty, reason and individual rights. The U.S. Constitution was also influenced by Blackstone's *Commentaries*, a widely used legal textbook from the eighteenth century. Legal philosopher Sir William Blackstone observed that if anyone has the power to punish a man without reference to the law, the result is tyranny; for 'no man shall be put to death, without being brought to answer by due process of law'.<sup>90</sup> The NAACP was dedicated to 'due process' and the 'equal protection of the law'. However, there were limits to freedom; liberals like Villard and Storey were suspicious of collectivist ideas and organisations. No labor unions were represented at the NAACP founding conferences.<sup>91</sup> The leadership generally subscribed to doctrines described by the historian B. Joyce Ross as 'non-economic

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<sup>86</sup> Duster ed., *Crusade for Justice*, p.327.

<sup>87</sup> Paula J. Giddings, *Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching: Ida, A Sword Among Lions*. (New York, 2008), p.479.

<sup>88</sup> Mia Bay, *To tell the Truth Freely. The Life of Ida B. Wells*. (New York, 2009), p.270.

<sup>89</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*. (London, 1688). John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*. (London, 1859).

<sup>90</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*. (Oxford, 1765). p.130.

<sup>91</sup> Ross, *J.E. Spingarn and the rise of the NAACP*, p.14.

liberalism'. This implied a wary attitude towards social and economic reforms.<sup>92</sup>

Liberals from the period of Thomas Jefferson believed the United States had a 'special mission' to spread democracy and equality across the world. They saw the United States as a 'beacon to the world' a concept inspired by the Sermon on the Mount. 'For You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in Heaven'.<sup>93</sup> The earliest record of this sentiment is a sermon of 1630 by John Winthrop, a Puritan lawyer who was governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. This was to take different forms, such as 'manifest destiny' or an 'American mission'. In the late nineteenth century Americans of English, Dutch, Scotch Irish and German descent began to describe themselves as superior 'Anglo-Saxon stock' who claimed the right to expand ever westward and southwards at the expense of native Americans, Mexico and the Spanish Empire. Indigenous Americans were the first victims and were almost exterminated by the 1900s.<sup>94</sup> White supremacism made it acceptable to carry out ruthless attacks on such 'inferior' races. American exceptionalism helped to justify aggression by its' allegiance to democracy and equality.<sup>95</sup> These expansionist claims drove Moorfield Storey and the Anti-Imperialist League to oppose U.S. annexation of the Philippines. Foreign policy drew on a tradition of Liberalism inspired by John Locke and rooted in liberty, law and individual rights. The flaw in this structure was belief in a racial hierarchy, so that African Americans were deprived of their rights based on a claim of their inferiority.<sup>96</sup>

Violence overseas was accompanied by racial violence at home. Lynching was the

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<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>93</sup> The New Testament, Matthew 5:14.

<sup>94</sup> Julius W. Pratt, 'Origin of Manifest Destiny'. *American Historical Review*, (1927). Vol.32, No.4. (1927) pp.795-6, p.796.

<sup>95</sup> Charles Murray, *American Exceptionalism: An Experiment in History*. (Washington D.C., 2013), p.13.

<sup>96</sup> Melvin P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad eds. *The Cold War* Vol.1. David C. Engerman, *Ideology and the Origins of the Cold War 1917-1962*. (Cambridge, 2010), pp.20-21.

antithesis of everything the NAACP believed in, so the Association became identified with the campaign against this crime. The NAACP campaign exemplified the strengths of the Association, with its careful gathering of evidence designed to win over public opinion. Collection of data by the Association and the Tuskegee Institute estimated that lynchings between 1899 and 1908 inclusive claimed at least 959 victims, of which 857 were described as ‘colored’.<sup>97</sup> Mobs frequently chose uneducated young Black men as victims, as their lack of social status made them vulnerable. The 1900s saw the rise of torture during lynchings, adding to the terror effect; death was deemed to be insufficient punishment of itself.<sup>98</sup> In 1899 farm labourer Sam Hose was tied to a tree in Coweta County, Georgia and burned alive; his body parts were openly sold as souvenirs and displayed in shop windows.<sup>99</sup> The horror of such atrocities failed to sway public opinion.

The NAACP founders believed publicity was the key to prevention, for if such hideous crimes were brought to the notice of the public, then decent people would surely be revolted by them. This demonstrates the NAACP’s belief that they were part of a moral crusade.<sup>100</sup> The campaign to stop lynching lasted until the 1950s but it was unable to secure federal government action against these atrocities. Congressional leaders remained unmoved by the horrors, relying year after year on the threadbare argument that lynching was necessary to deter rapists. The NAACP founders failed to realise that an approach based on morality would not persuade hardened white supremacists in Congress to change their ways.<sup>101</sup>

The historian Grace Elizabeth Hale argued that lynchings were dramas with a powerful message not understood by the NAACP. Local people regarded them as festivals,

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<sup>97</sup> James MacPherson ed., Speech by Ida Wells-Barnett: *Proceedings of the National Negro Conference, 1909*, p.175.

<sup>98</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, p.286.

<sup>99</sup> NAACP: LoC *Analysis of lynchings, 1880-1910*. Subject File: *Lynching*. Part I, Series C- 371.

<sup>100</sup> John H. Bracey Jr. and August Meier. Allies or Adversaries? The NAACP and the 1941 March on Washington. *The Georgia Historical Quarterly* 75, no. 1 (1991): 1–17. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40582270>. p.1.

<sup>101</sup> Walter White. *Rope and Faggot. A Biography of Judge Lynch*. (New York, 1929).

although their effect was to depict the ruthless power of the white majority.<sup>102</sup> The evidence suggests a huge gap existed between the rural South and the liberal elite, which explains the NAACP's lack of success. Lynching created a narrative which could be understood by the whole community and witnessed by an audience of thousands.<sup>103</sup> The 'drama' had a set sequence, starting with an accusation and lurid details of a crime, often enhanced by wild rumours. A hunt for the victim was recorded in the local newspapers, which brought out several editions each day. In Lima, Ohio a total of 'one hundred automobiles' joined the organised pursuit of an African American man who had been accused of rape.<sup>104</sup> A vivid image was created of baying hounds and armed whites chasing a black man across moonlit swamps.<sup>105</sup>

A lynching was often portrayed as a morality play by the community, as a way of ensuring prompt, just punishment of 'outrages' by alleged criminals. Perpetrators of racist violence were reported in admiring terms by the local press. *The Lincoln Daily Star* described the hunt for one suspect, which left the editor impressed by local men who had 'chased the victim and the sheriff for twenty-four hours'. They were infuriated by the alleged crime and seized the victim from Sheriff Davis who pleaded for the man's life to no avail. The lynching took place before a mass of witnesses of up to ten thousand people, who were described by one witness as a 'howling mob'. The leaders fired 'Volley after volley' into the victim's body.<sup>106</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Amy L. Wood, *Lynching and Spectacle; Witnessing Racial Violence in America 1890-1940*. (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009), p.114.

<sup>103</sup> Grace E. Hale, *Making Whiteness; The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*. (New York, 1999), p.203.

<sup>104</sup> NAACP: LoC Subject File *Lynching and Race Riots, 1885-1916*. Part I, Box 1, C371.

<sup>105</sup> W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death. Lynching in the South*. (Chapel Hill and London, 1997), p.1.

<sup>106</sup> *The Lincoln Daily Star*. November 12, 1909.p.3. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/309639879> (Retrieved July, 10 2017).

Many victims are described in the press as ‘black brutes’ who had ‘spilt blood’ and must be punished speedily. African Americans could be ‘extralegally and publicly tortured and killed’ without delay or the chance for an appeal.<sup>107</sup> The editor of *The Washington Post* wrote that it was an unwritten law in the South that a Black man who assaults a white woman must die’.<sup>108</sup> A Monroe, Louisiana headline read, ‘Negro accused of assault on white woman is found hanging on Court House Square’. Bodies were displayed conspicuously to make a point. Accounts often ended with the phrase, ‘the body was riddled with bullets’.<sup>109</sup> This emphasised that the killing was a corporate undertaking rather than a private matter. It was defined as ‘murder with the support of the community’.<sup>110</sup> This term was coined by William English Walling of the NAACP. An element of delusion was allowed to enter the analysis, when NAACP Secretary Roy Nash claimed that members of the upper class in the South were opposed to lynching, despite the lack of evidence.

There was a disagreement among the NAACP concerning a response to lynching. Ida Wells-Barnett had a very different background to other leaders of the white elite. She was born a slave in Mississippi and based in Chicago. As young woman in Memphis she had experience of slavery and violent racism. In danger of being lynched for her views, she always carried a gun.<sup>111</sup> She led the 1909 conference debate on the topic of ‘Lynching - Our National Crime’. Her theme was ‘Crime against women is the excuse not the cause...it is a national crime and requires a national remedy’. Lynch mobs were ‘a political movement’ which originated in the southern states. She argued that ‘Its purpose was to suppress the colored vote by intimidation and murder’. A reign of terror was being imposed by beating, shooting and killing African Americans ‘by the thousand’. Wells-Barnett’s proposal was for

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<sup>107</sup> Hale, *Making Whiteness*, p.205

<sup>108</sup> *The Washington Post*, March 29, 1906. [www.newspapers.com](http://www.newspapers.com). (Retrieved 8 July, 2017).

<sup>109</sup> *The Monroe Star*. March 16, 1918. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/82375034/?terms=> (Retrieved 10 July, 2017).

<sup>110</sup> NAACP: LoC., Roy Nash, Secretary *A Memorandum on the practicability of an attack on Lynch Law*, (New York 1916) Part I, Box 1, C371. p.14.

<sup>111</sup> Giddings, *Ida B. Wells and the Campaign against Lynching*, p. 212.

statistical analysis of the evidence and a bureau to be set up to investigate and publish details of every lynching.<sup>112</sup>

Mary Ovington demonstrated how comfortable she was with African Americans of her own upper-class status and spent time socialising in their company. She reported on their circumstances and attitudes. ‘Through social workers I met the professional people. They were a pleasant, friendly group with nothing to distinguish them from their neighbours but their color’.<sup>113</sup> Ovington observed ‘What most impressed me was their conservatism - not on the race question but on everything else...They wanted the status of the white man, to be able to go where their money would take them’.<sup>114</sup> Success for this group was defined by white mainstream values. They took pride in their status as solvent, educated homeowners with virtuous wives who were quietly, reliably engaged in ‘the politics of respectability’.<sup>115</sup> As firm believers in the U.S. Constitution and the American Dream they agreed with her that ‘the best thing that had ever been said regarding the rights of individuals was said by Thomas Jefferson in the opening to the U.S. Declaration of Independence’.<sup>116</sup> Relations with Ida Wells-Barnett however, were not so positive; she had disagreements with Ovington and resigned a few months after the founding. Scholar and biographer Mia Bay blames this disagreement on white prejudice, but she admits that Wells-Barnett was unconventional and lacked discipline.<sup>117</sup>

The NAACP has been described by historians such as Mia Bay as a direct response to violence in Springfield, Illinois during 1908, but this is an over-simplification.<sup>118</sup> The town of

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<sup>112</sup> James MacPherson ed., Speech by Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Proceedings of the National Negro Conference*, p.174.

<sup>113</sup> Luker, *Black and white sat Down Together*, p.15.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>115</sup> Michele Mitchell, *Righteous Propagation: African Americans and the Politics of Racial Destiny after Reconstruction*. (Chapel Hill, NC., 2004), Kindle loc.1887.

<sup>116</sup> Luker, *Black and white sat Down Together*, p.32

<sup>117</sup> Bay, *To tell the Truth Freely*, p.272.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, p.271.

Springfield had a symbolic significance as President Lincoln's birthplace and his one hundredth anniversary was in 1909. The location was salient because it was in the Midwest not in the South. On August 14, 1908 white mobs attacked homes and businesses belonging to African Americans. They were led by a white woman, Kate Howard, who demanded 'protection' from African Americans. The 'mob' included working class men employed on the town's street railway.<sup>119</sup> Their attacks were prompted by the alleged rape of a white woman by George Richardson. The county sheriff took Richardson into custody and protected him, so the mob took out its frustration by rioting for three days. Two elderly African Americans were mutilated and lynched. Five thousand National Guards arrived to restore order but by then ten people had been murdered and thousands were homeless.

William Walling was disturbed by events in Springfield because they were unplanned and spontaneous; the rioters saw nothing wrong in their actions. A newspaper article 'Race War in the North' was Walling's eyewitness account of the events.<sup>120</sup> He argued that racists were in danger of bringing a 'race war' to the North. The whites told Walling of their resentment. They complained that African Americans had an 'arrogant' attitude and furthermore, Black gangs, not whites, had caused the violence. They claimed to have a grievance against African Americans because they believed they were equal to whites.<sup>121</sup> Locals complained that they failed to 'know their place' in the racial hierarchy. 'Why, the n...ers came to think they were as good as us'.<sup>122</sup> Fifty years after the Emancipation Proclamation they were mocked and abused because of their race, 'Lincoln freed you, we will show you where you belong'. We 'curse the day that Lincoln freed the n...ers'. Walling was shocked by white working-class attitudes and he concluded a powerful body was needed to help African Americans, but no such body existed at the time.

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<sup>119</sup> Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois*, p. 254.

<sup>120</sup> William E. Walling, A Report; *African American Independent*, September 3, 1908. Eastern Illinois University. [www.eiu.edu/past\\_tracker/doc](http://www.eiu.edu/past_tracker/doc) (Retrieved October 3, 2016).

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*



The National Negro Committee was set up by Oswald Garrison Villard in 1909 to arrange the founding of the NAACP. Villard's social and business connections helped him become the Chairman, including his membership of exclusive clubs like the Harvard, Century and University.<sup>123</sup> The committee adopted a platform which condemned economic exploitation and advocated free education for all. It concluded that nothing lasting would be gained for African Americans without free access to the vote. All could agree with this consensual view. The NAACP programme of social and economic policies included: universal higher education, training of Black workers in practical skills, ending economic exploitation and stopping the 'enslavement of prisoners' by landowners and businessmen.<sup>124</sup> Nevertheless, the emphasis of the Association under the leadership of Oswald Villard and Moorfield Storey continued to be on equality, the right to vote and due process of law.

The National Negro Committee consisted of educated and respectable opinion leaders including clergy, social workers, journalists and lawyers. The majority of the forty members were white males from New York or Boston. The Committee summoned a national conference in New York on May 31 and June 1, 1909. Fifty delegates attended, including Oswald Villard, Ida Wells-Barnett, William Monroe Trotter and W.E.B. DuBois. Prominent experts spoke to the audience on politics and economics. The conference dealt with fundamental issues, such as the latest scientific thinking on race. Inspiration came from the empirical approach of the eighteenth-century Age of Enlightenment.<sup>125</sup> Guest speakers included Professors Livingston Farrand and Burt Wilder who were anthropologists at Cornell University. They challenged the popular belief that African Americans were intellectually inferior.<sup>126</sup> The conference's unifying theme was opposition to white supremacy.

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<sup>123</sup> Wreszin, *Oswald Garrison Villard*, p.33.

<sup>124</sup> Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*, p.42.

<sup>125</sup> Roy Porter, *Enlightenment. Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (London, 2001), p.96.

<sup>126</sup> James McPherson, ed. *Proceedings of the National Negro Conference*, 1909, p.21.

In 1910 a further conference was called to finalise the organisation of the NAACP including its name. Mary White Ovington took the lead in organising, with Villard, this crucial founding conference. She was mistrusted by some of the more radical delegates. Ovington reported that suspicious radicals were ‘muttering to each other that the white leaders were not to be relied on’.<sup>127</sup> These radicals were seen by the leadership as potentially difficult colleagues. Some African Americans were wary of joining a civil rights organisation which was white dominated, even though white allies were essential to the existence of the NAACP. The leadership’s aim was to extend American ideals to African Americans, which required the cooperation of people like W.E.B DuBois, William Monroe Trotter and Ida Wells-Barnett. Trotter had an intense hatred of Booker T. Washington but Villard and Ovington were keen to maintain good relations with him, as Washington commanded influence and significant resources.

Many NAACP members were motivated by a social conscience and progressive or socialist views, including left-wing activists, campaigning journalists and social workers. Highly educated white women like Jane Addams had established settlements in slum areas and lived among the working class to help them improve their conditions. Several members of the Jewish community were active at the conference. They used their experience of emigration and discrimination to support African Americans. Lilian Wald was a liberal Jew descended from Polish and German immigrants. She was a social worker, teacher and the founder of community nursing in the U.S. Joel Spingarn was an independently wealthy Jewish academic, who led the NAACP from 1914 until the late 1930s. Emil Hirsch was a Rabbi from Chicago’s Sinai Synagogue. Stephen Wise, an immigrant born in Budapest, was a Zionist Rabbi and Jacob Schiff and Herbert Lehman were philanthropic Jewish New York bankers. Nathan Ross Margold was a Rumanian Jewish immigrant, a graduate of Harvard

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<sup>127</sup> Luker, *Black and White sat Down Together*, p.59.

Law School who demonstrated the social mobility available through the NAACP and the legal profession. He was chosen by Walter White to produce a strategic plan for a campaign against segregation. Margold was joined by two brilliant Jewish lawyers, an immigrant Louis Brandeis and a child of immigrants, Felix Frankfurter, who would become a member of the U.S. Supreme Court. Other leaders form a nuanced picture of the eclectic membership, such as the businessman John E. Milholland. His daughter Inez was a suffragist, labour lawyer, socialist and war correspondent.

Once the founding was complete, the NAACP was controlled from a one room headquarters provided by Villard on Fifth Avenue, New York. A General Committee of One Hundred was appointed but power lay with the Executive Committee of twenty, who became the ruling National Board of Directors. The first National President was Moorfield Storey, the first Chairman was William English Walling and the first Executive Secretary was a white woman, Miss Frances Blascoer. Members of the Executive Committee included Jane Addams, Charles Edward Russell, Mary Ovington, Albert Pillsbury, Ida Wells-Barnett and Mrs Mary Church Terrell. The Executive Committee had twenty-five members, of whom five were clergy and eight were women. A total of forty-three whites and sixteen African Americans served on these committees. There was a bias towards New England, as thirty members had either grown up or moved there.<sup>128</sup>

Many liberals, like Walling, sought inspiration from the anti-slavery movement. This was a link with the previous generation as can be seen in a public meeting advertised in 1865 entitled, *The Equality of All Men, Claimed and Defended*.<sup>129</sup> The NAACP strategy was described by Joel Spingarn as the pursuit of equality for ‘colored people and...their white

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<sup>128</sup> William Stueck, ‘Progressivism and the Negro; White liberals and the early NAACP’, *The Historian* Vol.38, No.1. November (1975), pp.58-78, p.58.

<sup>129</sup> Report of a Public Meeting; *The Equality of All Men, Claimed and Defended in speeches* by Hon. William D. Kelley, Wendell Phillips and Frederick Douglass. (Boston, 1865). <https://archive.org/>

friends'. This would be 'a new movement against...discrimination. The policy of compromise...has really represented a loss'.<sup>130</sup> The white, liberal elite did not immediately respond to events in Springfield. Oswald Villard and Mary White Ovington would spend the next two years dealing with divided supporters, particularly those who distrusted Booker T. Washington. Ovington planned a compromise to accommodate as many different opinions as possible. Villard promised, 'It is not to be a Washington movement, or a DuBois movement'.<sup>131</sup> To avoid a damaging split over policy the Committee added a section to their aims about the importance of access to the ballot, as this was acceptable to all the delegates. The leaders were anxious to establish consensus by having limited, moderate aims, avoiding a breakup into several small, weak organisations.<sup>132</sup>

Oswald Villard and Mary Ovington had their own prejudices which caused conflict between the races. Offensive stereotypes affected attitudes towards African Americans who were believed to be undisciplined and not natural organisers. Ovington observed of Ida Wells-Barnett and William Monroe Trotter that, 'They were powerful personalities who had gone their own ways, fitted for courageous work but perhaps not fitted to accept the restraint of organisation'. The genius of African Americans was, she believed, to be found in art and music, because of their 'feeling for rhythm, melodious sound...intensity of sentiment and motion'. This 'trait' produced success in music and entertainment but not in politics.<sup>133</sup> Ovington was swayed by African American successes in this field, clouding her judgement on colleagues.<sup>134</sup> Oswald Villard also had a stereotyped view, which was revealed in the generalisation 'Colored people fight among themselves'. He found their behaviour at the 1910 conference 'trying' and he was keen to assert discipline over DuBois in particular.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> NAACP: LoC Subject File: *The J.E. Spingarn lecture tour*. Press release, January 10, 1914. Part 1, Box1, C1.

<sup>131</sup> Quoted in Lewis, *DuBois*. (New York, 2009), p.259, my emphasis.

<sup>132</sup> MacPherson, ed., *Proceedings of the National Negro Committee*. (New York, 1909), p.225.

<sup>133</sup> Quoted in McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy*, p.343.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>135</sup> Quoted in Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*, p.92.

Villard wanted a disciplined organisation and used ruthless tactics to create one. He ensured that his opponents were excluded from the key Committee of Forty and meetings were by his own account ‘rigged up in advance... which they naturally had to be’.<sup>136</sup> The Committee was established to decide the details of the NAACP. Members had been selected by Villard, who at one point in the proceedings removed ‘six or seven’ African American committee members on his own authority.<sup>137</sup> He played a dominant part in the founding and Mary Ovington occasionally had to use her tact to resolve disputes caused by his abrasive personality.

Many supporters of the NAACP were keen to promote higher living standards but they were not in control of the organisation. Mary Ovington, Jane Addams and Sophonisba Breckinridge were committed to helping the poor. As social workers they supported the National Settlement Movement, a campaign designed to improve living conditions for the working-class. They were responsible for setting up the strategic Chicago branch of the NAACP in 1910 and created Hull House, a settlement providing practical help for immigrants.<sup>138</sup> They were motivated by secular humanism and published their aims in the Hull House Charter, ‘To provide a center for a higher civic and social life; to institute and maintain educational and philanthropic enterprises, and to investigate and improve the conditions in the industrial districts of Chicago’. Other reformers in the NAACP leadership included Lincoln Steffens, the socialist author of *Shame of the Cities*, an investigation which exposed corruption across the United States.<sup>139</sup> Joel Spingarn was a reformer who left the Progressive Party because he was disappointed by its refusal to support equal rights for African Americans. Charles Edwin Bentley was an African American dentist who dedicated

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<sup>136</sup> Bay, *To Tell the Truth Freely*, p.271.

<sup>137</sup> Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*, p.29.

<sup>138</sup> Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House*. (Chicago, 1910), p.3.

<sup>139</sup> Lincoln Steffens, *The Shame of the Cities*. (New York, 1904), p.1.

his life to improved dental services for the working class and joined the NAACP.

The NAACP leadership had little in common with this diverse group and remained committed to the laissez-faire policies of Adam Smith and David Ricardo. Moorfield Storey was conservative in his views on labour and social class. He was labelled a ‘Mugwump’ as a young politician, meaning one who is independent and intensely opposed to corruption in politics. Abolitionist and Radical Republican Senator Charles Sumner influenced Storey’s attitudes as his secretary and his biographer. Sumner revealed to John Bright his conditions for allowing rebel states to come back to the Union. These were his principles, ‘I insist that the rebel states shall not come back except on the footing of the Declaration of Independence, with all persons equal before the law and government founded on the consent of the governed. In other words, there shall be no discrimination on account of color’.<sup>140</sup> This was Storey’s view.

The scholar B. Joyce Ross argues that the Association was only concerned with legal equality and avoided programmes of ‘economic liberalism’ or social and economic reform. Wages, hours of work, unionisation, social welfare, child labour and the redistribution of wealth were crucial for the working class, but they were of little interest to the NAACP leadership.<sup>141</sup> The middle-classes had no wish for change in the class system. Their priority was integration with white society as equal citizens.

The NAACP was a coalition of many different opinions and all the members would need to benefit from membership if they were to volunteer. It would have to accommodate men and women, Blacks and whites, Jews and Gentiles, liberals and conservatives. Socialists were tolerated because they were amongst the most active supporters.<sup>142</sup> Walling was author of *Socialism as it is: A Survey of the World-Wide Revolutionary Movement* (1912). The

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<sup>140</sup> Moorfield Storey, *Charles Sumner, American Statesman*. (Boston and New York, 1900), p. 288.

<sup>141</sup> Ross, *J.E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP*, p.13.

<sup>142</sup> McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy*, p.339.

intellectual W.E.B. DuBois expressed many socialist views and was a Socialist Party member from 1910 to 1912.<sup>143</sup> He referred to the philosopher Karl Marx as ‘a colossal genius’.<sup>144</sup> Ray Stannard Baker was a campaigning socialist, an investigative journalist and labour organiser. He was author of *The Atlanta Riot* (1907) an account of violence in the southern city. Baker criticised a local newspaper for demanding ‘quick justice’ for alleged Black rapists because he believed the paper was inciting a lynch mob.<sup>145</sup> He followed the customary policy of the NAACP by collecting evidence to persuade the public to eschew racist prejudices. He used data provided by Atlanta Police to analyse crime in 1906, a year when 7,515 white males had been arrested; the figure for African American males was 10,317. In the same year eight lynchings were recorded in Georgia, none involving a rape allegation. One was for ‘disorderly conduct’.<sup>146</sup> This was valuable to the NAACP in its information-led campaign to show that the legal system was racist.

Organised labour regarded the NAACP as a bourgeois organisation with narrow aims. It was attacked by A. Philip Randolph, socialist leader of the BSCP, the most significant Black labour union in North America. Another left-wing opponent was the socialist intellectual Hubert Harrison, a West Indian immigrant based in Harlem.<sup>147</sup> The NAACP feared the labour movement because of its socialist ideas but a more profound problem was the racism of segregated, skilled, white trade unions, affiliated to the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

I have re-interpreted the founding of the NAACP and traced its origins to a different root from that described by most scholars. I have analysed the importance of abolitionism to

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<sup>143</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois. A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century*. (New York, 1968), p.289.

<sup>144</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, ‘Marxism and the Negro Problem’. *The Crisis*, Vol. 40, No.5, May 1933, pp.103-4, p.103.

<sup>145</sup> Ray Stannard Baker, ‘Atlanta: A Race Riot and After’. *The American Magazine*. April 1907, pp.1-29 p.14.

<sup>146</sup> Ovington, *Black and White sat Down*, p.58.

<sup>147</sup> Gill, *Harlem*, p.208.

the founding process, as argued by the historian James M. McPherson.<sup>148</sup> There are extensive connections between abolitionism and founders of the NAACP. They had numerous family links and shared a system of beliefs. An outstanding example was Oswald Garrison Villard but there are many others. Moorfield Storey was a believer in equality from the 1860s, like his hero Senator Charles Sumner, who led the struggle for African American equality. Storey was inspired by abolitionism which he transformed into a movement for anti-imperialism. He set out his philosophy as President of the Anti-Imperialist League in a speech on November 30, 1909. 'We stand for the right of every people to rule itself, and to have no Government imposed upon it without its consent'. His position on the founding of the NAACP was almost identical to the philosophy of the Anti-Imperialist League.<sup>149</sup> This had been created on November 18, 1898 in Milk Street, Boston.<sup>150</sup> Moorfield Storey brought together a coherent position on imperialism and racism, which was a critique of the entire U.S. domestic and foreign policy.

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<sup>148</sup> McPherson, *The Abolitionist Legacy*. p.1-2.

<sup>149</sup> Moorfield Storey, *A Year of Progress*; Address given as President of the League, November 30, 1909.

<sup>150</sup> Kinzer, *The True Flag*, p.89



## **CHAPTER TWO: The Role of Social Class.**

This chapter develops my thesis that the NAACP was divided by issues around social class. The concept of class is a challenging one, whose definition is determined traditionally by the relationship to the means of production.

The African American middle-classes were growing in confidence and dominated the NAACP branches. Their interests diverged from the new urban working-class created in the northern cities. The Association had limited appeal to the mass of African Americans who were usually focused on ‘bread-and-butter’ issues. The Association divided over participation in the Great War.<sup>1</sup> Debates over war are barely mentioned by Gilbert Jonas. The result was continual controversy within the NAACP, who also clashed with Marcus Garvey’s Union of Negro Improvement Associations (UNIA) and the Communist Party (CPUSA). These were partly issues of social class. Moorfield Storey continued to focus his efforts on the litigation programme for the NAACP, refusing to be distracted by social and economic issues.

Members of the African American middle-class were growing in confidence during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Their numbers increased in the northern cities, where they could gain an education for their children. Opportunity was much more limited in the South, from where millions of African Americans had migrated. A lucky few were able to enter postgraduate education and become lawyers, teachers or doctors. Their progress was bolstered by the African American males who took on board mainstream patriarchal attitudes, which they believed would bring them material progress through the practice of self-help and respectability. The scholar Martin Summers argues that ‘Black men in the United States imagined and performed a gendered subjectivity in the first three decades of the twentieth

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<sup>1</sup> Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*, p.250.

century'. Ideas of manhood were articulated by middle-class men in several ways, including the Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro.<sup>2</sup> Their confidence enabled them to dominate the NAACP and ensure its continued conservatism. Proof of the NAACP's conservatism came from their patriotic response to the Great War.

African American women found a role in the campaigns through work with the Black churches and the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. The conservatism of these clubs was demonstrated by a resolution of their national conference, 'Believing that the mother is the rock upon which the home is built...we pledge...to instruct mothers in all that pertains to home building and child-life'.<sup>3</sup> They shared with the NAACP values of self-respect and racial uplift. This encouraged their participation in campaigns against lynching and discrimination.

Issues of race and social class intersected when women became active in churches like the African Methodist Episcopal Zion.<sup>4</sup> Historian Evelyn B. Higginbotham cites the social role of the Black Baptist Church in developing self-respect by organising training, education and running public meetings. Using sermons, tracts and its own newspapers, the churches provided physical and psychological defence against racism. The Black churches provided a route into the public sphere for activists like Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) the NAACP founder, educator and philanthropist. Black Baptist women supported the NAACP because they knew from experience that segregation meant degradation for them. The National Baptist Woman's Convention passed a resolution in 1918 protesting at the condition of the 'Jim Crow' railway carriages, 'The very purpose of the Jim Crow car is to make such striking differences...as will suggest the inferiority of one race to the other and

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents: The Black middle class and the Transformation of Masculinity 1900-1930*. (Chapel Hill, NC., 2004). p.4.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Aptheker, ed., *Documentary History of the Negro People*, Vol.1. (New York, 1951), p.890.

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn B. Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontents; the Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church 1880-1920*. (Cambridge, MA., 1993), p.1.

humiliate the race thus discriminated against'.<sup>5</sup> Women were degraded by the filthy condition of the train carriages reserved for them. Travel by railroad was essential for the better-off but on long journeys they were provided with squalid restrooms in 'Jim Crow' cars that were 'grimy' and 'caked with dirt'. Meals were served through 'a dirty and ill-attended hole in the wall'.<sup>6</sup> The need for white society to show respect was a constant theme of African American discourse. This underpinned the desire of aspiring middle classes to secure a home in a 'good area'.

The NAACP was built on an emerging African American middle-class who were encouraged by the idea of the 'New Negro'.<sup>7</sup> Booker T. Washington was the first to use this phrase, which was later developed by intellectuals like Alain Leroy Locke.<sup>8</sup> William Pickens was a leading supporter of this trend.<sup>9</sup> The NAACP supported this concept and leading members encouraged it at their mass meetings and membership drives.<sup>10</sup> An early example was entitled the 'Moorfield Storey Drive'. Migration from the rural south increased the membership of the NAACP.<sup>11</sup> Some in northern cities demanded something better than life in an overcrowded ghetto.<sup>12</sup> They demanded the right to freely choose where they would live.<sup>13</sup> The NAACP supported their aspirations in the Supreme Court case *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917).<sup>14</sup> This was led by Moorfield Storey, who worked for the Association pro bono.

The NAACP remained consistent in its attitude to civil rights and concentrated on a small number of issues, especially due process. They had limited funds and used them

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<sup>5</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent*, p.223.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Hale, *Making Whiteness*, p.33.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Stony the Road: Reconstruction, White Supremacy and the Rise of Jim Crow*. (New York, 2019), p.186.

<sup>8</sup> Leonard Harris. ed. *The Philosophy of Alain Leroy Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond*, (Philadelphia, Penn., 2010).

<sup>9</sup> William Pickens, *Bursting Bonds: Autobiography of a New Negro*. (Bloomington, IN., 1991), p.25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.75.

<sup>11</sup> Booker T. Washington, *The New Negro for a New Century*. (Boston, 1900), p.2.

<sup>12</sup> Gates, Jr., *Stony the Road*. p.186.

<sup>13</sup> Gunja Sengupta, 'Elites, Subalterns, and American Identities: A Case Study of African American Benevolence', *American Historical Review*, Vol.109, No.4 (2004), pp.1104-1139, p.1106.

<sup>14</sup> Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*. p. 35.

carefully on a few criminal cases. Early examples were the cases of Pinkney Franklin and Steve Greene. They were supported by the NAACP because they involved the death penalty and possible injustice. During the first twenty years of its existence such cases were pursued by the Association's National Legal Committee, a panel of volunteer lawyers, all of whom were white. The Association fought cases of widespread injustice, for example the failure to provide due process for defendants and the use of all-white juries. These cases were under the supervision of Moorfield Storey.

The most important case in Storey's career was *Dempsey v. Moore* (1923) which involved a massacre of African Americans in rural Phillips County, Arkansas. Sharecroppers were attempting to organise a branch of the Progressive Farmers and Household Union with the aim of reducing exploitation by white farmers; whites reacted violently.<sup>15</sup> This was in the aftermath of the Great War, a period known as the 'Red Summer'. The local authorities were determined to crush this movement and brought criminal charges against over sixty people. Twelve Black farmers were sentenced to death and it required the determined efforts of Storey and the NAACP to save them. Granting their appeal, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Oliver Wendell Holmes set the twelve men free, ruling their convictions and death sentences 'absolutely void'. He pointed out, 'The appellants were hurried to a conviction under the pressure of a mob, without any regard for their rights and without affording them due process of law'.<sup>16</sup> Moorfield Storey had achieved a major victory for the Association.

The NAACP remained committed to the civil rights of the working-classes. They had proved their determination by pursuing the *Dempsey* case for four years, up to the Supreme Court. Expenditure on the case for January to April 1920 alone was \$4,474, while attorney's fees for Scipio Africanus Jones came to \$12,000.<sup>17</sup> The phrase 'legal lynching' for such cases

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<sup>15</sup> Hixson, *Moorfield Storey*, p.181.

<sup>16</sup> US Supreme Court, [Moore v. Dempsey :: 261 U.S. 86 \(1923\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#).

<sup>17</sup> NAACP: Annual Report of the Secretary, 1920. <https://www.hathi.trust.org>

had been coined by William E. Walling, because the proceedings had the outward form or mere show of a fair trial. In such a case, the lynching was carried out by the state. Whites claimed there had been a ‘deliberately planned insurrection of the African Americans against the whites, directed by the Progressive Union’. They argued that the Union had been established for the purpose of ‘banding negroes’ to carry out the ‘killing of white people’.<sup>18</sup> The NAACP protected the Black farmers against loss of their civil rights but did not attempt to change their economic status as sharecroppers. This would have required radical social reform to eliminate the exploitative system of peonage. This system created a group of labourers who were bound in a state of debt slavery.

The social class of the NAACP troubled its members, who feared it was failing to connect with the Black majority. In 1916 the white executive secretary, May Childs Nerney gave a report to the Annual Meeting of the NAACP. Only thirty members were present.<sup>19</sup> In her report she claimed many successes, but the exception was the NAACP’s work among the ‘masses’ of working-class African Americans. She observed that in many places where there was ‘a large Southern colored population, the feeling toward the NAACP was indifference and prejudice, or open hostility’. As a result, white people felt free to argue that the ‘colored people prefer segregation’.<sup>20</sup> The Secretary ended her report with a devastating judgement. ‘The masses of colored people know nothing of the Association. *The Crisis* does not reach them; often they do not read. Civil Rights, Democracy and the New Abolition to them are phrases only. They do not speak our language’.<sup>21</sup> White domination of the organisation brought criticism from Marcus Garvey. Scholar Henry Louis Gates comments on what he calls ‘the politics of respectability’. He refers to African Americans following white middle-

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<sup>18</sup> NAACP: [Moore v. Dempsey :: 261 U.S. 86 \(1923\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#).

<sup>19</sup> NAACP: LoC Minutes of Annual Meeting, January 3, 1916. Secretary’s Report. Box1, C1, p.34.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.34.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.35.

class standards in speech and dress.<sup>22</sup> This was a sign of the divergence between African Americans of different classes. The African American middle-class and working-class were often in conflict with each other. The scholar John Dollard carried out a survey in the 1930s of their relationship.

The impression one gets from Southerntown is that the Negro middle-class people are mostly teachers and ministers of the gospel...there are two physicians, no lawyers, a few businessmen, including only two people who control a considerable acreage of land. The attempt of the middle-class to mark itself off from the pilloried lower-class negroes seems constant.<sup>23</sup>

Dollard commented that 'education is of course a passion with the middle-class Negroes as has been frequently noted'.<sup>24</sup> Patriotism divided the NAACP leadership in 1916. Two new artillery and infantry regiments were planned by the US Army and NAACP leaders were anxious to demonstrate their loyalty by participation in preparation for war. Oswald Villard offered African American volunteers for these regiments, who would be 'magnificent military material'.<sup>25</sup> The NAACP's leadership was instead weakened by the accusation that it was betraying its peaceful ideals and Villard backed the proposal before Congress, despite his life-long pacifism. He was anxious to secure full rights for all African Americans, including the equal right to serve one's country.<sup>26</sup>

Academic Kelly Miller argued at first that the war was an aggressive enterprise caused by imperialism and 'essentially...a white man's war' in which African Americans should not participate. In 1915 DuBois had expressed the same point of view concerning the outbreak of war. He blamed the Great War on the conflict between the European powers over empire in Africa.<sup>27</sup> Miller was persuaded to support the U.S. Government position by the rhetoric of President Woodrow Wilson, whose program was based on the liberal principle of

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<sup>22</sup> Gates, Jr., *Stony the Road*, p.194.

<sup>23</sup> John Dollard, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*. (New York, 1937). p.85.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.87.

<sup>25</sup> Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*, p.248.

<sup>26</sup> Wreszin, *Oswald Garrison Villard*, p.71.

<sup>27</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, 'The African Roots of War', *The Atlantic Monthly*, May 1915.

self-determination. Miller was an optimist who claimed, ‘The Negro will emerge from the war...redoubled in...privilege and opportunity...He will stand shoulder to shoulder with white fellow citizens to fight for their freedom’.<sup>28</sup> Miller accepted the promises of President Wilson, who called on Americans to bring democracy to the world.<sup>29</sup> NAACP leaders were challenged by the war. Did they support the conservative view that loyalty was paramount, or should they withhold support until their rights were secured?

Storey’s liberal views were derived from a tradition of free trade and international peace. He supported international anti-war organisations in the years before 1914. ‘There is no greater criminal than a man...who is willing to expose thousands of his fellow creatures to death and subject their wives and children to bereavement and sorrow and all the suffering that follows war’.<sup>30</sup> He was not a pacifist however, and he supported the war against Germany because of its aggressive, war-like government. Leaders of the NAACP had even stronger anti-war views, including some who were outright pacifists such as Oswald Garrison Villard and Mary White Ovington. Many others saw themselves as patriotic Americans and when a call came for Black volunteers to train as officers, Walter White, for one, was ready. In his memoirs he wrote, ‘When an eloquent appeal for volunteers was made, I found myself springing to my feet as one of the first to volunteer’.<sup>31</sup> Many African Americans believed that demonstrating loyalty would earn equal treatment, as service in the armed forces was a traditional route to equality. The NAACP took pride in the quality of their volunteers for the Army. They included two college presidents, twenty-three college professors, twenty physicians, ten clergy, three newspaper editors, five dentists and twenty Government clerks

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted in Juanita Karpf, ‘Get the Pageant Habit: E. Azalia Hackley’s Festivals and Pageants during the First World War Years, 1914–1918’, *Popular Music and Society*, 34,5 (December 2011), pp.517–556, p.521.

<sup>29</sup> Schomburg Center: Kelly Miller’s *History of the World War for Human Rights*. (New York, 1920), p.8.

<sup>30</sup> Moorfield Storey, ‘Sumner’s Argument Against War Corroborated by Subsequent Events’. *The Advocate of Peace*. (Boston, May 18, 1903), p.110.

<sup>31</sup> White, *A Man called White*, p.36.

or officials.<sup>32</sup> Joel Spingarn split the leadership by campaigning for a segregated officer training scheme and volunteering himself.

Officer training required more compromises, as it took place in a segregated camp at Des Moines, Iowa causing more arguments among the National Board of Directors. DuBois supported it in *The Crisis*, 'We have won, the camp is granted; we shall have one thousand Black officers in the U.S. Army! Write us for information'.<sup>33</sup> William Pickens supported the war on pragmatic grounds. Segregation was a loathsome institution but segregated officer training was a lesser evil, as the alternative was to have hundreds of thousands of Black soldiers in the Army with 'no Black officers' to lead them.<sup>34</sup> Joel Spingarn took the patriotic line and joined up as an officer in the Army Military Intelligence branch.<sup>35</sup> Moorfield Storey came round to support the war on the grounds of national self-defence, despite its horrors. When the Great War came to an end he looked for a solution which would prevent future wars and became an advocate of collective security, supporting the League of Nations which was set up in 1920.

The Army proved a difficult ally for the NAACP as it insisted on rigid segregation and routinely treated African Americans as inferior. On arriving in Europe they were allocated to the 'Services of Supply' or Labor Corps without completing their military training. This was a humiliation for educated patriots, who were dismissed by racist theory as lacking courage and intelligence. These theories falsely claimed 'scientific' backing from new intelligence tests devised by Alfred Binet and developed by Lewis Terman, an American psychologist. Thousands were considered to be of such low value that the Army transferred them en masse to the French Army, which was desperate to replace its huge losses.<sup>36</sup> The

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<sup>32</sup> Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*, p.252.

<sup>33</sup> Editorial, *The Crisis*, Vol.14, No.2 June 1917, p.2.

<sup>34</sup> Pickens, *Bursting Bonds*, p.74.

<sup>35</sup> Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois*, p.362.

<sup>36</sup> Chad L. Williams, 'Vanguard of the New Negro: African American Veterans and Post-WW1 racial militancy'. *The Journal of African American History*. Vol.92, No.3. (Summer, 2007), pp.347-370, p.347.



NAACP Washington D.C. Branch Chairman, Archibald Grimke, attacked the Association for its attitude. He complained about the ‘false promises and the hypocritical professions’ being used to encourage recruitment. African American loyalty was above suspicion, he argued, while the ‘extraordinary spirit’ shown in the present war’ was born of their faith in the United States.<sup>37</sup>

Executive Secretary James Weldon Johnson tried to strike a balance between the warring factions in the leadership, ‘Many of the rights and privileges of citizenship are still denied the African American, but the plain course before him is to continue to perform all of the duties of citizenship while he presses his demands for all of their rights and privileges’.<sup>38</sup> William Pickens was also patriotic but he demanded that the Government provide something in return, ‘The Negro will not fail to love the flag and be its staunchest defender, if it means a reasonable measure of protection for life, liberty, property, civil and political rights’.<sup>39</sup> A pair of anti-war socialists Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph asked why they should fight for a country that would not protect them from being murdered by lynch mobs.<sup>40</sup>

The NAACP arguments among the leadership became increasingly volatile under the strain of war. W.E.B. DuBois argued in *The Crisis* of July 1918, that civil rights and patriotic duty pointed in the same direction, since liberal democracy would not survive a German victory, ‘That which German power represents today spells death to the aspirations of Negroes...Let us, while this war lasts... close ranks, shoulder to shoulder with our own white fellow citizens’.<sup>41</sup> This opinion brought him criticism from African Americans who believed the American government was exploiting them and that they had been given nothing in

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<sup>37</sup> Archibald Grimke: ed. Manning Marable. Text of speech in *Freedom on My Mind*. Documents of the African American Experience. (New York, 2012), p.543.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in Karpf, ‘Get the Pageant Habit’, p.522.

<sup>39</sup> William Pickens, *The New Negro; His Political, Civil, and Mental Status*. (New York, 1916), p.234.

<sup>40</sup> David F. Krugler, *1919, The Year of Racial Violence: How African Americans fought back*. (Cambridge, 2015), p.26.

<sup>41</sup> Editorial, *The Crisis* Vol.16, No.3 July 1918. p.2.

return. In the September 1918 issue he insisted that ‘the first duty of an American is to win the war and all else is subsidiary’. All their grievances must wait, ‘First your Country, then your rights’.<sup>42</sup> DuBois was in despair by 1919 and he attacked the government claiming that the United States was being led by a ‘lying oligarchy’ who only wanted African Americans as ‘servants, dogs and monkeys’. He explained, ‘This country of ours, despite all its better souls have done and dreamed, is yet a shameful land...It cheats us out of our labor...We return. We return from fighting. We return fighting. Make way for Democracy!’<sup>43</sup> DuBois’ reversal of his 1918 view only added to the NAACP’s confusion. Racial violence made the Association’s situation even more difficult.

Federal authorities had contributed to violence by their reckless or ignorant treatment of Black units sent from northern states for training in segregated Texas, Georgia or South Carolina. The Houston Riot of 1917 resulted from posting Black soldiers of Third Battalion, 24th U.S. Army Infantry Regiment to Houston, Texas.<sup>44</sup> Local whites would not accept the presence of African Americans in uniform, regarding them as ‘insolent’ and ‘getting above themselves’.<sup>45</sup> Violence broke out one night between the soldiers and townspeople resulting in seventeen deaths, including two white policemen. The soldiers were accused of mutiny and tried by court martial. Thirteen soldiers were hanged at dawn on the day after the guilty verdict was handed down. No appeal was allowed. Senior officer General Rickman insisted on the hangings, which were against U.S. Army policy. His actions were only considered acceptable under Army law when in the presence of the enemy. At the time the German Army was five thousand miles away in France. Walter White persuaded President Wilson to commute a further ten death sentences, but Wilson subsequently ordered six additional men

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<sup>42</sup> Editorial, *The Crisis* Vol.16, No.4 September 1918. p.2.

<sup>43</sup> Opinion, *The Crisis* Vol.18, No.1 May 1919. pp.7-15, p.14.

<sup>44</sup> *The Houston Daily Post*, August 24, 1917. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/94927885>

<sup>45</sup> Martha Gruening ‘Report of an Investigation’. *The Crisis*, Vol.15, No.1. November 1917, pp.14-19, p.14.

to hang.<sup>46</sup> DuBois' friend Archibald Grimke wrote a poem in protest entitled, *Her Thirteen Black Soldiers*. DuBois refused to print it in *The Crisis*, under Army orders; he was fast becoming disillusioned with government policy.

Racial violence brought an unprecedented crisis in 1919 which eyewitness James Weldon Johnson called 'The Red Summer'. Two dozen race riots broke out simultaneously in the capital, as well as Chicago, Georgia, Alabama and Longview, Texas.<sup>47</sup> Black soldiers in uniform were attacked by whites infuriated by their official status.<sup>48</sup> On Friday 13 December, 1918, U.S. Army Sergeant Edgar Caldwell killed a man in a fight over a segregated bus seat in Anniston, Alabama. Many African Americans were beginning to resist racial slurs and lack of respect or humiliating treatment. The NAACP defended him, bringing witnesses to Caldwell's excellent war record as a volunteer and veteran of the Philippine Wars. After a court martial Caldwell was hanged in 1920, despite the NAACP's efforts. DuBois wrote his version of Sergeant Caldwell's last words saying, 'I am sacrificed today...one of the many victims who are paying the price of America's mockery of democracy'.<sup>49</sup>

A member of the public, Charles Williams, wrote to President Wilson to say that he was proud of the sacrifices that had won the war against Germany but he added that 'Colored people feel that protection is denied them under the Stars and Stripes'.<sup>50</sup> Thousands of victims of racial violence wrote to President Wilson pleading for federal intervention against the attacks, but received a standard reply stating that the federal Government was unable to help them, 'It is not possible for this department to intervene'.<sup>51</sup> In the first four months of 1919,

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<sup>46</sup> Colonel Frederick B. Wiener, 'The seamy side of the World War One court-martial controversy'. *Military Law Review*, Vol.123 (Winter 1989), pp.1-223, p.115.

<sup>47</sup> Manning Marable, *W.E.B. DuBois; Black Radical Democrat*. (Boulder CO., London, 2005), p.103.

<sup>48</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, p.331.

<sup>49</sup> Vincent P. Mikkelsen, 'Fighting for Sergeant Caldwell: The NAACP campaign against 'legal lynching' after World War One'. *The Journal of African American History*, Vol.94, No.4, (2009), pp.464-486, p.481.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Williams: *Letter of November 21, 1918*. US National Archives, <https://catalog.archives.gov/search?q=charles%20williams>. (Retrieved May 20, 2017).

<sup>51</sup> PBS American Experience: *The Great War* Part 3. (Viewed August 9, 2018).

nine lynchings were confirmed across five states, cases where the victims had been taken from police custody by mobs.<sup>52</sup> Twenty-five cities were devastated and hundreds killed. The fate of returning African American soldiers made a powerful argument for equality. Leroy Johnston had returned from service with the U.S. Army in France as part of the Third Battalion, 369th Infantry. The regiment recruited two thousand men, who had suffered thirteen hundred casualties in only three months. Johnston was seriously wounded and spent many months recovering in hospital. He was honourably discharged on July 5, 1919. On his return from a hunting trip with his three brothers he was seized at a railroad station by armed white men. He had been unwittingly caught up in the deadly events around Helena in Phillips County, Arkansas. All four brothers were shortly afterwards shot to death.<sup>53</sup>

The war and its aftermath strengthened the argument against the white leadership. Marcus Garvey subjected the NAACP to bitter attacks during the 1920s and condemned W.E.B. DuBois as ‘a hater of dark people’.<sup>54</sup> A weakened leadership confirmed James Weldon Johnson as the first African American Executive Secretary, assisted by Walter White. At this point, the President, Chairman, directors and Head of the Legal Committee were all white. The executive officers were African Americans. Robert W. Bagnall controlled the branches. Daisy Lampkin and William Pickens were responsible for field work. Herbert Seligman was the only white employee.

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<sup>52</sup> Kellogg, *A History of the NAACP*, p.233.

<sup>53</sup> PBS American Experience.

<sup>54</sup> Bob Blaisdell, ed. *Selected Writings and Speeches of Marcus Garvey*, (New York, 2004). p.111.

**TABLE ONE<sup>55</sup>**

Changes in NAACP Membership 1917-1929.

| Date                             | Number of members | Number of branches |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|
| December 31, 1917. <sup>56</sup> | 9,282             | 80                 |
| December 31, 1918. <sup>57</sup> | 43,994            | 165                |
| December 31, 1919. <sup>58</sup> | 91,203            | 310                |
| December 31, 1929. <sup>59</sup> | 21,402            | 239                |

The NAACP membership had soared during the wartime years, due to the efforts of May Childs Nerney and James Weldon Johnson, who were executive secretaries between the years 1912 and 1918. Expansion was mainly in the South, a region which soon provided a majority of members, who were overwhelmingly African American. The total membership approached a peak in 1919 at an estimated one hundred thousand.<sup>60</sup> The trend was reversed when members lost hope of an end to racial violence.

The year 1919 proved to be a turning-point for the Association. Moorfield Storey continued to control the legal strategy of the NAACP, winning several victories in the Supreme Court. Middle-class African Americans supported his emphasis on civil rights and opposition to segregation. He was a brilliant advocate who spoke frequently to many white audiences. Storey argued in Atlanta to one group, ‘I have said that the problem is a white man’s problem. The root of all our difficulties is planted in the breast of the white man, in the belief that he is superior, that he has the right to trample upon his weaker neighbors...in his

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<sup>55</sup> NAACP: Annual Reports 1918,1919, 1920, 1930. [Internet Archive Search: NAACP Annual Reports www.hathitrust.org](http://www.hathitrust.org) (Retrieved December 12, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> NAACP: *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> NAACP: *Ibid.*

<sup>58</sup> NAACP: LoC Board of Directors’ minutes, meeting of June 9, 1919. Part I, Reel 1. Box1, A 26.

<sup>59</sup> NAACP: Annual Reports 1918, 1919, 1920, 1930.

<sup>60</sup> Membership fell from almost one hundred thousand to less than thirty thousand by 1929.

determination that his former servant shall be “kept in his place.”<sup>61</sup> The Association did not change its character. The NAACP could not exist without the core values of equality and the rule of law expressed by Moorfield Storey.

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<sup>61</sup> Moorfield Storey, *The Legal Aspects of the Negro Question*. Address to an audience in Atlanta, Georgia. May 30-June 2, 1920. p.1, p. 8. [Internet Archive https://archive.org/details/legalaspectsofne00stor](https://archive.org/details/legalaspectsofne00stor) (Retrieved 25 June, 2020).

## CHAPTER THREE: A New Crowd 1920-35<sup>1</sup>

The Constitution of the United States knows only American citizens and recognizes no difference of race or color. Every right that any American citizen has, belongs to all.

Moorfield Storey.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter concerns the transfer of power in the 1920s from the white leadership to African Americans who were known as the 'New Crowd'. The 1930s saw attempts to change the organisation in a radical, socialist direction, but these all failed. A handful of the New England white establishment had led the NAACP since the founding in 1910. Subsequently, a new elite of African Americans took control of the organisation. The 'New Crowd' was led by James Weldon Johnson and came from working or middle-class backgrounds. They were high achievers who had overcome their disadvantages, including poverty and racial discrimination. The white founders were individually impressive, yet by the early 1920s they had been replaced by this new generation of young African Americans. This group was sustained by a rapidly growing middle-class in the cities of the North.

The position of the white leadership was repeatedly weakened by internal divisions, including clashes of personality. In 1914 Chairman and Treasurer Oswald Garrison Villard attempted to assert his authority over W.E.B. DuBois, editor of *The Crisis*. DuBois refused to accept the position of subordinate to Villard who in frustration resigned his post. DuBois observed Villard's attitude, commenting 'To a white philanthropist like Villard, an African American was quite naturally expected to be humble and thankful, certainly not assertive or aggressive'. Villard was 'resentful' of this treatment.<sup>3</sup> Mary White Ovington noted the

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<sup>1</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p.340.

<sup>2</sup> Moorfield Storey, *Legal aspects of the Negro question*. An address to law students in Georgia, 1920. [Internet Archive https://archive.org/details/legalaspectsofne00stor](https://archive.org/details/legalaspectsofne00stor) p.1, p. 8. (Retrieved 25 June, 2020).

<sup>3</sup> DuBois, *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois*, p.256.

changes. In a routine board meeting during 1917 she observed that all those attending were white, but by 1920 all the senior executive officers were African Americans: James W. Johnson was Secretary, Walter White Deputy Secretary, Daisy Lampkin Field Secretary and Robert W. Bagnall Director of Branches.<sup>4</sup> African Americans for the first time joined the all-white National Board of Directors, the first being Robert Reed Church, a rich, mixed-race landowner and businessman from Tennessee. These changes occurred over a short period during the 1920s.

The NAACP had many critics on the political left because it appeared to support an aspiring middle-class but was indifferent to the impoverishment of the working class. The NAACP leadership refused to change when presented with radical alternatives by Abram Harris, W.E.B. DuBois and Joel Spingarn; their reform programmes were failures. White members had shrunk to become a tiny proportion of the total membership, consisting of a few wealthy donors and a handful of white lawyers; Louis Marshall, Moorfield Storey and Clarence Darrow, each of whom was from a generation born in the 1840s or 1850s.<sup>5</sup> The 1920s witnessed the seeping away of power and influence from the original white founders. This was partly a natural process of an older generation being replaced by a younger one. It was also due to the emergence of able African Americans from modest backgrounds.

The 'New Crowd' were like most of the founders socially conservative and dedicated to the law. Their attitudes gave them a profound distrust of the labour movement. The founders of the NAACP accepted the African American middle-class whose attitudes were similar to their own, including opposition to radical social or economic change. The NAACP programme of 1910 did not contain any measures that would alter the distribution of wealth and power between the classes. The Association's strategy supported protection of the rights of individual citizens and property rights. These were also protected by the Fourth

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<sup>4</sup> Ovington, *The Walls came Tumbling Down*, p.110.

<sup>5</sup> McNeil, *Groundwork*, p.132.



Amendment to the Constitution. They were suspicious of collectivist ideas and class conflict was present in the NAACP from the founding.

Walter White was among the first of the 'New Crowd' to join the NAACP, becoming part of a cohort of African Americans who were making progress in society, despite prejudice and discrimination. Ironically, segregation helped many African Americans by providing safe spaces in which they could thrive, such as the Black Churches, the new universities created after the Civil War and some occupations, like federal mailman and sleeping-car porters. Some opportunities opened up for them in the legal profession. Historian Kevin K. Gaines asserts that African Americans were making economic progress through success in education, allowing a large, stable middle-class to be created. This group benefited from general improvements in the lives of African Americans.<sup>6</sup> African American mortality rate dropped from twenty-five per thousand to sixteen per thousand between 1900 and 1930. Adult illiteracy fell from forty-five per cent to sixteen per cent during the same period.<sup>7</sup> New opportunities appeared in the fields of music and entertainment, where discrimination and segregation were not as powerful. Segregation provided openings for Black performers such as Duke Ellington in Harlem and Louis Armstrong in New Orleans. Executive Secretary James Weldon Johnson had a successful career as a talented writer and musician.<sup>8</sup>

The 'New Crowd' in the NAACP also included Charles Hamilton Houston, Raymond Pace Alexander, James Cobb and Thurgood Marshall. They were an elite because of their talents and a common purpose; they believed the law must have a social purpose and serve the interests of African Americans. Houston argued that a lawyer should be 'a mouthpiece of the weak and a sentinel...against wrong...using law as an instrument for the

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<sup>6</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, p.12.

<sup>7</sup> Census quoted in Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks. The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue*. (Oxford, 2009), p.24.

<sup>8</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*. (New York, 1912), p.22.

minority...to achieve its place in the community and the nation'.<sup>9</sup> He believed in the social duty of the legal profession.<sup>10</sup> Houston was well known for his selection of able students and the pursuit of academic excellence. His beliefs were in turn inspired by the works of the eminent lawyer Louis Brandeis' work on social studies.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most committed members was Raymond Pace Alexander (1897-1974), a civil rights attorney in Philadelphia. He was nineteen when he spoke to an audience of two thousand people expressing his admiration for white achievements. Alexander came from the working-class Seventh Ward of Philadelphia, which had been described by DuBois in his book *The Philadelphia Negro*.<sup>12</sup> He was a representative figure and one of the 'New Crowd' in the NAACP. His parents were migrants from the South and he worked his way through Harvard Law School, emerging from the working-class. While living in New York he was a Red Cap porter and he recalled one summer making a thousand dollars in tips to take back to Harvard.<sup>13</sup> By the 1920s and 1930s he was practicing law at the head of his own partnership, at a time when Philadelphia was rigidly segregated. The Great Migration had brought thousands of African Americans to the city.<sup>14</sup>

Alexander was above all an extremely able lawyer who devised a civil rights strategy using a combination of litigation and mass action to defeat segregation. In Philadelphia segregation was widespread affecting hospitals, hotels, parks and housing. Action to defeat it meant boycotts, protest marches and 'jail-ins'. He advocated using these methods to campaign for the desegregation of a school at Berwyn, a suburb of Philadelphia.<sup>15</sup> Alexander

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in McNeil, *Groundwork*, p.217.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Houston, 'On the Need for Negro lawyers'. *Journal of Negro Education*. Vol.4, No.1(Jan.1935), pp.49-52, p.50.

<sup>11</sup> Livy S. Richard, Up from Aristocracy, *The Independent*, July 27, 1914. Vol.79, No.34 pp.130-132, p.131.

<sup>12</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro. A Social Study*. (Philadelphia, Penn.,1899).

<sup>13</sup> David A. Canton, *Raymond Pace Alexander: A New Negro lawyer fights for Civil Rights in Philadelphia*. (Jackson, Miss., 2010), p. 17.

<sup>14</sup> Canton, *Raymond Pace Alexander*, p. ix.

<sup>15</sup> David A. Canton, 'A dress rehearsal for the modern civil rights movement in Philadelphia. Raymond Pace Alexander and the Berwyn, Pennsylvania, school desegregation case, 1932-35'. *Pennsylvania History. A Journal of Mid Atlantic Studies*. Vol.75, No.2. (Spring 2008), pp. 260-284 p. 266.

urged African Americans, especially lawyers, to set high standards in their work. He argued that people were expecting ‘this ignorant race’ to become good citizens while they remained surrounded by whites who were ‘the strongest race of men on earth’ with ‘a genius for gigantic projects’.<sup>16</sup> He expressed similar views a decade later, when he called on African Americans to ‘ape the white man’.<sup>17</sup> Alexander argued that whites set the standard for success in U.S. society and he challenged Black professionals to meet or exceed it by greater commitment. Young lawyers like Alexander earned white respect by their professionalism. He challenged African Americans to win cases by working harder and being better lawyers. The anthropologist Franz Boas observed the challenges they faced, ‘the intellectual and moral qualities required to ensure success to the African American are infinitely greater’.<sup>18</sup> In short, they had to work twice as hard as whites to achieve the same result. Raymond Pace Alexander was an example of the commitment with which the ‘new crowd’ of NAACP leaders responded to discrimination.

African Americans were inspired to achieve success by the ideals of ‘racial uplift’. Talented African Americans were keen to achieve social mobility and the most effective way of doing this was to enter the professions. They aimed to win acceptance and respect from white society as full, equal citizens who were integrated into American society. Although some were as well-educated as the whites, they did not have their social advantages. Walter White, the NAACP’s controlling personality during the 1930s and 1940s, had a ‘respectable’ background as the graduate son of an aspiring African American. His career was built on a patriarchal, conservative home life where attendance at the First Congregational Church of

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in David Canton ‘Colored Youth talks to 2,000 people’ *The Philadelphia Tribune*, February 24, 1917. p.1.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth W. Mack, *Representing the Race: The Creation of the Civil Rights Lawyer*, (Cambridge, MA., 2012), p.13.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Mary W. Ovington, *Half A Man: The Status of the Negro in New York*, (New York, 1911), p. viii.

Atlanta encouraged a stable childhood.<sup>19</sup> Strict Puritan Sundays were observed with prayers and a Bible reading, led by White senior, followed by Sunday School.<sup>20</sup> After graduating from Atlanta University he took a position as a cashier at Standard Life, a large, Black-owned insurance company. This post placed him firmly in the middle-class. Among African Americans the middle and working classes were set apart from each other. The middle-classes were distinguished by their education and correct use of the English language in their speech. To be a respectable member of the middle-class was also to be deserving of equal rights.<sup>21</sup> Other examples of the socially mobile 'New Crowd' were Archibald Grimke and William Pickens who grew up in poverty among former slaves. Success came from their own determination.<sup>22</sup> They inhabited a liminal space between the races and social classes, even between nations.

James Weldon Johnson was of mixed-race and came from a family in the Bahamas. He was brought up in poverty, but took advantage of an excellent education which was paid for by an anonymous white man. Johnson had sequential careers as teacher, lawyer, poet, writer, diplomat and activist. He was a committed civil rights campaigner in Florida at a time when the Association did not exist in the region. Members of this elite were in constant danger of discrimination or even physical attack but his courage was beyond question. In Jacksonville he was accused of following a white girl and instantly was surrounded by an armed mob of white men shouting, 'Kill the black son of a bitch!' Johnson could see his own death forecast in the eyes of 'a frenzied brute' of a white man but he survived by luck and his refusal to show fear.<sup>23</sup> On becoming the first permanent Black Executive Secretary in 1920, he defied the informal rule that only whites could represent the NAACP to outsiders.

Archibald Grimke was another example of social mobility in the NAACP. He also

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<sup>19</sup> Thomas Dyja, *Walter White: The Dilemma of Black Identity in America*. (Chicago, 2008), p.12.

<sup>20</sup> White, *A Man called White*, p.16.

<sup>21</sup> Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African Americans in Detroit*, (Chapel Hill, NC., 2001), p.140.

<sup>22</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p.341.

<sup>23</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *Along this Way: An Autobiography*. (London, 1933), p.78.

rose from poverty in South Carolina where he was brought up by his mother, a former slave. His father was the plantation owner, who ignored his existence.<sup>24</sup> He attended a Freedman Bureau School and worked in the fields, but later graduated from Lincoln University and Harvard Law School. Most of his career was spent in Boston, where he supported the Niagara movement.<sup>25</sup> In spite of obstacles he became a diplomat, rising to become the U.S. Consul in the Dominican Republic. He was an effective recruiter for the NAACP branch in Washington D.C., which soon had a membership of thousands.<sup>26</sup>

William Pickens' ideas were a synthesis of Christianity, patriotism and the Declaration of Independence. He promoted conservative values in a Christian framework, combined with a belief in equality under law. As a child he had worked in the cotton fields and attended a segregated public school. His political abilities were proven during his years as the NAACP Director of Branches. In 1916 he published an influential work of essays on civil rights, *The New Negro: His Political, Civil and Mental Status*. He represented the ideals at the heart of the NAACP, that all African Americans must pursue legal equality under the Constitution. They were also obliged, in his view, to practice social conservatism and compassionate Christianity. He called his ideas 'American Christian Democracy'.<sup>27</sup> Pickens argued that segregation was unconstitutional but added it was also 'cruelly unchristian'.<sup>28</sup> Christianity supported the Black man's right to work. 'If Colored folk are brothers in Christ, then why are they not brothers in the machine shop and factory?' he asked.<sup>29</sup> At the same time the intellectual Alain LeRoy Locke was developing a similar 'civic religion'. Locke gave his own account of this idea, 'With this new self-respect and self-dependence, the life of

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<sup>24</sup> Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. *Archibald Grimke. Portrait of a Black Independent*. (Baton Rouge and London, 1993), p.1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup> Mark Perry, *Lift up thy voice. The Grimke family journey from slaveholders to civil rights leaders*. (New York, 2001), p.336.

<sup>27</sup> Pickens, *The New Negro*, p.176.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.180.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.178.

the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase, the buoyancy from within compensating for whatever pressure there may be of conditions from without'.<sup>30</sup> The NAACP leadership was sympathetic to these ideas. Locke's most important book included contributions from W.E.B. DuBois, Walter White and James Weldon Johnson.

A new generation of African Americans took this development a step further. Abram Harris (1899-1964) was an academic with an interest in the labour movement and socialist ideas. He tried to explain in *The Black Worker* (1931) the role played by labour in the economy, describing it as forming 'a reserve army of the unemployed' who were unwittingly helping employers to exploit the white working class.<sup>31</sup> Migrants were in competition for employment and housing, which exacerbated racial conflict. Jobs open to African Americans were traditionally in low-paid domestic service or unskilled labouring, although the evidence collected by Harris presents a more complicated picture. He discovered African Americans were working in a range of occupations: Pullman porters, longshoremen, miners, mailmen, cabinetmakers, railroad staff and engineers. The 1920 U.S Census lists 34,243 Black carpenters and 10,609 brick or stonemasons.<sup>32</sup> This was a diverse group but the numbers are small in absolute terms. In Chicago new opportunities were being created in the automobile and steel industries but racial discrimination remained strong; African Americans were often recruited for the toughest jobs on the lowest wages. They might be stoking the furnaces at U.S Steel South Works or working in the stockyards on the killing floors.<sup>33</sup> Abram Harris, Joel Spingarn and W.E.B. DuBois feared the NAACP had nothing to offer this new working-class.

In the 1920s and early 1930s several attempts were made to reform the NAACP's organisation and change its conservative nature. The hopeful reformers on the Committee for

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<sup>30</sup> Alain LeRoy Locke, 'Enter The New Negro'. *Survey Graphic*, March 1925. p.2.

<sup>31</sup> Abram L. Harris and Sterling D. Spero, *Black Worker: The Negro and the Labor Movement*. (New York, 1931), p.149.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p.83.

<sup>33</sup> Dominic A. Pacyga, *Chicago; A Biography*. (Chicago, 2009), p.137.

the Future Plan and Program for the NAACP had radical ideas in mind. After the Wall Street Crash and the start of the Depression, W.E.B. DuBois and NAACP President Joel Spingarn felt the anger and despair of the working classes who were suffering from mass unemployment. A collapse in world prices for farm products, including cotton, afflicted the rural south. In this crisis, Spingarn admitted the Association lacked direction and its membership was in decline from a 1919 peak of 91,203 in 310 branches. In 1929 it was at its lowest point of 21,402 members in 239 branches.<sup>34</sup> Spingarn resigned as president to campaign for reform. In a letter to Mary White Ovington he expressed his disillusionment,

I have lost interest in the Association as it is now run. I do not approve of the spirit that motivates it, and I do not feel like allowing my name to be used to represent that spirit...I am not interested in a succession of cases. When I joined the Association, we had what was a thrilling program, revolutionary for its time, and one that gave us a little hope of solving the whole problem. Now we have only cases, no program.

He added bitter criticism of Walter White and the Board of Directors 'Every effort...has been ignored or thwarted by the Secretary or the Board'.<sup>35</sup> They refused all proposals for change or progress. Roy Wilkins, the Assistant Secretary, nevertheless defended the organisation, complaining to Spingarn about left-wingers in the NAACP, who he described as the 'Abram Harris clique'. He added, 'Among the liberals and radicals, both Negro and white, the impression prevails that the Association is weak because it has no economic program and no economic philosophy'. Wilkins admitted that he had no interest in Karl Marx and the class struggle. He denied the NAACP existed for the benefit of 'upper class Negroes'.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, the conservative leadership was sceptical on social reforms which could have improved the lives of the working classes, Black or white.

W.E.B. DuBois was disappointed by the lack of response to these problems from the

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<sup>34</sup> James Gregory: NAACP Membership. Boston and New York had around three hundred members by 1914. <https://public.tableau.com/app/search/vizzes/NAACP%20membership> (Retrieved April 5, 2022).

<sup>35</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Joel Spingarn to Mary Ovington, March 28, 1933. Box B11, Folder 5.

<sup>36</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Roy Wilkins to J.E. Spingarn, May 25, 1935. Box B11, Folder 5.

NAACP leaders, so he publicly denounced the organisation to which he had dedicated himself for a quarter of a century. He had begun his campaign for reform with a blunt speech on the topic of ‘What Is Wrong with the NAACP?’ at the Annual Conference of 1932. DuBois demanded to know how it had become an ‘elitist’ organisation. ‘What is wrong with the NAACP? It has laid itself open to the charge that it is a high-brow organization...The masses have no voice’. DuBois insisted on the need to, ‘decentralize the power of the central office...We must have a positive program rather than mere negative attempts to avoid segregation’.<sup>37</sup> In August 1934 DuBois was forced to resign by the Board of Directors because of his constant attacks on the leadership.<sup>38</sup>

The Board of Directors’ approach to DuBois was part of a pattern of behaviour. William Pickens was publicly reprimanded for disloyalty and injuring the organisation. He had written a letter to *The Daily Worker*.<sup>39</sup> In it he praised the Communist Party for its promptness in helping the Scottsboro Boys.<sup>40</sup> The Board wrote to Pickens, complaining that his opinions had embarrassed and harmed the NAACP. They were defensive in the face of dissent and did not handle the criticism well. DuBois was part of a group who believed that new circumstances called for the creation by the Association of ‘a positive program of construction and inspiration’. The impatient DuBois claimed this was ‘a task of which they seemed incapable’.<sup>41</sup>

Abram Harris led The Committee for The Future Plan and Program which ‘tried to diminish the role of the national office, the executive secretary, and the Board of Directors by transforming local branches into permanent centers of economic and political education and

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<sup>37</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, Conference speech May 18, 1932: Report in *The Crisis*, July 1932.

<sup>38</sup> Editorial: ‘Dr DuBois resigns’. *The Crisis*, August 1934, pp.244-245, p.245.

<sup>39</sup> *The Daily Worker* April 20, 1931.

<sup>40</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from the Chairman of the Board of Directors to William Pickens. April 30, 1931. Legal File, Part 1, Box 1, D 68, Folder 12.

<sup>41</sup> Bates, ‘A New Crowd Challenges’, p.352.



agitation to be supervised by a salaried regional secretary'.<sup>42</sup> This approach was utterly at odds with the conservative views of Villard and Moorfield Storey which remained influential in the National Board of Directors. Walter White and the Board of Directors repeatedly discussed this Plan and seemed to give it serious attention.

White set up a small committee to discuss the proposals and report back to the Board. The Board amended The Plan at a meeting on December 10, 1934 but made no decision on further action. On February 11, 1935 the Board decided to delay any action until the document could be edited to make it manageable.<sup>43</sup> The Plan was eventually brought before the National Conference at St. Louis, Missouri in June 1935, after years of delay and argument. Harris' proposal would have reformed the organisation by making it more democratic and responsive to the needs of ordinary members. It advocated social programmes to encourage the members to join bi-racial industrial unions. Workers' and farmers' councils would encourage mass, direct action such as strikes, boycotts and demonstrations.<sup>44</sup>

The National Conference accepted the modified plan but no practical action followed, because its cost was said by Walter White to be prohibitive.<sup>45</sup> White had opposed the programme from its inception because of its left-wing bias, its radicalism and his scepticism concerning cooperation with organised labour. The scholar Kenneth Janken concluded that Walter White had been successful, 'White would not be able to completely ignore the Future Plan and Program... he would still... pursue legal remedies'.<sup>46</sup> In bureaucratic style White had conducted a classic campaign of delay, watering down the proposals with detailed arguments until a weary Abram Harris resigned and returned to academic life.<sup>47</sup> A separate set of reform proposals had been devised by W.E.B. DuBois but they were roundly defeated

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<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.340-377, p.354.

<sup>43</sup> NAACP: LoC Minutes, Board of Director's File, February 11, 1935. Part I, Box I, A3, Reel 2.

<sup>44</sup> NAACP: LoC Special Subjects, *The Committee on the Future Plan and Program for the NAACP, 1935*.

<sup>45</sup> NAACP: LoC Board of Director's File, February 11, 1935. Part 1, Box I, A3, Reel 2.

<sup>46</sup> Janken, *White. The Biography of Walter White*, p.195.

<sup>47</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p.352.

and DuBois was forced to resign from the organisation; the reformers had been routed. The alternative plan chosen would not be that of Harris or DuBois but instead one devised by Nathan Margold and Walter White. Their new plan was ambitious and rigorous but it was firmly embedded in the NAACP's tradition. The strategy would use the Supreme Court to undermine the system of segregation.<sup>48</sup>

The NAACP branches were affected by social change during the 1920s and 1930s, especially the Great Migration. Scholar Nicholas Lemann describes an example of the mass movement which emptied small towns of their populations. The people of Clarksdale, Mississippi moved en masse to Chicago.<sup>49</sup> They were driven by the arrival of a mechanical cotton-picker which destroyed hundreds of jobs previously done by sharecroppers and labourers. The effects of living under white domination were also to blame. Contemporary surveys of these migrants found that the overwhelming majority gave 'social factors' as their reason for leaving the South, by which they meant the 'unbearable conditions' and the 'oppression' of white supremacy.<sup>50</sup> The scholar Beth Tompkins Bates points out that four hundred thousand African Americans left the South between 1910 and 1920, followed by a million more during the 1920s.<sup>51</sup> One result of migration was the establishment of large African American populations in major cities like Chicago, Detroit, Pittsburgh and Baltimore. This led to the creation of new NAACP branches. The organization favoured the interests of the middle- class rather than addressing the social problems of the working class.

The NAACP constantly reverted to conservative ideas of bourgeois respectability. Many African Americans were inspired by ideas from mainstream white culture. The key to their success was educational achievement. In American society there was a common belief

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<sup>48</sup> NAACP: LoC Board of Director's File, Preliminary Report to the Joint Committee Supervising the Expenditure of the 1930 Appropriation by the American Fund for Public Service to the NAACP. Part 1, Box 1, A2, Reel 2.

<sup>49</sup> Lemann, *Promised Land*, p.4.

<sup>50</sup> Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit, in the Age of Henry Ford*, (Chapel Hill, NC., 2012), p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

that material success could be earned by individual ‘diligence and integrity’. These were the themes of English writer Samuel Smiles, whose popular books included *The Lives of George and Robert Stephenson*, which were published in the United States in the 1890s.<sup>52</sup> Scholar Kevin K. Gaines argues that racial uplift and ‘self-help’ encouraged ambitious African Americans to succeed.<sup>53</sup> In the 1920s upwardly mobile men and women rose through the ranks of the NAACP and took substantive power away from the white leadership. The philosophy of the organisation was fundamentally unchanged.

Segregation provided opportunities for the African Americans who supported the NAACP in areas such as Atlanta, Georgia. Spelman College, Morehouse College and Atlanta University were open to them. The activist E. Franklin Frazier observed the alienation amongst African Americans and commented that barriers were appearing between them because of their lifestyles. ‘Although doctors, dentists and lawyers depend upon the Black masses for their living...they have generally acquired conservative outlooks on life’.<sup>54</sup> Education emphasised an increasing gap between the African American middle and working classes.

National leader Booker T. Washington was the first to observe the phenomenon of the confident African American.<sup>55</sup> The NAACP leadership established its own high status by associating with cultural trends like the ‘New Negro’ and the Harlem Renaissance. *The Crisis* promoted these ideas, becoming more sophisticated and pre-occupied with educational achievement. DuBois also supported artists like the playwright Langston Hughes. As editor he believed that African Americans were making significant progress in cultural life and their wealth was growing with the help of northern philanthropists. An official NAACP report

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<sup>52</sup> Samuel Smiles, *The Lives of George and Robert Stephenson*. (London,1857), p.222.

<sup>53</sup> Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, p.67.

<sup>54</sup> E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie. The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States*. (New York, 1997), p.104.

<sup>55</sup> Booker T. Washington, *A New Negro for a New Century*. (Boston,1900), p.37.

observed that education was improving, 'Illiteracy has decreased. Thrift and wealth have increased. Health has improved and there has been a notable advance in self-respect'.<sup>56</sup> However, the Association continued to be criticised for its conservatism.

The NAACP leadership was heavily criticised by a left-wing Harlem newspaper, *The Messenger*, written by activists Hubert Harrison, Frank Crosswaite and A. Philip Randolph of the BSCP, who owned the paper.<sup>57</sup> Criticism also came from opponents on the right-wing who were Black Nationalist or Pan-Africanist. The Universal Negro Improvement Association was founded by West Indian migrant Marcus Garvey in 1916 and Harlem was its first U.S. branch. After a brief interval of co-operation, the NAACP became alienated from the UNIA. The attitudes of Garveyism were very different from those of DuBois and the NAACP.

Garvey left school in Jamaica with basic education and became an apprentice printer. He mocked the Association for its 'light-coloured' membership and was proud of his black skin, anti-colonialism and links with the African diaspora. Garvey attracted support by using kinetic propaganda with a full spectrum of techniques, including mass meetings, uniforms and passionate oratory. He used flags, parades and para-military forces which were attractive to the urban working class, many of whom had become detached from their roots in the South. Garvey's meetings offered an array of speakers to represent the boastful claims that he had four hundred million African supporters. The reverse of this image was the criminal activity of some UNIA supporters, which contributed to his deportation in 1927 following accusations of fraud by W.E.B. DuBois. The conflict between the NAACP and Garvey emphasised the gap between the two groups based on class identity as well as race. The relationship degenerated into accusations, threats and racial insults on both sides, for example

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<sup>56</sup> NAACP Annual Report for 1915. <https://credo.library.umass.edu/view/full/mums312-b008-i277> (Retrieved October 27, 2017). p.71.

<sup>57</sup> American Red Cross: *Report by the Oklahoma Commission to study the Race Riot of 1921*. (Tulsa OK., 1994).

DuBois' denunciation of Garvey for his 'swaggering monkey shins' and Garvey's use of criminal threats.<sup>58</sup> The NAACP had shown its inability to deal well with conflicting views.<sup>59</sup>

A handful of African American entrepreneurs emerged from the cities having become prosperous; they were a valuable source of funds for the Association and wielded influence over branches.<sup>60</sup> Membership grew amongst the middle-classes. A survey in 1917 had shown that in nine branches with 345 new members, fifty-three per cent were educators, clergy, doctors, dentists, businessmen or other non-manual posts.<sup>61</sup> They were the backbone of the NAACP who believed in social mobility, self-respect and self-discipline.<sup>62</sup> Executive Secretary Walter White proudly identified himself as a 'Negro' despite his appearance. His courage was shown by undercover work in the South. 'As I remember...I believed I would be subjected to even greater fury for the sin of 'passing' as a white man'.<sup>63</sup> He did this to gain the confidence of lynchers. His autobiography also demonstrates the gendered role of African American males who were expected to defend their homes by force if necessary, as occurred in the *Sweet Case* in 1925. At the age of fourteen Walter White was ready to defend his home from a white mob, when he heard the voice of a white boy he knew. 'That's where that n...er mail carrier lives...burn it down! It's too nice for a ni..er to live in!'<sup>64</sup> Jealousy was a powerful force behind white hostility towards middle-class African Americans.

The new African American elite supported the few good, segregated schools open to them, of which the most famous was Dunbar High in Washington D.C. The scholar Alison Stewart describes its exclusive aspects and elitism. Its success was founded on academic rigour, discipline and a demanding curriculum: English, Science, History, Military Drill,

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<sup>58</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, Editorial, *The Crisis*, Vol.28, No.1 pp.8-12, p.9.

<sup>59</sup> See Chapter Six.

<sup>60</sup> Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, p.46.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Bernard Eisenberg, 'Only for the Bourgeois? James Weldon Johnson and the NAACP 1916-30'. *Phylon*. Vol.43, No.2 (1982), pp.110-124, p.113.

<sup>62</sup> Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents*, p.4.

<sup>63</sup> White, *A Man called White*, p.40.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

Sport, Latin, Spanish, French and German.<sup>65</sup> Dunbar teachers were considered world class, as almost all were qualified at the postgraduate level. Alumni spoke decades later of the high standards they achieved. The school served a segregated community based on the prestigious 'U' Street in D.C. with its local newspaper *The Washington Bee*.<sup>66</sup> The area was known as Black Broadway for its culture, art galleries, theatres and clubs. Stars like Duke Ellington could be observed in live performance. New segregated universities had been set up during Reconstruction. Fisk University, Howard University, Morehouse University and Hampton University were all founded in 1867 and 1868. The African American elite now stood a much greater chance of achieving a high standard of postgraduate education.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the growth of the middle-classes some NAACP branches had a small membership divided between working-class and middle-class. Such branches found it hard to survive and several ceased to exist in the 1920s, especially in the South. Ben Stanley of Baton Rouge, Louisiana admitted, 'The fact that we have responded liberally to calls from the home office...may have given the impression that we have a numerically strong branch. We have...fifteen or twenty active members'.<sup>68</sup> The sociologist E. Franklin Frazier believed that the 'Black Bourgeoisie' were living in 'a world of make believe'.<sup>69</sup> He was scathing about their unrealistic pretensions.

The priority for most middle-class African Americans was to find safe housing in a 'good' area and this was a permanent challenge for the NAACP. A proposal was made to introduce 'racial zoning' in residential areas. Legal segregation of whites from African Americans became official policy for the first time. The first serious proposal was in

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<sup>65</sup> Stewart, *First Class: Legacy of Dunbar*, p.86.

<sup>66</sup> *The Washington Bee Newspaper*, Library of Congress.

<sup>67</sup> James Smethurst, 'Don't Say Goodbye to the Porkpie Hat. Langston Hughes, the Left and the Black Arts Movement'. *Callaloo*, Vol.25, No.4 (Autumn, 2002), pp.1224-1237, p.1229.

<sup>68</sup> NAACP: Harmsworth Library, Oxford. Letter of June 12, 1936 from Ben Stanley: Part VIII Legal File, 1910-55, R 8.

<sup>69</sup> Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, p.231.

Baltimore.<sup>70</sup> The local authorities claimed they had a reserve ‘police power’ on the grounds of a city-wide emergency. City Councilman Samuel L. West introduced his plan for racial zoning, blaming African American migrants because they wanted to live alongside whites, in the white areas. African Americans were said to be bringing down property values because of their ‘ignorance’ and their ‘low cultural level’. He argued that once an African American arrived in a white area, property immediately ‘depreciates in value by one half as the white population leaves’. The City Attorney advised that legal segregation was necessary to prevent this. The Attorney, who was from the South, argued that the ‘commingling of white and colored races is an absolute impossibility’.<sup>71</sup> Racial zoning was approved by the Council. A similar law was passed in Louisville, Kentucky, ‘An ordinance to prevent a conflict...in Louisville between white and colored races...and to preserve the public peace... by making reasonable provisions requiring, as far as practicable, the use of separate blocks, for residences and places of assembly by white and colored’.<sup>72</sup> Racial separation of living space was believed to be essential and similar patterns would appear in New York, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia and Cleveland. Chicago had a serious housing problem which caused mass violence.

The NAACP’s response was to arrange a carefully planned legal test case. *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917) was designed to prevent Louisville, Kentucky from carrying out a segregation policy. A Black civil rights lawyer, William Warley, deposed that the city ordinance was in breach of the Fourteenth Amendment, since it damaged the vendor’s right to freely contract with anyone he wished. This was a conservative, rather than a civil rights judgement based on a case in the Supreme Court. The judgement in *Buchanan v. Warley*

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<sup>70</sup> Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*. (New York, 2017), p.44.

<sup>71</sup> Report, *The New York Times*, December 25, 1910.

<sup>72</sup> George C. Wright, ‘The NAACP and Residential Segregation in Louisville, Kentucky, 1914-1917.’ *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society*. Vol. 78, No. 1 (Winter 1980), pp. 39-54, p.45.

accepted the NAACP argument, ‘A white owner who has made an otherwise valid and enforceable contract to convey...a plot to a colored person for the erection of a house upon it is...deprived... of an essential element of his property - the right to dispose of it to a purchaser’.<sup>73</sup> This conservative judgement won the day. The Court ruled that the use of an emergency ‘police power’ was not justified by the problem described.<sup>74</sup> However, the practice of informal racial zoning took place all over the U.S.

The Great Migration led to separate zones for African American and Irish immigrants. Mary White Ovington put on record in 1911 the resentment felt by New Yorkers at the arrival of Black competitors for jobs and housing, ‘The dwellings on Sixty-first and Sixty-second Streets are human hives, honeycombed with little rooms thick with human beings... Boys play at craps unmolested, gambling is prevalent, and Negro loafers hang about the street corners and the Tenth Avenue saloons’.<sup>75</sup> Low skilled migrants produced downward pressure on wages and competition with other ethnic communities for housing. Ovington observed of the African American that ‘His chief competitor was the Irish immigrant, like him an agricultural labourer, without previous training in business’.<sup>76</sup> Riots took place in New York between the Irish and African Americans in 1900.<sup>77</sup>

NAACP members were frequently keen to separate themselves from the working classes. Lee Sartain describes the Louisiana NAACP as a genteel, middle-class group descended from a long line of free African Americans who displayed a ‘self-conscious conservatism’. They rejected any appearance of ‘identifying with the mass of African

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<sup>73</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, *Buchanan v. Warley*. [Buchanan v. Warley :: 245 U.S. 60 \(1917\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#)

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Quoted in Ovington, *Half A Man*, pp. 40,41. NAACP: Admin File, Speeches and articles: Text of speech to a public meeting on January 29, 1913..

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p.37.



Americans'.<sup>78</sup> Anyone from outside their circle was unwelcome. Away from large cities the African American middle-classes were sometimes so few as to be almost non-existent. Shortage of members meant the NAACP barely functioned in large areas of the South.

An educated minority of African Americans found opportunities in the segregated northern cities, forming a new, secure middle class of doctors, teachers, clergy, lawyers and businessmen. They congregated in healthy suburbs such as Brooklyn forming the core of the NAACP branch structure as their numbers increased. The African American majority tended to gather in areas like Greenwich Village or The West Side.<sup>79</sup> Migration created a critical mass of professionals in the cities. Ovington met this class in Harlem and she approved of them, 'I met the professional people...a pleasant, friendly group with nothing to distinguish them from their neighbors except their color. Most lived in houses which they owned'. They were well-educated.<sup>80</sup> Historian Martin Summers argues that for African Americans the category of middle-class was a broader, looser concept than the white version. Lower middle-class positions like insurance agent, postman, barber, grocer and sleeping car attendant were regarded by African Americans as desirable and securely within the 'middle class'. Membership was defined by their adherence to an ideology of 'right' behaviour and respectability.<sup>81</sup>

The African American population was consolidated into sustainable communities like Harlem, Brooklyn and Chicago South Side. The number of African American college graduates in the US increased dramatically from 215 in 1880 to 10,000 in 1935, providing more potential leaders for the middle-class.<sup>82</sup> Attitudes to education were crucial to their

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<sup>78</sup> Kevern Verney and Lee Sartain (eds.) *Long is the Way and Hard: One Hundred Years of the NAACP*. (Fayetteville, N.C., 2009), p.123.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p.28.

<sup>80</sup> Ovington, *Black and White Sat Down Together*, p.15.

<sup>81</sup> Summers, *Manliness and its Discontents*, p.6.

<sup>82</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay towards an Autobiography of a Race Concept*. (Oxford, 2007), p.105.

progress; one of W.E.B. DuBois' earliest research projects was a study of aspiring working-class families and their belief in education in Philadelphia.<sup>83</sup>

The NAACP was committed to equal opportunity for all but concentrated its limited resources on the aspiring middle-class. The scholar Victoria Wolcott argues that the middle-class in towns and cities, 'Through moral suasion...hoped to persuade migrants to abide by the tenets of bourgeois respectability. Migrants' behaviour could then help uplift the race'.<sup>84</sup> The NAACP leadership supported those who were willing and able to move out of the overcrowded 'ghetto'. The Association in Detroit made a major commitment after the African American population had risen from 8,000 in 1915 to 85,000 by 1925, putting housing supply under severe pressure.<sup>85</sup>

Ossian Sweet was an African American doctor from Florida. He aspired to upper middle-class status. The grandson of a slave, he worked as a waiter to fund his studies at Howard University College of Medicine and Wilberforce College. This was followed by study in Vienna and Paris. He planned his family's escape from the crowded area of Detroit where most African Americans lived. Sweet used a white agent to buy a large house at 2905 Garland Street in a white suburb. His home came under siege when he moved in and he was ready to defend it by force with his wife Gladys, a teacher, his brothers Otis, who was a dentist and Henry, a college student. Three student friends joined them. The group was heavily armed and well-organised, representing the confident 'New Negro' who was ready to defend home and family. The house was mobbed by a hostile white crowd who objected to their presence. Two shots were fired from inside the house, killing a white man. The whole family was arrested and charged with conspiracy to murder and the NAACP committed to helping them. Their trial represented both racial and class issues. Historian James R.

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<sup>83</sup> DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, p.83.

<sup>84</sup> Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability*, p. 6.

<sup>85</sup> White, *A Man called White*, p.73.

Grossman argues that the case demonstrates the equal importance of race and social class in the development of the 'African American Question'.<sup>86</sup> The family were defended by Clarence Darrow, the most respected civil rights lawyer in America, whose substantial fees were paid by the NAACP. His strategy was devised by Walter White. He portrayed the Sweet family as respectable householders who had used their right to defend the family home. Darrow contrasted them with the locals who were recent immigrants from overseas. He mocked their ignorance of the English language, while his assistant Garfield Hays noted 'The defense witnesses, most of them Colored, were of a distinctly higher type than the whites...for the prosecution...the Colored witnesses were largely professional men and women, of clear features, good looks and unusual intelligence'.<sup>87</sup> Darrow argued that the family feared for their lives and had merely exercised their innate right of self-defence. Judge and jury were convinced by his assertion that this right belonged to citizens of all races.

In the early 1920s NAACP membership reached an estimated 100,000 members at a time when the future of African Americans seemed positive in many ways.<sup>88</sup> The Dyer Bill against lynching was going through Congress and African Americans were taking leadership positions in the NAACP. Members were now contributing most of its income by subscription, rather than a few large donations by wealthy whites. New branches appeared in southern towns which had no history of civil rights activities; Selma and Montgomery in Alabama set up branches in 1918, followed by Birmingham and Mobile in 1919. Ten more appeared during the 1920s, however, historian Kevern Verney points out that most of these were defunct by 1931 due to Ku Klux Klan oppression and their small numbers.<sup>89</sup>

The Association made up for some of its losses with support from a few wealthy

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<sup>86</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*, p.264.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Hannon, 'The Sweet Trial' University of Minnesota, [http://moses.law.umn.edu/darrow/trialpdfs/SWEET TRIALS.pdf](http://moses.law.umn.edu/darrow/trialpdfs/SWEET_TRIALS.pdf) (Retrieved December 12, 2015).

<sup>88</sup> Membership in years 1916 to 1920.

<sup>89</sup> Verney, *Long is the Way and Hard*, p.106.

women.<sup>90</sup> Lulu Belle Madison White was a graduate of Prairie View A & M College in Texas, whose motto was the aspirational slogan, 'We lift as we climb'. She led a comfortable life in segregated Houston among the African American middle-class until officials prevented her from voting. This spurred her to begin a career in NAACP politics which lasted throughout the 1930s.<sup>91</sup> She was an example of power in the NAACP shifting from white, upper-class males to African Americans known as the 'New Crowd'. I have shown that despite the change of personnel, the essence of the NAACP remained the same. The proposals for reform were successfully resisted by Walter White and the National Board of Directors. They remained firmly committed to their American liberal values. However, class conflict became a permanent factor in the work of the Association.

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<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Merline Pitre, 'Struggle Against Jim Crow: Lulu B. White and the NAACP, 1900-1957. Building and Selling the NAACP. Lulu B. White as an Organizer and Mobilizer', *East Texas Historical Journal*. 39, 1 (2001).

## CHAPTER FOUR: The Great Cities of the North 1930-1945.

The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the role of urban branches in the development of the NAACP. The Association was dominated by its branches which were powerful and independent with characters of their own. Their leaders varied in quality and had different priorities. They were a crucial source of funds and Walter White, based in New York, had to negotiate with these organisations. Despite his importance as chief executive officer of the NAACP, his power was limited. I demonstrate how national problems such as social class, declining membership, budget crises and social welfare were managed at the grassroots in the 1930s and 1940s.

Wealthy African Americans who were descended from generations of free men and women had established themselves in exclusive areas of major cities like Atlanta, Boston, New York and Washington D.C. They formed a 'Black aristocracy' of less than one hundred families in each city.<sup>1</sup> This elite was exclusive and they tended to keep themselves apart from recent migrants, considering them to be socially inferior. Scholar Willard Gatewood observed, 'The class conscious "upper crust" who considered themselves to be "old residents" were opposed to mass migration'. They excluded the new arrivals from their social organisations.<sup>2</sup> Daniel Murray (1851-1925) was an example of the 'upper crust' in Washington D.C. He had dedicated his working life to the Library of Congress, where he was a librarian. Murray owned property and he had been able to privately educate five boys; one son played First Violin in a New York orchestra and another was at Harvard University.<sup>3</sup> People like Murray, living at the turn of the century, viewed themselves as the natural leaders of the African American community. This social group included W.E.B. DuBois, Archibald

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth D. Taylor, *The Original Black Elite: Daniel Murray and the Forgotten Era*. (London, 2017), p.2.

<sup>2</sup> Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite 1880-1920*. (Fayetteville AR., 2000), p.124.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *The Original Black Elite*, p.2.

Grimke, Booker T. Washington and Mary Church Terrell.<sup>4</sup>

The leading personality of the Association by 1930 was Walter White, who had replaced James Weldon Johnson as Executive Secretary. He dominated a group of African Americans who had risen rapidly through education and the legal system, including Archibald Grimke, William Pickens and Raymond Pace Alexander. A process of stratification affected migrants from the South, creating a class system in the cities, especially Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit. More NAACP branches were set up, led by the middle classes such as doctors, teachers, businessmen, insurance agents and lawyers. Alliances appeared between the branch leadership and a few wealthy African American entrepreneurs.

In 1921 migrant barber, Jesse Binga, arrived in Chicago. He made his fortune by establishing a bank for people not welcome in the traditional white-owned institutions. Binga used his bank to finance property deals and became reputedly the richest African American in the city. He gained influence amongst African Americans by joining the board of the local NAACP branch.<sup>5</sup> A similar pattern appeared in New Orleans, where African American business leader Smith W. Green had made a fortune from insurance. Green was Supreme Chancellor of the Knights of Pythias, a fraternal organisation and secret society which claimed nine thousand members. The fabulous wealth of his family made it possible for him to finance the building of a palace for the society costing \$225,000.<sup>6</sup> In New Orleans and Baton Rouge businessmen made fortunes in insurance, real estate or the law by catering exclusively for their own community.

In Philadelphia the role of powerbroker was taken by Isadore Martin, a property and insurance magnate. W.E.B. DuBois had observed that the city had a well-established class

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<sup>4</sup> Taylor, *The Original Black Elite*, p.2.

<sup>5</sup> Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, p.46.

<sup>6</sup> *The Crisis*, February 1916, Vol.11, No.4, p.170.

system as early as 1899. There was a Black ‘aristocracy’ of professional people.<sup>7</sup> He described the ‘best class of Philadelphia Blacks’ as scattered throughout the city, not living in a ghetto. They found secure employment as ‘caterers, clerks, teachers, professional men, merchants...all are fairly educated’.<sup>8</sup> Working-class African Americans found work as labourers or domestic staff, whose homes in the Seventh Ward were sometimes described as ‘Black slums’.<sup>9</sup>

The city of Atlanta, Georgia catered for a prosperous, segregated African American community. The Citizens' Trust Company Bank dealt exclusively with Black customers.<sup>10</sup> The local community ran its own schools, banks, universities, churches, law firms, estate agents, barbers and other businesses. These ‘strivers’ supported an expanding group of civil rights leaders, including Walter White and in the following generation, a young Dr. Martin Luther King (1929-1968). The position elsewhere in the South was different. In Alabama the NAACP’s situation was complicated by severe poverty and white repression, so the Association only had a handful of members in towns such as Selma and Mobile. Hosea Hudson was a farm labourer who joined the NAACP but felt alienated and out of place, ‘Before, we just knew it was there, but we didn’t go, that was the better class of folks was in the NAACP. An ordinary Negro didn’t feel that was his place...all these was doctors, schoolteachers, or some kind of little businessman’.<sup>11</sup> The gap between the classes was profound as Hudson described, ‘When we began to get up and talk...these better class Negroes was caught by surprise. These kinds of people had never had the chance to hear ordinary Negroes talk like that. They were shocked’.<sup>12</sup> The Communist Party was keen to

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<sup>7</sup> DuBois, *The Philadelphia Negro*, s.4, p.7.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, s.5, p.58.

<sup>10</sup> August Meier and David L. Lewis, ‘A History of the Negro Upper Class in Atlanta, Georgia from 1890 to 1958’. *Journal of Negro Education*. Vol.28, No.2 (Spring, 1959), pp.128-139, p.131.

<sup>11</sup> Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson*, p.271, 272.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 272.

recruit working-class people like Hudson, who became a steelworker and union organiser. The Party claimed to be 'a working-class alternative' to the NAACP.<sup>13</sup>

A large proportion of the African American population remained outside the organisation, in the belief that the NAACP had nothing to offer the working-class. They were alienated and supported radical parties like the Socialists, the UNIA and the CPUSA. The resulting struggle for the loyalty of African Americans was fought out in Chicago and Detroit. These great cities exemplified the racial and class conflicts which made the 1920s and 1930s a fraught time for the NAACP.

The Association branches relied on recruits from the African American middle-class, reinforced at regular intervals by new waves of migrants. Branch leaders in Chicago or Philadelphia had different priorities from those of the working classes. Senior Attorney for the NAACP Charles Hamilton Houston admitted that the Association was unrepresentative and 'top-heavy with white-collar interests'.<sup>14</sup> African American intellectual Ralph Bunche observed that many branches were run by businessmen or urban professionals, where social activities seemed to take precedence over dealing with racism, 'Control of branches...rests largely in the hands of an exclusive...class and color snobbish, self-appointed Black upper-class group'.<sup>15</sup> They acted like an oligarchy or a closed corporation. Branches ignored calls from left-wingers such as Abram Harris and W.E.B. DuBois to offer the working classes a basic programme to answer their social problems. A proposal of this type could have provided social security, encouraged growth of labour unions or improved the housing stock. Bunche went on to observe that the aim of the Association was to win civil liberties rather than build labour unity, 'It has never reached the masses of African Americans. Rather, the

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<sup>13</sup> Verney, *Long is the Way and Hard*, p.107.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Mark V. Tushnet, *The NAACP's Legal Strategy on Segregated Education*, (Chapel Hill NC., 1987), p.38.

<sup>15</sup> Charles P. Henry ed. Ralph J. Bunche, *Selected Speeches and Writings*. (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1939), p.71.



NAACP has been cautious and maintained respectability'.<sup>16</sup> However, many small branches relied on the middle-class to maintain the organisation.

In 1931 there were no NAACP branches left in Birmingham, Montgomery or Chattanooga, where ten years before there had been ten active ones.<sup>17</sup> This demonstrated the weakness of NAACP leadership; in 1919 there were active branches in ten southern towns, including Birmingham, Mobile, Selma and Montgomery. Most of these new branches collapsed within two or three years undermining the NAACP's position during their campaigns in the South. In 1924 Tuscaloosa, Mobile, Blocton and Emsley branches had their charters revoked because they had apparently ceased to function.<sup>18</sup> They had failed to produce annual reports or pay the money they owed to the headquarters in New York. The Association should have been supporting their network of branches but instead they had a bureaucratic policy of centralization and control. In Birmingham, Alabama Dr. Charles McPherson was branch president, secretary and treasurer throughout the 1920s, leading just six paid-up members at one point. Postal worker John L. LeFlore and insurance manager William Bolden revived the Mobile branch in 1926, assisted by a few teachers and dentists.<sup>19</sup>

Historian Kevern Verney argues that most branches in the South would not have survived at all without the middle-classes, who had the benefits of education and a secure income to protect them from persecution.<sup>20</sup> Relations between the classes were on occasions poor. Sociologist Gunnar Myrdal argued that African American businessmen, shopkeepers, teachers, doctors and lawyers had control of the branches while some Black leaders dismissed the working class as 'lazy, promiscuous, uneducated, good for nothings'.<sup>21</sup> Scholar Robin D.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Verney, *Long is the Way and Hard*, p.105.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.106.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.110.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p.121.

<sup>21</sup> Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*, Vol. II. (New York, 1944), p.703.

G. Kelley in his study of a small Mississippi town found the working classes distrusted their 'betters' and mocked them as the local 'Big Shots'. Aspiring middle-class African Americans were said to flaunt their superiority and to be 'selling out to white folk'. Black shopkeepers were accused of exploiting customers, who often had little choice of where to shop.<sup>22</sup>

Society in Chicago and Detroit was changing rapidly in the 1920s and 1930s. The African American working-class continued to migrate from the rural South to the industrialising Midwest. A survey of migrants in Chicago showed the reasons why they left, including low wages, mob violence, segregation and poor education.<sup>23</sup> The manufacturer Henry Ford saw an opportunity to build a loyal workforce by paying relatively high wages to African Americans. Migrants were also arriving from overseas, including Polish, Ukrainians, Croatians, Serbians and Irish. African Americans were promoted by Ford who discouraged them from resorting to labour unions.<sup>24</sup>

The NAACP branch in Chicago did not benefit from the increasing numbers of African American arrivals and had limited success finding members. It had been set up by social workers, Jane Addams and Sophonisba Breckenridge in 1910. Marcus Garvey's UNIA was more popular with the working class in the city. Garvey was a brilliant public speaker and provided spectacle, parades and marches in paramilitary style.<sup>25</sup> In contrast with the UNIA the NAACP only played a minor role in the city's race relations, for example providing lawyers and legal advice for African Americans arrested or injured during the Chicago riots of 1919. The City Branch told the Commission of Enquiry about its priorities.

The national purpose (of the NAACP) is to combat injustice against Negroes, stamp out race discriminations, prevent lynchings, burnings, and torturing of Negroes...to demand the prosecution of those responsible, to assure to every citizen of color the common rights of an American citizen, and secure for colored children equal opportunity in public-school

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<sup>22</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, 'We are not what we seem. Rethinking Black Working class Opposition in the Jim Crow South'. *The Journal of American History*, Vol.80, No.1 (June,1993), Issue 1, pp.75-112, p.76.

<sup>23</sup> *The Negro in Chicago. A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot.* The Chicago Commission on Race Relations. (Chicago, 1922). p.84.

<sup>24</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p.373.

<sup>25</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*, p.264.

education.<sup>26</sup>

The Chicago branch leadership changed when radical journalist A. Clement MacNeal arrived in the city. He was the first Black professional leader of the NAACP in Chicago. He was dissatisfied with the feeble state of the city branch. Scholar Christopher Reed claims that MacNeal brought a new energy to the leadership as its first leader to come from the 'New Crowd'.<sup>27</sup> The branch had not achieved its potential before. During the 1920s it was led by a conservative patriarchy of three retired African American physicians: Herbert A. Turner, Charles M. Thompson and Charles V. Dudley. They held all the branch posts between them and followed the cautious NAACP strategy. Membership and branch funds were in crisis under their stewardship. The Black owned Binga State Bank of Chicago closed in July 1930 following the Wall Street Crash, taking the branch funds with it and leaving accusations of embezzlement against Jesse Binga, who eventually went to gaol.<sup>28</sup> The leaders were not focused on building a mass membership and had to be replaced; weak leadership had held it back from recruiting from the working-class.<sup>29</sup> Branch membership had fallen below three hundred by 1932. The branch would not fulfil its potential until after the outbreak of war in 1941. MacNeal complained that 'for eight years' the branch had had effectively 'no program' and it was being used by 'ambitious local individuals' for their own interests.<sup>30</sup>

Yale graduate MacNeal became its chairman in 1933 and later president. In his view there was no conflict between pursuing civil rights and social issues at the same time. As the editor of campaigning newspapers *The Chicago Whip* and *The Chicago Defender* he was an activist with a range of strategies. His priority was economics and he was prepared to use

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<sup>26</sup> *The Negro in Chicago. A Study of Race Relations and a Race Riot.* The Chicago Commission on Race Relations. (Chicago, 1922). p.148.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher R. Reed, *The Chicago NAACP and the rise of Black Professional Leadership 1910-66.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN., 1997), p.90.

<sup>28</sup> NAACP: Harmsworth Library, Oxford. Letter from Archie L. Weaver to Roy Wilkins, June 17,1932. mf 4934.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>30</sup> NAACP: Harmsworth Library, Oxford. Letter from A. C. MacNeal to Walter White, May 27, 1933. mf 4951.

confrontational methods. He ordered the aggressive picketing of Woolworth's Five and Dime Stores on the South Side, forcing the company to employ Black clerks. After seventeen weeks of struggle Woolworth gave in.<sup>31</sup> His approach was described as 'middle-class professionalism'.<sup>32</sup> MacNeal's strategies were based on what produced results for a mass membership. In 1933 the *Chicago Defender* reported on a meeting held with forty local organisations who resolved to boycott the purchase of meat in protest at high prices.<sup>33</sup>

MacNeal started litigation against bus companies, railroads, loan companies and restaurants who practiced 'Jim Crow' policies.<sup>34</sup> His targets included Chicago University, which was establishing a residential buffer zone around the campus, to be kept free of African Americans. His new approach brought him into conflict with business leaders and the NAACP hierarchy, who saw businessmen as partners and a source of vital donations. Walter White had given his support to MacNeal for the position of branch president.<sup>35</sup> Under MacNeal's leadership the branch began to build a mass membership by running grassroots campaigns amongst the working class and unemployed. In a letter to White of May 1933, MacNeal criticised the people whom he called the 'Old Order'.

In the first place, I wish to point out that the Chicago Branch for eight years has been... a paper and pencil organisation, whose sole hold on the Chicago public has been the 'Annual Drive' and 'Cabaret Party'. When the present regime took office, it asked questions: What are you doing in Chicago? What is the program of the branch? Why is the Chicago branch and the whole Association a 'blue stocking' organisation?

MacNeal continued his critique, arguing that the branch had had no definite program. It had been 'inveigled into...the program of certain ambitious local individuals who were advancing their own cause'. The leadership was cut off from the membership; in short, the organisation

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<sup>31</sup> Christopher Robert Reed, *Depression comes to the South Side: Protest and Politics in the Black Metropolis 1930-1933*, (Bloomington, Ind., 2001), p.101.

<sup>32</sup> Reed, *The Chicago NAACP*, p.91.

<sup>33</sup> *Chicago Defender* 20 July, 1935. <https://www.library.ucdavis.edu/database/chicago-defender-1909-1975-via-proquest-historical-newspapers/> (Retrieved June 29, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> NAACP: LoC., Chicago Branch Files: Press Release, November 1933. Part 1, Box 1, G 51.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.340-377, p.344.

had 'failed dismally'.<sup>36</sup> MacNeal's new regime worked in cooperation with Black Churches, the unemployed and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.<sup>37</sup>

MacNeal's main target was the powerful Sears Roebuck chain of department stores based in Chicago. To gather evidence white catering staff were surveyed and they admitted a policy of racial discrimination and segregation. In Sears' Café African Americans were charged extra and were told it was, 'to cover the cost of dishes which would have to be broken after they had eaten off them'.<sup>38</sup> One white man commented, 'Not enough Negroes can afford to pay the prices in high-grade restaurants to make them a real problem, and stray cases are handled as they appear'. A manager stated, 'An effort was made to make them feel uncomfortable so they would not return...In former years he had seen dishes deliberately broken in the presence of Negroes after being used in high grade restaurants where their patronage was not wanted'. Slow service and indifferent attention were also used to discourage them from a return visit.<sup>39</sup>

MacNeal's aim was to bring down the Sears' chain which belonged to the philanthropic Rosenwald Trust. He planned to boycott Sears in a campaign called, 'Don't Spend Where You Can't Shop'. African American women shoppers at Sears faced insults and slurs daily. The shoe department had a 'white section' but the 'Black section' was separate, located 'somewhere out back'.<sup>40</sup> Women were humiliated in the clothing department by being made to wait on special seats behind whites and prevented from trying on items for 'sanitary reasons'.<sup>41</sup> When MacNeal described discrimination, Sears responded with vague denials. MacNeal explained that 'Colored people all over the South' were its' mail order customers,

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<sup>36</sup> NAACP: LoC Chicago Branch Files: Letter from A.C. MacNeal to Walter White, May 27 1933. Part 1, Box 1, G 51.

<sup>37</sup> NAACP: LoC Chicago Branch Files, Press Release, November 15, 1933. Part 1, Box 1, G 51.

<sup>38</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from A. C. MacNeal to Walter White, June 22, 1933. Part 1, Box 1, G 51.

<sup>39</sup> *Report of the Chicago Commission on Race Relations*, (Chicago, 1923), p.313.

<sup>40</sup> NAACP: Harmsworth Library, Oxford. Chicago Branch Files. Memorandum, June 8, 1933. Mf 4938.

<sup>41</sup> NAACP: Harmsworth Library, Oxford. Chicago Branch Files, June 22, 1933. Mf 4939.

leaving the threat of a boycott in the background.<sup>42</sup> MacNeal's aggression was a rejection of the 'culture of civility' which had previously characterised NAACP actions; he was determined to assert Black dignity and pride.<sup>43</sup>

The Chicago branch continued to ask questions, such as whether Sears subscribed to Jim Crow. MacNeal wrote to Walter White recommending the boycott and expressing a hope that White would not be influenced by the annual donation of \$2,500 received from Andrew Rosenwald of Sears for NAACP funds.<sup>44</sup> MacNeal took an adversarial approach, aiming to generate damaging publicity for Sears and 'explode the myth of Rosenwald's friendliness to the African Americans'.<sup>45</sup> Walter White was caught in a dilemma between the need for Rosenwald funds and the pressure to support MacNeal. His decision was to support Sears on this occasion and he ordered MacNeal to call off the boycott, which had been widely publicised claiming he had a 'gentleman's agreement' with Sears promising that 'conditions would improve' in the store. In return the branch would cease all publicity for the accusations of discrimination.<sup>46</sup> MacNeal complained to White that the NAACP's 'reputation' for supporting African Americans was in danger if it did not campaign effectively for their welfare.<sup>47</sup> This episode reflects class conflict in the Association, as the pro-business leadership wanted to maintain good relations and avoid bad publicity for white donors.

The NAACP suffered from a severe budget deficit following the Wall Street Crash and White emphasised the Association's anti-communism as a way of trying to win over wealthy donors. Between 1910 and 1932 Julius Rosenwald made donations totalling \$20,100 to the NAACP, whose finances were in a parlous state.<sup>48</sup> Julius Rosenwald, head of the

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<sup>42</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from A. Clement MacNeal, June 12, 1933. Part 1, Box 1, G 51.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p.348.

<sup>44</sup> NAACP: Letter from A. Clement MacNeal July 3, 1933 Series G, Box 1, G 51.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> NAACP: Letter from Walter White to A.C. MacNeal, August 3, 1933 Series G, Box G 51.

<sup>47</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p.350.

<sup>48</sup> NAACP: LoC Part 1 Box 1, C159, Folder 1.

family, was a donor to the NAACP Legal Fund.<sup>49</sup> White asked the Trust for aid, emphasising the despair which was affecting many African Americans, 'It is this hopelessness which the communists are seeking to utilize to their own ends...on the theory that...the Black is so exploited and oppressed he should easily be induced to...overthrow the American Government'.<sup>50</sup> This warning was repeated many times by White. He put his argument to the Congressional Committee on Communism when questioned by a senior New York Republican, Hamilton Fish. Walter White asserted, 'The greatest pro-Communist influence among Blacks in the United States is the lyncher, the Ku Klux Klan...and others who indulge in...segregation and denial of economic opportunity'.<sup>51</sup> In a letter to a newspaper editor he explained his condemnation of the CPUSA, 'We know beyond question that they are not interested in the lives of the people involved – only in making Communist propaganda'.<sup>52</sup> This was his theme in the 1930s. The CPUSA was recruiting in Chicago, using grievances over jobs, discrimination and housing to win members at the expense of the NAACP.<sup>53</sup>

The NAACP remained concerned by the effect of the Wall Street Crash and Depression on its finances. A leading member, Robert W. Bagnall, was a successful Director of Branches, but to ease the financial crisis he was made redundant. Walter White's decision for his dismissal was extremely unpopular. White came under pressure and was spending much of his time writing to wealthy donors asking for help. In 1933 William Rosenwald complained to White that the Chicago NAACP had written to his brother, Lessing Rosenwald, a letter that was 'couched in so unpleasant a tone that he did not think it worth the trouble of attempting to answer it'. He complained to White,

Your Chicago branch does not have a very good reputation...they are not personally known by some citizens in Chicago who take a leading interest in negro work...I felt certain you

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<sup>49</sup> Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, p.94.

<sup>50</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White, 1932: Part 1, Box 1, C159, Folder 1.

<sup>51</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin. Subject File: Press Release. *The Fish Committee on Communism, 1930*. Part 1.

<sup>52</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Carl Murphy, May 16, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68 Folder 18.

<sup>53</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p.350.

would want this called to your attention, as you doubtless wish to uphold the reputation of your Organization.<sup>54</sup>

The source implies a comfortable relationship with business, who expected NAACP activists to be ‘personally known’ to the power brokers. This was likely to inhibit the actions of the Association. MacNeal’s pressure had exposed a conflict within the NAACP between conservatives who cooperated with business and radicals who challenged businessmen as enemies.

African Americans faced long-standing problems with housing in Chicago, which the branch tried to solve with slow, methodical legal methods designed to remove restrictive covenants. The NAACP could have campaigned against poor quality rented property in the ghettos but instead worked to end the discrimination by white homeowners, using covenants. These were agreements signed by homeowners, which agreed, ‘no part of said premises shall be sold, given, conveyed or leased to any Black’.<sup>55</sup> Black servants were allowed as temporary exceptions to the rule. MacNeal worked hard to eliminate these devices by writing to white property owners, working with white organisations and pointing out their weaknesses. The branch took up test cases for their supporters, Carl A. Hansberry and Harry H. Pace.<sup>56</sup> Hansberry was branch secretary and a real estate broker; Pace was a successful African American music publisher. Both were sued by white organisations for breaking covenants, having purchased expensive houses in Washington Park, which was considered a ‘white area’ near the University. The NAACP fought a long campaign against the local white residents, ending in *Hansberry v. Lee* (1940). This lawsuit took three years to reach the US Supreme Court.<sup>57</sup> Victory went to the NAACP but only on a technical point of law, so racial covenants

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<sup>54</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from William Rosenwald to Walter White, June 28, 1933. Series I, Box C 74.

<sup>55</sup> NAACP: LoC Segregation, 1937. Woodlawn Property Owners Association. Part 1, Box 1, C 404.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> US Supreme Court *Hansberry vs. Lee* (1940). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/311/32/>. (Retrieved, April, 5,2022).



remained in use until 1948.<sup>58</sup> This showed a weakness of NAACP litigation methods which were slow and unreliable.

The Chicago branch was in no condition to resist the consequences of the Great Depression, which increased class conflict in the city. It was described as in 'perhaps the worst plight of any of our cities, with schoolteachers, policemen, firemen, and city workers of all classes unpaid for months.... The working class is [even] harder hit, if that be possible, than the professional and clerical class'.<sup>59</sup> The Chicago Urban League reported Black unemployment rates of forty-five per cent.<sup>60</sup> Local NAACP official Archie L. Weaver reported 'Twenty banks have closed their doors in Chicago on Monday and Tuesday. This morning the Lincoln State Bank closed...all in the Colored district. It is terrible. The Douglass Bank is the only bank open'.<sup>61</sup> Class conflict was the result, with fighting breaking out in the city's streets. Large crowds, including communists, were engaged in pitched battles with the police. Sheriff's bailiffs carried out evictions for failure to pay rent.<sup>62</sup> MacNeal was keen to address Black social and economic problems, believing it was necessary to save the branch from becoming irrelevant to African Americans. This brought him into conflict with Walter White who was concerned to maintain the flow of donations from the Rosenwald Trust.

The Philadelphia NAACP was one of the wealthiest branches in the country and displayed upper middle-class traits on a large scale, such as members using the branch for their own social advancement. They preferred to spend time at social or cultural events rather than organising direct action. Senior posts as President, Chairman, Treasurer and Secretary were divided up amongst a small group. In 1933 this arrangement was disturbed when the

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<sup>58</sup> Beth Tompkins Bates, *Pullman Porters and the Rise of Protest Politics in Black America 1925-1945*. (Chapel Hill N.C., 2001), p.116.

<sup>59</sup> Quoted in Reed, *Depression Comes to the South Side*, p.12.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. vii.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.9.

Philadelphia banks closed suddenly and caused hardship for the branch.<sup>63</sup> The membership became even more skewed towards the economically secure professionals who continued to pay their subscriptions. By 1936 sixty-three per cent of the branch members were doctors, lawyers, teachers or businessmen, while only nine per cent could be described as 'non-professionals'.<sup>64</sup>

The more prosperous NAACP members were loudly praised by Walter White for making substantial donations and were encouraged to meet elite whites at social functions organised by the branch. A testimonial dinner for the Philadelphia branch president was publicised in a Press Service report, which boasted, 'We had one hundred of Philadelphia's most prominent citizens, as well as Miss Nannie Burroughs [a National Executive member] who delivered a most inspiring talk...and Dr. Aldrich Burton, Toastmaster'.<sup>65</sup> The branch was active politically in national anti-lynching campaigns and raising funds for national headquarters. Nevertheless, it was a cautious, conservative organisation which wished to avoid conflict with white society. To maintain respectability the branch had to keep its distance from the African American poor who lived in the crowded West Side of Philadelphia.

In 1932, sixteen-year-old Willie Brown became a cause in Philadelphia, when he was accused of the rape and murder of Dorothy Lutz, a seven-year-old white girl. Detectives were accused by the press of concocting a confession and bullying Brown into signing it. This was a common practice known as 'giving the third degree'.<sup>66</sup> He was found guilty after an hour of deliberation by the jury and sentenced to the electric chair, but Raymond Pace Alexander volunteered to defend him. At an appeal hearing he argued that Brown had not received due

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<sup>63</sup> NAACP: LoC Philadelphia Branch correspondence: Letter from Arthur Spingarn to Walter White, February 26, 1930. Part 1, Box I, G187.

<sup>64</sup> H. Viscount Nelson: 'The Philadelphia NAACP: Race versus Class consciousness during the thirties'. *Journal of Black Studies: Working Papers in the Study of Race Consciousness*. Vol.5 No.3 (1975), pp.255-276, p.257.

<sup>65</sup> NAACP: LoC Philadelphia Branch correspondence: Press release February 1, 1930. Part 1, Box 1, G188.

<sup>66</sup> NAACP: LoC Philadelphia Branch Files, Letter of March 25, 1932 from Raymond Pace Alexander. Part 1, Box 1, G186.

process. ‘The chief issue was whether the confession was made voluntarily, or under such duress as to destroy its value as evidence’.<sup>67</sup> He subjected police detectives to devastating cross-examinations and won a retrial. Allegations of interracial sex and murder were poisonous to the NAACP, argued branch leaders Arthur Spingarn and Isadore Martin, who refused to get involved in the case. Alexander complained to Walter White about his colleagues, ‘I regret ever so much the inactivity of the Philadelphia NAACP...This branch seems to take no interest in such matters...I cannot understand a lack of interest in the segregated school question, discrimination...indignities we suffer’.<sup>68</sup> Walter White backed Alexander, but was criticised for interference by Arthur Spingarn, who wrote ‘I cannot see on what theory we should take it up. It is a typical case of police brutality towards every poor defendant’.<sup>69</sup> White responded by warning the local association that they were in danger of losing all credibility with the public, ‘The Branch has become almost notoriously inactive in taking up cases of any description...Police brutality has been flagrant...we are going to lose steadily so far as public support is concerned’.<sup>70</sup> Walter White’s intervention caused conflict with the branch leadership, who believed defending a petty criminal charged with interracial rape and murder was considered to be politically risky and morally distasteful.

Branches were in danger of becoming complacent which would weaken their commitment to the ideal of equality. Nevertheless, the organisation as a whole remained faithful to the liberal ideals of Moorfield Storey. The context in which they operated changed over a period of several decades, due to migration, rapid industrialisation and urban growth.

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<sup>67</sup> NAACP: LoC Philadelphia Branch Files, March – May 1932. Part 1, Box 1, G186. *Pennsylvania v. William Brown*, (1932).

<sup>68</sup> NAACP: LoC Philadelphia Branch Files, Letter of March 25, 1932 from Raymond P. Alexander to Walter White. Part 1, Box 1, G188.

<sup>69</sup> NAACP: LoC Philadelphia Branch Files, Letter of March 30, 1932 from Arthur Spingarn to Walter White. Part 1, Box 1, G188.

<sup>70</sup> NAACP: LoC Chicago Branch Letter, April 1, 1932 from Walter White to Arthur Spingarn. Part 1, Box 1, G188.

In Chicago an African American diaspora appeared complete with a stable middle-class. They were able to leave the overcrowded areas of Chicago or Detroit for more salubrious white areas. This group was supported by legal advice from the NAACP in the case of *Buchanan v. Warley*. A similar case was the nationally known family of Ossian Sweet. My achievement has been to look beyond the conventional portrayal of the civil rights movement. I describe an organisation as concerned with issues of social class as with race. These issues were played out in cities like Atlanta, Baltimore and Philadelphia.

## CHAPTER FIVE: An Incident in Scottsboro 1931-1941.

I'm gonna tell all the colored people,  
Even the old n...er here,  
Don't ya ever go to Alabama,  
And try to live.  
Go to Alabama and you better watch out,  
The landlord will get you, gonna jump and shout,  
Scottsboro! Scottsboro! Boys...<sup>1</sup>

This chapter explores the attitudes of the NAACP leadership towards the African American working class, as revealed through the archives of the Association. Letters between the leaders of the organisation display their private opinions and I use sources which have not been generally cited before. I chose to focus on the Scottsboro affair, which threatened the execution of a group of indigent youths accused of rape. It cast a harsh light on race relations in the South in the 1930s. The NAACP found this a challenging experience, which showed the effect of severe stress on the leaders.

Walter White was at the centre of the affair and he was pulled in different directions by contradictory forces. On the one hand he was reluctant to intervene in Scottsboro for fear of harming the image of the Association. The uneducated youths were very different from the family of Ossian Sweet in Detroit, who had been given generous support by White and the NAACP. At a time when the Association was under intense financial pressure, White knew Scottsboro would be another costly intervention. On the other hand, the widespread expectation was that he would help save these 'boys' from the electric chair. He also feared contact with powerful communist organisations, who were making propaganda out of the case. 'Scottsboro'

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<sup>1</sup> William 'Leadbelly' Leadbetter sings 'The Scottsboro Boys'. *Smithsonian Folkways* 1935.

has been the subject of numerous studies but none have used the documents in the way I have to better understand the elite nature of the NAACP in this period. The sources contribute to my overall argument by revealing the conservative and class-based attitudes of the leadership. These events also show Walter White's concern to preserve the organisation from reputational damage, even to the extent of compromising its core mission.

The 'Scottsboro Boys' were an undistinguished group of youths who became 'a cause' on March 25, 1931 in the depths of the Great Depression. A freight train was making a routine journey alongside the Tennessee River in rural Alabama and a number of unemployed young men were 'riding the rails' in search of work. A fight broke out and the white youths were driven off the train. They complained to the local police and nine African Americans were arrested on suspicion of assault when it stopped at the rural settlement of Paint Rock. All of them were minors and the youngest was thirteen years old. Initially they were accused of assault or vagrancy. The atmosphere became menacing when two white women were found among them, dressed in men's clothes. Victoria Price and Ruby Bates then complained to Deputy Sheriff Charlie Latham that they had been raped by the nine African Americans. A travelling salesman who was present reported that a 'wholesale lynching' on the spot was narrowly averted by deputies.<sup>2</sup> The 'boys' were all taken to the nearby county town of Scottsboro, but the original accusation now became the capital charge of interracial rape.

'Scottsboro' became a symbol of 'the race question' in the Deep South. As such it illustrated a complex network of law, social class, education and sexuality as well as race. These in turn generated a struggle in the courts, the press, the streets and within the NAACP itself. This was not its finest hour. The Association was divided by issues of social class; the leadership saw the youths and their parents as an embarrassing example of the Black proletariat. They were keen to avoid association with them. Scholar Daniel T. Carter rightly points out that

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<sup>2</sup> Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, p.5.

Walter White was keen to avoid cooperation with the Communist Party or the International Labor Defense.<sup>3</sup> However, Carter fails to acknowledge the number of sources setting out White's attitude towards the parents of the boys. The parents were vital to the case because the youths were minors. Walter White became angry with the parents, who refused to understand their own best interests. As a result, he and his colleagues indulged in a condescending class attitude at their expense. He referred to them as 'frightfully ignorant' and said, 'several of them have been taken in completely by the International Labor Defense'.<sup>4</sup>

The CPUSA created the ILD in 1925. White was frustrated by the ILD activities and the international communist movement who had taken up the cause of the youths. He was opposed to communism for its collectivism and alien loyalties. He remained committed to the US Constitution. Several strands of conflicting opinion emerged during this struggle. White supremacists were determined the 'Boys' should pay the ultimate price in the electric chair for a breach of the unwritten code governing race relations. On the other hand, sympathisers of the 'Boys' became aware of an emerging injustice of the sort which was all too common in the South and was only distinguished by the unusual number and the age of those who had been condemned to death.

The NAACP was expected to campaign hard to save the 'Boys'. However, the pace was set by an active, disciplined group of communists in New York and Alabama who became involved early in the legal process. The communists regarded the youths as victims of a heartless, capitalist system because they were uneducated and unemployed. They had powerful and organised backing from the Communist International (Comintern). The NAACP leadership became engaged in a bitter struggle with the Communist Party. It found itself fighting on several

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<sup>3</sup> Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, p.52.

<sup>4</sup> NAACP: LoC Legal File. Letter from Walter White to Herbert A. Turner, May 3, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 14.

fronts at once. At the same time, White and his colleague William Pickens were repelled by the sordid reality which the boys represented. Had the leadership been given a choice, they would have remained uninvolved. Sympathisers across America had read about the case, for example in *The New York Times* and put pressure on White to take action against the perceived injustice of the boys' treatment.<sup>5</sup> White attempted to limit the damage to the Association's reputation for respectability by taking control of the trial. His objective was to exclude the ILD from the case but, despite strenuous efforts, the NAACP was unable to achieve this.

The incident at Paint Rock was a microcosm of race relations in Alabama, representing white anxiety about 'racial purity' and revealing an undercurrent of violence in a quiet, rural settlement. A comparison with one of White's previous investigations shows these common themes. In Nashville, Tennessee a youth called Sammie Smith, aged fifteen, was shot during a gunfight with a white man. He was taken to a segregated hospital, where he was expected to die from his wounds in a short time, but a local sheriff chained him to his bed. During the night ten armed men invaded the hospital ward, forcing a nurse to identify him. He was taken away and murdered shortly afterwards.<sup>6</sup> In a speech to the National Conference on Lynching in 1919 James Weldon Johnson had announced that between 1914 and 1918, 325 Blacks had been lynched, but of these only twenty-eight had even been accused of rape, let alone convicted.<sup>7</sup> Young African American males like Smith were terrorised and murdered to eliminate any sign of resistance to white supremacy.

Social historians Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck assert that lynching was also an exercise in 'popular justice'. In almost every case the murderers attempted to justify their crime by claiming that they had a 'legitimate grievance'. The lynchers often claimed to have been 'provoked' by the special horror of the crime. Alternatively, they would argue that the African

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<sup>5</sup> *The New York Times*, <https://famous-trials.com/scottsbobroboys/1539-nytimesarticles>. March 25, 1931. (Retrieved 25 June, 2019). p.1.

<sup>6</sup> *On Lynching*: <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/naACP/the-new-negro-movement> (Retrieved February 1, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> NAACP: LoC., Minutes of proceedings of the National Conference on Lynching, 1919. Part 1, Box 1, C 339.



American who was to be lynched was so deprived in nature that the speedy justice of a lynching was the only acceptable response.<sup>8</sup> These racial attitudes were activated by the circumstances in Scottsboro.

Thousands of people arrived in Scottsboro from the countryside in the days following the arrests, attracted by rumours of a savage, sexual crime involving African Americans. An investigator described them as ‘in a lynching spirit’.<sup>9</sup> Walter White believed that an obsession with ‘sex and alleged sex crimes have served as the great bulwark of the lyncher’.<sup>10</sup> Lynching was defended by its supporters because it was widely believed to be a just punishment for rape. The accusation of interracial rape was an effective defence for lynching, because few dared to criticise it. The attitude of white people made a rational discussion of the issue impossible.<sup>11</sup> He issued a statement which asserted, ‘The NAACP has no axe to grind. It desires only that the boys get a fair trial in a court free from mob domination. The NAACP believes that the only way to go about this case is in an orderly manner, with a firm appeal to the regular courts of law’.<sup>12</sup> White tried to neutralise the race issue by focusing on the rule of law.

There was a constant threat from local people that they would spurn the rule of law and resort to violence. Press reports alleged an attempt ‘to seize the Blacks’ had been planned by ‘a threatening crowd of up to three hundred men’.<sup>13</sup> The mob’s intentions were prompted by lurid rumours and were not based on any evidence. Over decades many prisoners had been

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<sup>8</sup> Stewart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck, *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*. (Urbana, Ill., 1995), p.86.

<sup>9</sup> Hollace Ransdell, *ACLU Report on the Scottsboro Trial*. (New York, 1931), p.4. <https://www.aclu.org/other/aclu-history-scottsboro-boys> (Retrieved July 1, 2016).

<sup>10</sup> White, *Rope and Faggot*, p.55.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>12</sup> NAACP: LoC., Legal File: An Appeal for donations; 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D71.

<sup>13</sup> *The Anniston Star*, Alabama, March 26, 1931 <https://www.newspapers.com/image/110484326/> (Retrieved July 4, 2017).

seized from jail and murdered by mobs.<sup>14</sup> The Boys were afraid that this was exactly what would happen to them. One of them, Haywood Patterson, understood the police officers were sympathetic to local racist opinion. He described how one afternoon two or three deputies entered the cell and announced, 'All right, let's go'. The police intended to allow the mass murder of the boys, who were in irons. 'They wanted us out to the crowd. Locked our hands together. Wanted to rush us outside into the mob'.<sup>15</sup> Betrayal of the rule of law by police officers was a persistent problem in the South. The boys were fortunate to be protected by the most senior police officer in the area, High Sheriff Matthew Warren. He was a law officer in a southern rural town and as such was under pressure to prevent lynchings and keep suspects safe in custody. Warren arrived in the nick of time, demanding of his deputies, 'Where are you taking these boys?'<sup>16</sup> The pressure came from groups such as The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL) which was led by a white woman from Texas, Mrs Jessie Daniel Ames.<sup>17</sup>

The attitude of the police officers was only one aspect of a larger problem faced by the NAACP. The justice system in which they had placed so much faith had been weighted against African Americans for decades. In 1901 Alabama had adopted a new State Constitution at a constitutional convention with no African American delegates present. The chairman was John B. Knox, an attorney who openly avowed his 'aim of establishing white supremacy' by law.<sup>18</sup> A similar movement took place in Mississippi and South Carolina. Southern states had by 1909 stopped most African Americans from voting or serving on

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<sup>14</sup> Christopher Waldrep, *The Many Faces of Judge Lynch: Extralegal Violence and Punishment in America*. (Gordonsville VA., 2002), p. 43.

<sup>15</sup> Patterson and Conrad, *Scottsboro Boy*, p.8.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.8.

<sup>17</sup> Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry. Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign Against Lynching*. (New York, 1993), p.99.

<sup>18</sup> John B. Knox, *Opening address: Proceedings of Alabama Constitutional Convention 1903*.

juries, eliminating many of the freedoms gained under Radical Reconstruction.<sup>19</sup> NAACP founder Archibald E. Grimke described African Americans as ‘ballot-less victims’. He concluded, ‘For, with grandfather and understanding clauses, educational and property qualifications, partisan...election supervisors and white primaries...colored people have been ... deprived of any voice in the Government’.<sup>20</sup>

The Alabama constitution which applied during the Scottsboro affair banned ‘vagrants’ from voting and anyone convicted of ‘miscegenation’ or ‘moral turpitude’. They were placed in a category with the learning impaired. Poll taxes had to be paid up to date by anyone who wished to vote. Vague legal terms were employed that could be used against African Americans where necessary. Voters had to be literate, of ‘good character’ and most difficult of all, able ‘to understand the duties and obligations of citizenship’.<sup>21</sup> Historian Steven Hahn argues that these measures were on a spectrum of methods used by the white supremacists to deny African Americans the right to vote.<sup>22</sup>

Legal discrimination was underpinned by armed groups of white males in each town who were ready to act outside the law where necessary. They saw themselves as sentinels ‘patrolling the boundaries’ between Black and white. The races were believed to be permanently established racial ‘types’ which had been created by ‘nature’ as separate entities who were divided into superior and inferior races.<sup>23</sup> White supremacists regarded consensual sex ‘across the color line’ as unthinkable and this principle developed in the courts as well. A view of this nature was openly expressed by Judge William Callahan in 1933 while he was presiding at the re-trial of Haywood Patterson. He announced, ‘Where the woman charged to

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<sup>19</sup> Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States. Vol. 1.* (New York, 1951), pp.926-7.

<sup>20</sup> Archibald Grimke, *The Ballotless Victim of One-Party Government*, (Washington D.C.,1913), p.3.

<sup>21</sup> The Alabama Constitution <https://codes.findlaw.com/al/alabama-constitution-of-1901/> July 4, 2017 s.180-1.

<sup>22</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders. The United States and its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910.* (New York, 2016), p. 471.

<sup>23</sup> Hahn, *A Nation without Borders*, p.479.

have been raped...is a white woman, there is a very strong presumption under the law that she...did not yield voluntarily to the defendant, who is a Black'.<sup>24</sup> The NAACP knew the strength of this belief among whites and Walter White, who was brought up in Atlanta, was especially aware, as were James Weldon Johnson from Florida, Ida Wells-Barnett from Mississippi and Archibald Grimke from South Carolina. Grimke had advice for those who wanted to deal with the South; they needed to appreciate how irrational were the actions of the mob. He said, 'Ask Judge Lynch, ask the blind and murderous sex fury of white men, the red male rage of Southern mobs'.<sup>25</sup> The slightest suspicion of sexual contact was believed to justify punishment by torture and murder. In the racist mythology white women were the essence of purity and execution alone was inadequate for a Black rapist.

Sheriff Warren's stand against the Scottsboro crowd was supplemented by the National Guard, sent from the state capital at Montgomery by the Governor, Bib Graves. The masses were kept at bay by three National Guard officers and thirty enlisted men, with four machine-guns placed on the courthouse steps. Everyone entering the courthouse building was searched. The Federated Press Agency reported that an 'unprecedented' crowd of five thousand people arrived in the small town, in 'an atmosphere charged with hatred and violence'.<sup>26</sup> Haywood Patterson described the mood of the people, 'The sixty or seventy National Guards, they got orders to make a lane through the crowd...They had rifles, looked smart in their uniform. When the guards formed a tunnel for us ... we heard the mob roar, 'We going to kill you n...ers'.<sup>27</sup> This behaviour was in contrast with the approach of the NAACP to the law.

Methodist clergy in Chattanooga met to discuss the case and sent a white attorney Stephen Roddy to observe the trial. He recorded the crowd's reaction when the first guilty

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<sup>24</sup> Judge Callahan: Report by New York Times, December 1, 1933. [www.newspaperArchive.com](http://www.newspaperArchive.com). (Retrieved July 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Archibald Grimke, *The Ultimate Criminal*. (Washington D.C.,1915), p.9.

<sup>26</sup> NAACP: LoC Scottsboro Case Correspondence: Federated Press. June 8, 1931. Part 1, Box I, D69. Folder 1.

<sup>27</sup> Patterson, *Scottsboro Boy*, p.10.

verdicts were announced. ‘Instantly, a wild, thunderous cheer went up from the audience and was heard by those in the courtyard, where thousands...took up the demonstration...for fifteen or twenty minutes’.<sup>28</sup> The significance of the noise was in the atmosphere of intimidation it created in the town and in the courtroom where the jury could hear it. This was a violation of due process. In this febrile mood the jurors convicted all nine boys, including fourteen-year-old Roy Wright who was sentenced to life imprisonment, subject to one condition, that he waive his right to appeal against sentence.<sup>29</sup> Several members of the all-white jury persisted in demanding the death penalty for him. The trials had lasted four days, in a continuing atmosphere of uncontrolled emotion and after all the trials were over, eight of them were immediately condemned to death. The proceedings had been rushed, with the defendants being charged on March 25 and indicted on March 30, 1931. Defense counsel had still not been appointed by then and when two reluctant local lawyers were chosen, they were given no time to prepare a case or request a change of venue. Medical evidence gathered by examination of the women was ignored.

International Labor Defense took the case to the Supreme Court and in *Powell v. Alabama* (1932) the Court judged that a proper defence had been denied the Boys by the confusion in the court and the judges overruled the convictions.<sup>30</sup> The two defense lawyers were not chosen until the first day of the trial and even then, they had not been properly identified.<sup>31</sup> In the Supreme Court later, Justice Sutherland put himself in the place of the Boys,

The defendants, young, ignorant, illiterate, surrounded by hostile sentiment, hauled back and forth under guard of soldiers, charged with an atrocious crime regarded with especial horror in the community where they were to be tried, were thus put in peril of their lives within a

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<sup>28</sup> NAACP: LoC Trial Summary by Stephen Roddy. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 9.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Horne, *Powell v. Alabama*, p.30.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.71.

few moments after counsel...began to represent them'.<sup>32</sup>

All of the convictions were eventually overturned by the Supreme Court, on the grounds of lack of due process. The Court ruled in *Norris v. Alabama* (1935) that Norris had been denied the 'equal protection of the laws' guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment because of the all-white jury.<sup>33</sup> Investigations revealed that all the African Americans in the county had been routinely excluded from all juries for at least twenty years, although many of them were qualified and willing to serve. The pressure group ILD had provided their top attorney, Joseph Brodsky from New York to defend the boys. He achieved a major success over the Alabama court system.<sup>34</sup> The NAACP was seen as in competition with the ILD for influence amongst African American opinion but the NAACP had been humiliated by them on its chosen battleground, the United States legal system.

Lynching is defined as the involvement of a mass of people carrying out summary justice. In such a case as this an execution was to be carried out by the state at the behest of a mob, with only the appearance of a fair trial. This was the situation in Scottsboro. Due process required the appointment of lawyers and a jury and this was done in the original Scottsboro trial. However, the defense attorneys were unable to function effectively. The NAACP was inhibited in its defence by the sensitivity of the subject matter, so they persistently tried to avoid the topic of interracial sex. Their argument was that most lynchings were not connected with the crime of rape at all. Many victims were chosen at random, while others were killed for 'offences' which were not crimes, such as showing 'disrespect' to whites. Across the country several 'Sundown Towns' existed where African Americans were

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<sup>32</sup> U.S. Supreme Court, Justice Sutherland, *Powell v. Alabama*, [Powell v. Alabama, 287 U.S. 45 \(1932\). Decision, U.S. Supreme Court. - Cornell University Library Digital Collections: Scottsboro Trials Collection](#) (Retrieved July 30, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> U.S. American Red Cross: *Report by the Oklahoma Commission to study the Race Riot of 1921*. (Tulsa OK., 1994).

Supreme Court, *Norris v. Alabama* JUSTIA <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/294/587/> (Retrieved July 30, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Horne, *Powell v. Alabama*, p.30.

threatened with murder for being found in town after dark.<sup>35</sup> The NAACP took an evidence-based, rational approach which they hoped would win over educated whites. They used research to support their campaign. The Tuskegee Institute recorded 4,743 lynchings in the United States between the years 1882 and 1968, but only 1,200 (25%) involved an accusation of rape or attempted rape.<sup>36</sup> The NAACP produced a similar analysis to show that African Americans were no more likely to be guilty of rape than were whites of a similar social class.

The NAACP leadership was haunted by the claim that they were advocating ‘social equality’ a phrase which was usually taken to be code for ‘miscegenation’. As a result, they avoided the subject whenever possible. The organisation was torn between its ideal of equality and a fear of losing its reputation for moderation. The leaders were also afraid that taking part in the defence of the Scottsboro boys would taint the organisation with the sordid details of their lives.

Walter White did not wish to avoid the issue of lynching because he lacked courage; in 1919, he risked being lynched himself while on an undercover investigation of a lynching in Georgia. ‘I would be given short shrift if...the murderers found out why I was there. I would be subjected to even greater fury for the sin of ‘passing’ as a white man’.<sup>37</sup> On a train journey leaving for the North the conductor was puzzled by his departure. He commented, ‘But you’re leaving, mister, just when the fun is going to start...There’s a damned yellow ni..er here passing for white and the boys are going to get him’.<sup>38</sup> If he were exposed as an African American passing for white, the locals would have ‘fun’ with his torture and murder. White was not afraid of physical danger but association with rapists and prostitutes threatened the reputation of the NAACP.

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<sup>35</sup> James W. Loewen, *Sundown Towns and Counties: The Hidden Dimension of Segregation in America*, (New York, 2005), p.4.

<sup>36</sup> Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching*, p.8.

<sup>37</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.40.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p.51.

The Association was permanently troubled by issues of social class and ‘respectability’. The Scottsboro campaign was seen by Walter White as his most difficult case. William Pickens was frustrated by the lack of cooperation from the parents. He complained to Walter White,

Walter, if those Communist pigheads succeed in sacrificing those lads, poor, ignorant dumb-driven cattle that they are, they will certainly make me their eternal enemy...I still hold that they are not enemies, at heart, of the boys. But they do not care a damn what occurs to those boys or to the whole Negro race. Their political advance is all that interests them.<sup>39</sup>

He was perplexed because the need to oppose injustice clashed with a reluctance to get involved with ‘these unfortunate boys’ and young women whose reputation might damage the organisation. An aspect of this was snobbery, as a prejudice against the ‘lower orders’ was evident even in the idealistic lawyer Raymond Pace Alexander. He described a crime location in West Philadelphia as ‘a very bad section of the city, where live foreigners, lower-class Americans and poor colored families’ in grim back alleys. The foreigners were also of ‘a very low and unruly class’, he claimed.<sup>40</sup> Walter White was prejudiced against the boys on several grounds. They were dark-skinned, illiterate transients who were accused of ‘miscegenation’. One described to the court the grotesque symptoms of syphilis in his ‘privates’. Willie Robertson was assessed by a psychiatrist as having a mental age of nine and an IQ test score of only 64.<sup>41</sup>

In private to his colleagues White explained his loathing of these sordid examples of Black life.<sup>42</sup> He told a senior colleague that he believed the boys were innocent, despite their ‘bad reputation’.<sup>43</sup> Class-bound attitudes became apparent in his private letters referring to their accusers, ‘The two girls are of the lowest sort and spent the night in a house...in a

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<sup>39</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Professor William Pickens to Walter White, May 30, 1931: Legal File Part 1, Box 1, D69.

<sup>40</sup> NAACP: LoC Branch Files: Letter from Raymond P. Alexander to Walter White, March 25, 1932. Part 1, Box 1, G188.

<sup>41</sup> Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, p.221.

<sup>42</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter to Herbert A. Turner, May 9, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 17.

<sup>43</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter to Herbert A. Turner, May 11, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 16.



questionable neighbourhood'. He claimed that one of them had 'been caught in flagrante delicto with a Black a few months before'.<sup>44</sup> Pickens expressed unguarded opinions about the parents. He complained to Roy Wilkins that the parents and the boys were 'all very ignorant and wholly unfamiliar with the communists'.<sup>45</sup> Elitist attitudes like these made the NAACP leaders reluctant to be involved with uneducated youths who associated with white women.

The NAACP took a conciliatory approach, attempting to reduce white hostility to their defence by cooperating with the Alabama legal system. White Alabama lawyers were sought out to reduce local resentment of outsiders. This was not always successful. Congressman George Huddleston was suggested as a defense attorney because of his liberal reputation, but he was enraged when the idea was put to him, 'He reared up out of his chair and nearly hit the ceiling. Said 'he was not interested in knowing any of the facts'. Huddleston added, 'I don't care whether they [the defendants] are innocent or guilty. They were found riding on the freight car with two white women, and that is enough for me...I am in favor of the boys being executed as quickly as possible!'<sup>46</sup> This was a common attitude even amongst educated men and women.

The Association was well-informed of the details of the case, which was being widely reported at the time.<sup>47</sup> White chose to ignore the sexual aspect of the case and cited *Moore v. Dempsey* (1923) which was a trial with no sexual element. In *Moore*, the Supreme Court ruled that 'mob domination' had prevented due process and a fair trial.<sup>48</sup> White came under pressure including from his colleague Roy Wilkins who was new to the NAACP as White's deputy and was eager for the fray, 'I thought it was a miracle that all nine weren't lynched on the spot...I waited eagerly for Walter to grab the case, but to my surprise, the New York

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from White to Roy Wilkins, May 13, 1931. Part 1, Box1, D68, Folder 17.

<sup>46</sup> NAACP: LoC Report of Interview with Congressman George Huddleston, May 6, 1931. Legal File, Part 1, Box 1, D 68, Folder 15.

<sup>47</sup> Schomburg Center: Historical Newspapers Collection: *The New York Times*; March 26, 1931.

<sup>48</sup> Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching*, p.86.

office seemed...to let it go...The Communists scrambled aboard'.<sup>49</sup> This was an example of the tensions within the NAACP leadership. Wilkins could not understand why the NAACP was so slow to get involved, particularly as there were so many contacts from sympathisers who wanted to know what action the organisation was taking.<sup>50</sup> An important example came from Chattanooga, Tennessee which was the former location of an NAACP branch. The Colored Ministers Alliance of Chattanooga was keen to support the boys. Chattanooga had no local branch as it had collapsed in the 1920s. The ministers wrote to Walter White, having taken the initiative by retaining a white lawyer 'to see these boys get justice'.<sup>51</sup> The lawyer was Stephen Roddy who prepared a detailed account of the trial in anticipation of an appeal taking place.<sup>52</sup> He sent this to New York and a legal assistant replied on April 10, calmly noting the eight death sentences and asking the clergy to prepare a trial transcript to be sent 'at the very earliest opportunity'.<sup>53</sup> The Board of Directors and National Legal Committee insisted on seeing a transcript before they would discuss taking action.

The Association showed no urgency while ILD seized the opportunity to win the trust of the youths and their parents. Rivalry between ILD and the NAACP intensified. Communist activist Harry Haywood, newly returned from the Soviet Union, claimed that the NAACP was determined to sabotage the communist campaign for the boys. He commented, 'They refused to support a Free the Scottsboro Boys March on Washington, but this proved to be a serious blunder for the already crisis ridden and isolated NAACP'.<sup>54</sup> ILD members Isabelle Allen and Lowell Wakefield were in the Scottsboro courtroom when the grand jury first convened to discuss charging them. Isabelle's husband Jim Allen, a journalist, was also present. At this time the NAACP had no lawyers or observers in attendance at the trial.

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<sup>49</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, p.157.

<sup>50</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from James Syphax to NAACP, April 30, 1931: Part I, Box I, D68, Folder 13.

<sup>51</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from New York NAACP April 2, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 9.

<sup>52</sup> NAACP: LoC Report by Stephen Roddy, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 9.

<sup>53</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from New York Office, April 10, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 9.

<sup>54</sup> Harry Haywood, Gwendolyn Midlo Hall ed., *A Black Communist in the Freedom Struggle*. (Minneapolis, 2012), p. 190.

Scholar Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore observed, ‘Allen’s early and relentless coverage of the Scottsboro ‘Boys’ made his reputation. It probably saved them from execution’.<sup>55</sup> After sentences were passed on the Boys many sympathisers wanted to know what the NAACP plans were. James W. Syphax wrote, ‘It has greatly surprised me to note what little activity your generally very efficient organisation has taken in the matter of that infamous legal slaughter of those nine youths’.<sup>56</sup> A day after sentencing the Association received numerous inquiries from the public and six NAACP branches. The American Civil Liberties Union, the Socialist Party and the editor of *The Nation* magazine were also in touch.<sup>57</sup> The famous lawyer Clarence Darrow had already been asked by the ILD to lead the defense team. The NAACP was under extreme pressure to become involved.

Walter White had lost the initiative so in self-defence he began to construct his own version of recent events. His responses were misleading, as shown in a letter which falsely claimed, ‘The NAACP has been closely connected with these cases from the very beginning. We are for obvious reasons not making our connection public until we have concluded plans for action’.<sup>58</sup> His answers often complained about legal costs, included a plea for donations and a membership application form for the NAACP. This illustrates the organisational problems pressing on White. He wrote to a Wisconsin legislator who had questioned his actions, saying, ‘Immediately upon receiving word of the arrest of the men we engaged counsel through representatives of ours in the vicinity’.<sup>59</sup> This misleading account ignored the role of the Chattanooga Methodists in favour of his own version of events.

The lack of branches in Chattanooga, Birmingham or Montgomery made the

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<sup>55</sup> Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights*, (New York and London, 2008), p.119.

<sup>56</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from James Syphax to NAACP, April 30, 1931: Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 13.

<sup>57</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin File: Office Diary, April 20, 1931: Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 9.

<sup>58</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Mrs Cartwright, April 20, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 9.

<sup>59</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to a Wisconsin legislator, April 22, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 10.

organisation's responses slow and ineffective. Methodist clergyman Doctor P. A. Stephens asked for permission to 're-organize' the Chattanooga branch using the old charter.<sup>60</sup> Grassroots members were calling for action. The Mobile branch consisted of a tiny group led by J.L. LeFlore. He complained that he had offered to send donations by airmail but received no answer, 'Unless proper encouragement is given by National Office people down here will lose interest in the appeal'.<sup>61</sup> On the same day a letter was received from Raymond Pace Alexander, offering the help of the American Bar Association, 'to avoid such a wholesale slaughter of human flesh that is contemplated by these Alabaman bloodhounds'.<sup>62</sup> There is no record of any reply from the NAACP to these approaches.

Leaders of the NAACP had a genuine fear of international communism being spread by the Great Depression and in almost every reply White mentioned the threat of communism. He was obsessed with the fear that the CPUSA would replace his own organisation. The CPUSA had run a propaganda war against the Association throughout the 1920s. In a letter to the editor of *The Afro-American* newspaper White complained 'Particular viciousness is involved in the Scottsboro cases...Their present efforts are designed to get revenge on the association and to destroy or discredit the NAACP'.<sup>63</sup> He wrote to his Chicago colleague, Herbert A. Turner, 'Unfortunately, the Communists are seeking to make propaganda out of the cases. I am convinced, harsh though it sounds, that they are far more interested in that than in saving the lives of the nine boys'.<sup>64</sup>

White made his views public in a major article for *Harper's* magazine, where he attacked the CPUSA for exploiting the boys; he claimed that Communists did not want the youths saved, but sought instead to make "martyrs" of them for purposes of Communist

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<sup>60</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from P.A. Stephens to Walter White, April 16, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 10.

<sup>61</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from J.L. LeFlore, Mobile, to R.W. Bagnall Director of Branches, April 22, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 10.

<sup>62</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from R.P. Alexander to the NAACP, April 22, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 10.

<sup>63</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Carl Murphy, April 22, 1931: Legal File, Part 1 Box 1, D68, Folder 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

propaganda.<sup>65</sup> A draft by White on hotel notepaper from The Thomas Jefferson Hotel in Birmingham, Alabama shows that communist subversion was his real theme.<sup>66</sup> On April 20, 1931 White wrote to the Chattanooga clergy warning that the ILD would try to make propaganda from the case; he added that it was impossible to co-operate with the group. The NAACP claimed to be interested only in, 'saving the lives of these boys, if innocent' and securing a fair trial if guilty.<sup>67</sup> White appeared to be trying to ascertain if local people believed the boys to be innocent.

Walter White was manipulating the narrative but the failures of the NAACP were exposed when Field Secretary, William Pickens wrote to the communist newspaper, *The Daily Worker* congratulating the ILD on its prompt assistance for the defendants. This was a propaganda coup for the communists and Pickens was 'severely censured' by the Board of Directors for his 'disloyalty'. He had allowed his opinions 'to injure the organization'.<sup>68</sup> In a private letter White admitted damage had been done. 'The letter written by Pickens is being broadcast and it has done us immense harm'. He admitted the threat to the Association's reputation done by this case. Any connection with the communists would be 'suicidal' because they are 'an outfit of lunatics'. The parents were dismissed as 'pathetically poor'.<sup>69</sup>

Negative stories spread across the country, for example, 'Pickens asked to resign by the NAACP.' This was a false headline published in an Harlem newspaper.<sup>70</sup> Sympathisers were bewildered by the hesitations of the Association. Roy Wilkins was still a journalist on the *Kansas City Call* when he wrote to Walter White complaining of the 'embarrassment'

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<sup>65</sup> Walter White, 'The Negro and the Communist Party'. *Harper's Magazine*, December 1931.

<sup>66</sup> NAACP: LoC Personal Correspondence; draft article by Walter White, October 1931.

<sup>67</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to the public. April 20, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 9. My emphasis.

<sup>68</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Chairman of the Board to Mr William Pickens, April 30, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 12.

<sup>69</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to H. A. Turner and R. W. Bagnall May 3, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 14.

<sup>70</sup> NAACP: LoC *The New York News*, May 1931. Part 1, Box 1, C432, Folder 2.

caused by the case. The NAACP response to the problem was one of, 'silence and indefinite pronouncements' while the communists were ever active.<sup>71</sup> White wrote an angry reply to Wilkins attacking the CPUSA for not caring whether the Boys lived or died, provided they succeeded in spreading 'valuable propaganda'. He claimed their aim was either 'to destroy or seriously injure' the NAACP.<sup>72</sup>

The public expected the NAACP to save the boys, but it would be extremely difficult to do so without endangering its reputation. Issues of race, sex and class were hard enough to handle, but there was also a political problem caused by the presence of the communists.<sup>73</sup> The NAACP was unable to remove the ILD from the case. William Pickens became frustrated at his inability to win over the parents and he began to express his class bias in private. He claimed the parents were, 'the densest and dumbest animals it has yet been my privilege to meet...whose loyalty was being bought by the communists with a monthly cheque'.<sup>74</sup> Pickens showed his contempt for the CPUSA as well as the boys' parents, who could not match his own excellent education. As the propaganda war grew more intense, each side accused the other of exploiting the Boys. In 1931 Pickens was visiting Chattanooga in search of a parent he dismissively called 'the Williams woman'. He saw 'one of the Reds leading the Patterson couple like two dumb animals, jumping them into his car and racing them off to some place where the Williams woman had already been concealed'.<sup>75</sup> The 'Williams woman' was the mother of Eugene Williams, who was working with the ILD to save her son. White added, 'You will find, too, that some of those concerned belong to the type of colored people who believe anything said by a white man...in preference to anything that may be said by any Black, no matter how sincere or intelligent'.<sup>76</sup> White shows his

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<sup>71</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Roy Wilkins to Walter White, May 7, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 17.

<sup>72</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Roy Wilkins, May 12, 1931. Part I, Box 1, D68, Folder 17.

<sup>73</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to H. A. Turner, May 9, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 17.

<sup>74</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Will Pickens to Walter White, June 6, 1931. Legal File Part 1, Box 1, D69.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Pickens, May 27, 1931. Scottsboro Legal File Part 1, Box 1, D69.

disdain for poor Blacks who were, he claimed, unable to understand their own best interests.

The parents had, he believed, been completely deceived by the communists. White describes them as ‘pathetically ignorant and poor...Bewildered by the catastrophe’.<sup>77</sup> He demanded ‘absolute control’ of the case so that the parents and the CPUSA could all be excluded. He advised Pickens, ‘I think I ought to warn you in advance that you have...never before encountered such ignorance as you will find here’.<sup>78</sup> He added, ‘To begin at the beginning, the reputation of the boys is exceedingly bad, with one possible exception...The reputation of the two white girls is infinitely worse’. White railed at the ‘ignorance and stupidity’ of the parents.<sup>79</sup>

White was dismissive and abusive towards almost everyone involved. The Boys were an ill-favoured group, who might be guilty of rape and had breached the unwritten racial code. He wrote to his friend Herbert A. Turner that of all his cases this was the most ‘tangled and ugly’. The communists were out of control with their use of ‘almost insane threats’.<sup>80</sup> The events surrounding Scottsboro placed a heavy burden on the NAACP and its reputation for competence suffered badly. One example involved Stephen Roddy. The NAACP claimed to have appointed him as a defence lawyer but then was embarrassed to find out that he was an alcoholic.

To be associated with the communists would be ‘suicidal’ politically. The ‘ignorance and stupidity of the boy’s parents’ were to blame.<sup>81</sup> In a letter to Roy Wilkins, White complained the communists were exploiting the boys for their own purposes. He revealed his real fear which was that the CPUSA wanted to destroy the NAACP, ‘A large part of the viciousness of the communists’ attack on the NAACP ...is due to their desire to destroy or

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<sup>77</sup> NAACP: LoC Personal correspondence: Letter from White to Will Pickens. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 14.

<sup>78</sup> NAACP: LoC Private notes on hotel notepaper. Legal File Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 14.

<sup>79</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter to Herbert A. Turner and Robert Bagnall, May 9, 1931. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 17.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>81</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Herbert Turner: Scottsboro Legal File, Part 1, Box 1, D69. May 19, 1931.

seriously injure the NAACP...and thus to clear the ground for their own activities and propaganda among Negroes'.<sup>82</sup> He was anxious to maintain control of the organisation and prevent extremism. White claimed that he could have resolved this problem had he been in Scottsboro earlier.<sup>83</sup> White's position was delicate because he wanted support from southern white people and he targeted them for his persuasion. They included those who were considered liberal by the standards of the time but it was unfortunate for White that this group remained opposed to what they called 'miscegenation' and they were supporters of segregation.

The Commission on Interracial Cooperation (CIC) was one such body, which was founded in 1919 by two southern clergymen, Will W. Alexander and Willis D. Weatherford, who were lavishly financed by white philanthropists in response to a revival in Ku Klux Klan activity.<sup>84</sup> A women's branch was established at the CIC founding conference in Memphis, in cooperation with the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, which was led by Harriet Tubman and Mary Church Terrell. The CIC programme condemned lynching. It stated, 'As women we urge those who are charged with the administration of the law to prevent lynchings at any cost...we pledge to...uphold these officials in the execution of justice'.<sup>85</sup> In 1931 the CIC held pledges of support totalling \$721,000 and ran a Stabilization Fund to administer its generous budget.<sup>86</sup>

Despite the goodwill of white sympathisers, race relations were still a minefield. One Black activist arrived as a guest speaker at a white CIC Baptist group, only to be told that she

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<sup>82</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Roy Wilkins, May 13, 1931. Part 1, Box1, D68, Folder 17.

<sup>83</sup> NAACP: LoC Personal correspondence: Letter from Walter White to Will Pickens. Part 1, Box 1, D68, Folder 14.

<sup>84</sup> Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White*, p.34.

<sup>85</sup> Southern Women and Race Cooperation *Documenting the American South*. [Summary of Southern Women and Race Cooperation. A Story of the Memphis Conference, October Sixth and Seventh, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty \(unc.edu\)](#) (Retrieved 17 July, 2013).

<sup>86</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin Subject File, The Commission for Interracial Cooperation, July-December 1931. Financial Statement. Part 1, Box 1, C32.



had been invited to describe ‘the work of the n...ers’ and she must enter by the back door.’<sup>87</sup> The CIC strategy was to educate white opinion and in 1935 the CIC published a list of seventeen sheriffs who had ‘shown exceptional coolness and judgement’ in standing up to a mob and they were awarded medals inscribed, ‘In Defense of Law and Civilization’.<sup>88</sup> The NAACP believed they had sufficient common ground on which to build an alliance with whites like these.

Southern whites had a reputation for hating communism and the NAACP could not risk appearing to cooperate with the CPUSA. NAACP official Herbert J. Seligman attacked the communists because of the irreconcilable differences between their methods. Over Scottsboro, he believed, ‘such cases must be won not in newspapers, but in courts of law’.<sup>89</sup>

In a letter to a colleague Walter White claimed ‘Unfortunately, the Communists are seeking to make propaganda out of the cases. I am convinced...that they are far more interested in that than in actually saving the lives of the nine boys’.<sup>90</sup> Invective and abuse emphasised the hatred that existed between the NAACP and communists. African American writer and communist Eugene Gordon wrote sarcastically in the journal *Labor Defender* about the NAACP as the ‘Nice Association for the Advancement of Colored People’.<sup>91</sup> In *The New Masses* magazine it became ‘the Nicest Association for the Advantage of Certain Persons’. On a more serious note, they were accused of seeking to confirm their ‘ultra-respectable’ status in American society by allowing the boys to be handed over to the hangman.<sup>92</sup>

Walter White found that attacking the CPUSA alienated his own supporters among

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<sup>87</sup> Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, p. 101.

<sup>88</sup> NAACP: LoC Report to the Board of Directors by Roy Wilkins. Part 2, Box A70.

<sup>89</sup> NAACP: LoC Press Release, May 27, 1931. Box B1, Folder 18.

<sup>90</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Herbert A. Turner. May 11, 1931. Scottsboro Legal File Part 1, Box 1, D68. Folder 16.

<sup>91</sup> Walter Howard, ed. *Black Communists on Scottsboro: A Documentary History*, (Philadelphia, 2007), p.12.

<sup>92</sup> Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, p.86.

editors of the African American press including: *The Baltimore African American*, *The Chicago Defender* and *The Norfolk Journal and Guide*. All took the view that communism should not be seen as ‘a complete evil’.<sup>93</sup> None of these opinion leaders described themselves as an ‘anti-communist’. William H. Kelley, editor of *The Amsterdam News* asked why they should not look favourably on communism, since capitalism had not given them anything; moreover the CPUSA was the only party which practiced racial equality.<sup>94</sup> This opinion demonstrated yet again the difficulties of Walter White’s position. The CPUSA strategy was determined by the forces of international communism, which were engaged in a world-wide class struggle. Many Americans believed it was a menace to US society.

Roy Wilkins and Walter White believed that the interests of the Soviet Union were being served by CPUSA propaganda. White complained about their ulterior motives, ‘These efforts at organization were based upon the theory that the African Americans are the most oppressed group in the United States and should be the most fertile field for revolutionary propaganda’. Their strategy was to expose the ‘true’ nature of the ‘capitalist legal system’.<sup>95</sup> The NAACP was despised for its trust in judges and the courts. In the 1920s the League of Struggle for Negro Rights accused the Association of being a ‘Black misleader’ with a strategy of ‘appealing to the white bosses’.<sup>96</sup> Communists regarded Scottsboro not as a legal struggle, but a political struggle designed to win support for revolution. Harry Haywood was involved from the start, ‘We Communists viewed the case in much broader, class terms. First, we assumed the boys were innocent. Second, it was a lyncher’s court...From the beginning we called for mass protest against the social crime being acted out by Wall Street’s Bourbon henchmen’ in the southern states.<sup>97</sup>

Communist propaganda was vitriolic and damaging for the NAACP. *The Daily*

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<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to editors: Scottsboro Legal File Part 1, Box 1, D69. May 19, 1931.

<sup>95</sup> Walter White, ‘The Negro and the Communist Party’, *Harper’s Magazine*, December 1931. p.62.

<sup>96</sup> NAACP: LoC Poster, ‘Defend the Scottsboro Boys!’ Part 1, Box 1, C401, Folder 14.

<sup>97</sup> Hall, ed., *A Black Communist*, p.167.

*Worker* called for mass demonstrations across the world in support of the boys and denounced the NAACP for its ‘betrayal’.<sup>98</sup> Communism was anathema to the NAACP and White claimed their tactics were based on ruthless lies. The ‘Boys’ were told the NAACP wanted them lynched, while White and Pickens were accused of serving the ‘boss-lynchers’ of the South.<sup>99</sup> The communists used celebrities to advance their case. Albert Einstein wrote a letter to President Hoover, which produced several valuable headlines, for example, ‘Einstein begs President to save Alabama Negroes: Pleads for eight condemned at Scottsboro, for the sake of humanity’.<sup>100</sup> Einstein was joined by the world-famous Soviet novelist Maxim Gorky.<sup>101</sup> These high-pressure tactics kept the initiative away from the Association.

The NAACP was in competition with the Communists for resources available from The American Fund for Public Service, known as the Garland Fund. The Fund rejected applications for donations from the International Labor Defense and the American Negro Labor Congress. White commented that members of the Communist Party on the Garland Fund’s board of directors ‘fought bitterly to the very end to get \$100,000 appropriated to the ILD instead of the NAACP’.<sup>102</sup> Walter White won because of his skill at lobbying, although in the event, most of the money was never received. This increased the tensions between the NAACP and the CPUSA.

The Association was cautious because of its desperate financial situation. Walter White was canvassing wealthy sympathisers like John D. Rockefeller III, Harvey Firestone, George Foster Peabody and Felix Warburg.<sup>103</sup> He warned the cotton merchant Fergus Reid, ‘Acting upon the theory that the African American is the most exploited and the most unjustly treated group in America and...the most fertile field for revolutionary activity, the

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<sup>98</sup> Schomburg Center Communist Historical Newspapers: *The Daily Worker*, May 6, 1932.

<sup>99</sup> NAACP: LoC Article, *Harper’s Weekly*. October 31, 1931. Part 1, Box D71, Folder 1.

<sup>100</sup> Schomburg Center Historical Newspapers: *New York Herald/Tribune*, July 12, 1931.

<sup>101</sup> Schomburg Center Historical Newspapers: *Chicago Daily Tribune*, September 21, 1931.

<sup>102</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Fergus Reid, January 22, 1932. Part 1, Box 1, C159, Folder 1.

<sup>103</sup> NAACP: LoC Office Record; Part 1, Box 1, C159, Folder 5.

Communists are thus concentrating upon efforts to spread their doctrine among American Blacks'.<sup>104</sup> The CPUSA located Scottsboro in a context of an 'imminent revolution' while the NAACP were labelled as 'social fascists', 'reformists' or 'class traitors'.<sup>105</sup> Harry Haywood was part of this process, as a black member of the CPUSA Central Committee. He argued the NAACP strategy would make it effectively an 'assistant hangman' for the state of Alabama.<sup>106</sup> The communist campaign was designed to connect Alabama with events in New York, Washington D.C. and across the whole of Europe.

Trial judges and officials were bombarded with angry telegrams threatening reprisals if the executions went ahead. On the day of sentencing the Central Committee of the CPUSA denounced the trial; this was the start of a campaign to brand Walter White and his colleague William Pickens as 'traitors'.<sup>107</sup> Communist propaganda accused the NAACP of treachery, 'They refused to have anything to do with the organizations defending the boys, the ILD and other groups. Shamelessly, they lied about the facts of the case, tried to cover up the hideous crime of the bosses against the toiling masses'.<sup>108</sup> However, the NAACP leaders were willing to work with rivals, even with the communists, provided they had control over the circumstances. They supported the Scottsboro Defense Committee, which was formed in 1936 by the ILD, NAACP and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). A neutral chairman came from the Methodist Federation for Social Service, Allan Knight Chalmers, who was pastor of the Broadway Tabernacle Congregational Church.

Roy Wilkins remained hostile to communism in all its aspects. He took the CPUSA's participation as proof of communist deception. It also confirmed his view that world

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<sup>104</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to Fergus Reid, January 22, 1932. Admin File Part 1, Box 1, C159, Folder 1.

<sup>105</sup> James A. Miller, Susan D. Pennybacker and Eve Rosenhaft, Mother Ada Wright and the international campaign to free the Scottsboro Boys, 1931-1934, *The American Historical Review*, Vol.106, No.2 (2001), pp.387- 430, p.391.

<sup>106</sup> Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South*, p.13.

<sup>107</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin File, Report, *The Daily Worker*, June 27, 1931, Part I, Box 1, C432, Folder 1.

<sup>108</sup>LoC Pamphlet on The Scottsboro campaign: *They shall not die! Stop the Legal Lynchings!* (New York, 1932), p.14.

communism was an international, monolithic entity controlled from Moscow. He asserted, 'At precisely this time, Stalin ordered his international outriders to form united fronts with liberal groups. Overnight, we capitalist tools became potential comrades-in-arms'.<sup>109</sup> Now the NAACP had a leading role in the campaign for the defence.<sup>110</sup> Scottsboro exposed the depth of divisions between the NAACP leadership and the Left. This encouraged a split amongst members of the NAACP, between those who supported the traditional concern for legal remedies and those on the Left whose main concern was social and economic reform. This tension would only increase in the 1930s, posing a serious threat to the existence of the Association and leading to the creation of the National Negro Congress in 1936, which significantly was held in Chicago.

At the core was a disagreement between liberals and radicals regarding the acceptance or rejection of the Constitution. The NAACP had a stake in the Constitution and the class system which it protected. The NNC and the CPUSA rejected the Constitution and favoured fundamental social change. The Association's reputation was damaged by the Scottsboro case which revealed evidence of snobbery, arrogance and contempt for ordinary African Americans. These opinions became public through leaks from within the leadership. Scottsboro shows Walter White's best and worst features as a leader. He stubbornly opposed all cooperation with the Left until the end of the 1930s and was determined to preserve the NAACP and its moderate, respectable image.

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<sup>109</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, p.159.

<sup>110</sup> Solomon, *The Cry was Unity*, p.299.

## **CHAPTER SIX: The NAACP and its Enemies to the Left and Right.**

Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold. Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter analyses the shifting position of the NAACP from the 1920s to the 1940s. Politically, the Association was a moderate, legal group placed between extremes of the Left and Right; these threatened to crush the organisation between them. I have used the archives to demonstrate the bitter conflicts between these extremes and their effect on the Association in these early decades. Gilbert Jonas gives an impression of the NAACP as a united, disciplined organisation.<sup>2</sup> The civil rights movement during the 1930s is shown by the evidence to be deeply divided and fluid in its allegiances. On the left were the communists and the National Negro Congress, an organisation which was regarded with deep suspicion by the NAACP leadership. Walter White saw them as a sinister force which threatened the values of the Constitution. On numerous occasions he came into conflict with the Communist Party and left-wing reformers within the Association itself. White also distrusted collectivist organisations, in favour of individualism and the class system. Joel Spingarn represented this view, 'His personal philosophy, like that of the Association, rested on those principles of non-economic liberalism which stressed equal civil and political rights for all, under the existing social economic system with special privileges for none'.<sup>3</sup>

The right-wing was at the opposite extreme of politics and consisted of Marcus Garvey's nationalist UNIA, who rejected the United States in favour of the mythical movement 'Back to Africa'. There was a huge gap between the NAACP leadership and the African American working-class. Some of the working-class supported the Communist Party

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<sup>1</sup> William Butler Yeats, *The Second Coming (1919)*. Collected Poems. (London, 2016).

<sup>2</sup> Jonas, *Freedom's Sword*, p. xiii.

<sup>3</sup> Ross, *Joel Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP 1911-1939*. (New York, 1972), p.243.

(CPUSA) and owed allegiance to the Soviet Union while others supported the UNIA. They looked to Africa and for their goals and inspiration.

The NAACP strategy lay at the intersection of two interpretations of history, one based on race and the other on social class. A fault-line within the organisation divided the two sides of this debate. Walter White never wavered from his belief in racial equality, but he opposed radical social change. This was reflected in his distrust of socialism and communism. A small, loosely organised group on the political left argued that social class should be the driving force behind politics. They believed the priority for African Americans should be the reform of education, employment and housing. In a period of mass unemployment the urgent challenge for African Americans was to survive the Depression. These debates reached a peak during the interwar period when the NAACP was challenged by the National Negro Congress and the CPUSA continued to be a threat. Walter White was concerned by the growth of communism, and the activities of a small group of 'Black Bolsheviks' who helped to run the National Negro Congress, Benjamin J. Davis Jr., Harry Haywood and James W. Ford.<sup>4</sup> The NNC National Council had seventy members, of whom ten were communists.<sup>5</sup> Claudia Jones and Esther Cooper were among several women recruited by the communists during this period because communism appeared to make sense of their triple oppressions by social structures of class, race and gender.<sup>6</sup> Women activists specialised in the causes of domestic workers and anti-fascism.<sup>7</sup>

The NAACP had always rejected violence in favour of rational thought and policy that was based on evidence. However, they faced a period of instability caused by war, racism and the mass movement of people northwards. The worst race riots of the century

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<sup>4</sup> Hall ed. Harry Haywood, *A Black Communist*, p.224.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.227.

<sup>6</sup> McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom*, p.92.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.114.

occurred in East St. Louis, Illinois in 1917. Ida Wells-Barnett produced an eyewitness account, *The East St. Louis Massacre: The Greatest Outrage of the Century*, in which she claimed over two hundred people died. She observed houses of middle-class African Americans which had been looted and burnt. 'Most of these houses had brass or iron bedsteads, and the mattresses were good, worth \$5.00...In two I saw a piano. In one of them the woman found a few...records, but her Victrola...had been taken away'.<sup>8</sup> Status symbols like the Victrola were a target for resentful, envious whites.<sup>9</sup> Issues of racism combined with class jealousy to cause the destruction.<sup>10</sup> In 1921 a further outbreak took place in Tulsa, Oklahoma where a thousand homes and businesses were burned to the ground and hundreds of people lost their lives.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Great War**

In the period after 1919 the NAACP came under attack from Socialists and Communists but it remained committed to its original value of moderation. After the war their policy was threatened by violence and extremism. A militant, secretive group known as the African Blood Brotherhood for Liberation and Redemption was founded in 1919 by another West Indian immigrant to New York, war veteran Cyril Briggs. The ABB was hostile to the NAACP, as reported by the communist Claude Mackay at the time, 'The petit bourgeoisie, with whom the race is honeycombed, find expression chiefly in the NAACP. This group of bourgeois gentlemen (colored and white) carry around the bourgeois psychology'.<sup>12</sup> Disaffected veterans also joined Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association.

The NAACP was highly successful during the period up to 1919 and membership had

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<sup>8</sup> Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *The East St. Louis Massacre: Greatest Outrage of the Century*. (Chicago, 1917), p.4.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>10</sup> Martha Gruening, 'Massacre of East St. Louis', *The Crisis*, Vol.14, No.5 September 1917, pp.219-238, p.227.

<sup>11</sup> Ellsworth, *The Ground-Breaking*, p.13.

<sup>12</sup> Claude Mackay, *Report on the American 'Negro Problem' for the Communist International*, November 1922. Held in the Comintern Archive, Moscow; f.515, op.1; d.93, l.97; 99-105. Accessed Schomburg Center.



risen rapidly under the dynamic leadership of two Executive Secretaries, a hard-working white woman, May Child Nerney, followed by the African American James Weldon Johnson. Membership reached 9,200 in January 1918 and 51,023 by April 1919.<sup>13</sup> An estimated total of one hundred thousand members was achieved in 1920, after which the growth turned into a long-term decline. Hopes for a law against lynching had remained temporarily high after 1919 and a bill was drafted by the NAACP with the assistance of Walter White and Moorfield Storey. Congressman Leonidas Dyer presented the Bill in 1918. His campaign appeared successful and it passed the House of Representatives in 1922 by 230 -119 votes. Disappointment was the order of the day when after many debates and hearings, it was blocked in the US Senate. The NAACP was forced to admit defeat and withdrew the Bill. Extremists of left and right appeared to be vindicated by the failure of the NAACP's rigorously legal tactics. However, scholar William B. Hixson argues that Moorfield Storey had taken legal argument a step beyond his earlier narrow view, which was that a ban on lynching was probably unconstitutional. He believed that the Southern states had failed to provide due process and equal protection of the law. As a result, Congress had the power to protect these rights by passing laws against lynching.<sup>14</sup>

In 1919 racial violence continued and disorder began to spread from undistinguished places like Jenkins County, Georgia to the largest cities, including Washington D.C. Clashes between black and white US Army veterans were triggered by arguments over segregated bus seats, access to beaches or parks; even the appearance of African American soldiers in US Army uniform seemed to provoke attacks.<sup>15</sup> The combination of legislative failure and increased disorder caused disillusionment with the NAACP strategy. This was confirmed by

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<sup>13</sup> NAACP: LoC John Shillady, Speech: Part 1, Box 6, Reel 8.

<sup>14</sup> William B. Hixson, Moorfield Storey and The Defense of the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill. *The New England Quarterly*, Vol.42, No.1 March 1969. pp. 65-81, p.78.

<sup>15</sup> Cameron McWhirter, *Red Summer: 1919 and the Awakening of Black America*, (New York, 2011), p. 25.

the rapidly falling membership in the 1920s. Before the war hopes had been high for better race relations, based on promises made by President Woodrow Wilson of peace, democracy and self-determination. The reality was disappointment and violence.

Historian B. Joyce Ross emphasises the NAACP's persistent belief in non-economic liberalism, which meant legal rights only and loyalty to the Constitution.<sup>16</sup> Social and economic reforms had a low priority compared with individual freedom. Moorfield Storey's concept of society was based on a social contract to protect citizens and their property from anarchy. To obey the law was for him the Golden Rule.<sup>17</sup> He was determined to protect the right of African American citizens to due process, arguing, 'Where law ends, tyranny and barbarism begin'.<sup>18</sup> Storey was an opponent of war and violence generally, although he was not a pacifist. He perceptively pointed out the danger to US society represented by 'disbanding armies' in 1919. They released resentful, damaged men who were, in some cases, a threat to public safety. This group encouraged extremism.<sup>19</sup>

In return for loyalty, citizen's private property and personal security were protected.<sup>20</sup> This was a narrow definition of civil rights which caused permanent tension between African Americans from different social classes. The professional classes, especially clergy, lawyers, office workers and teachers led the branches of the NAACP. They favoured traditional politics including persuasion, lobbying and litigation. These would not alarm the respectable middle classes or sympathetic whites. The natural caution of the NAACP was reinforced by an informal alliance with conservatives in the Black Baptist Church. This movement was led by the National Baptist Convention established in Montgomery, Alabama. Baptist women backed the NAACP over a ban on lynching and discrimination at the national conference. They passed a resolution in support of the Association, 'Any man not a member...stands with

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<sup>16</sup> Ross, *J.E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP*, p.14.

<sup>17</sup> Storey, *Obedience to the Law*, p. 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Fourth and Fourteenth Amendments. <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/constitution>.

the mob. There is no middle ground'.<sup>21</sup> The NAACP argued that African Americans could rise from their oppressed status and assert their rights against white supremacy while remaining within the law.<sup>22</sup>

### **Marcus Garvey and the UNIA**

In the 1920s thousands of ex-soldiers were still trying to adjust to normal life after the Great War. The UNIA won their support and argued for its own version of the Constitution, The Declaration of Negro Rights, which was adopted in 1918 which declared, 'Be it known that all men are created equal and entitled to the rights of life, liberty and pursuit of happiness...we declare men, women and children of our blood...citizens of Africa, the Motherland of all Negroes'.<sup>23</sup> Marcus Garvey developed a politics of separatist racial identity and he taunted the NAACP for advocating assimilation. His supporters were noticeably 'younger, darker, angrier and poorer' than members of the National Association.<sup>24</sup> The gulf separating them was revealed by the willingness of Garvey to hold secret talks with arch-racist Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi, to discuss the permanent separation of the races. When these controversial talks were exposed, Garvey was defiant, 'Between the Ku Klux Klan and the Moorfield Storey National Association for the Advancement of 'Certain' People, give me the Klan for their honesty of purpose'.<sup>25</sup> Garvey attacked his former ally W.E.B. DuBois as a 'Black misleader' and a 'hater of dark people'.<sup>26</sup> DuBois was condemned as a traitor and dismissed as a 'white man's n---r'.<sup>27</sup> He was accused of hating his own African American blood and wanting to be white. Garvey accused the NAACP of planning to create 'a caste aristocracy of light skin'. Anything Black was said to be for DuBois, 'ugly,

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<sup>21</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontents*, p.224.

<sup>22</sup> Sengupta, 'Elites, Subalterns, and American Identities', p.1106.

<sup>23</sup> Robert Hill, ed. *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*. Volumes 1-8. (Berkeley, 1986), Vol.2, p.572.

<sup>24</sup> Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois*, p.417.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.432.

<sup>26</sup> Hill, ed. *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*. Vol. 5, p.257.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in August Meier and John H. Bracey, *The NAACP as a Reform Movement 1909-1965: 'To Reach the Conscience of America'*, *Journal of Southern History* Vol.59, No.1 (1993) February, pp.3-30, p.11.

hideous, monstrous'. On a visit to *The Crisis* magazine office, Garvey observed that DuBois only had the lightest of colored people working for him.<sup>28</sup>

UNIA radicalism appealed to the working-class and it grew into an international network with 1,176 branches, of which five hundred were in the southern United States; of these, 354 were in farming communities.<sup>29</sup> Garveyism also appealed to African Americans who had migrated from the rural south and found themselves disoriented on arrival in the cities.<sup>30</sup> He used the semiotics of an independent state and his overpowering oratory to give them a sense of direction.<sup>31</sup> Historian Manfred Berg argues that the UNIA was 'a radical, charismatic alternative to the NAACP's rationalism and legalism'.<sup>32</sup> Garveyism opposed the NAACP who sought good relations with the white business community.<sup>33</sup> The rivalry descended into a visceral dispute over class, race and skin colour. Light skin was common among the NAACP leadership and sociologist E. Franklin Frazier observed that a 'racial mixture' seemed to raise the status of the 'mulatto' above 'the unmixed Black'.<sup>34</sup> This gave the NAACP a sense of superiority and caused resentment among others.

The gulf between NAACP and UNIA was intensely personal and descended to insults. DuBois condemned Garvey as either a 'lunatic or a traitor' and 'the most dangerous enemy of the Black race in America'.<sup>35</sup> Garvey was described by the NAACP's Robert W. Bagnall as, 'A little, fat, black man, ugly, but with intelligent eyes...in the presence of a thousand or more applauding dark spectators'.<sup>36</sup> Bagnall, who was an ordained minister and

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<sup>28</sup> Hill, ed. *The Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*, Vol. 5, p.437.

<sup>29</sup> Jarod Roll, 'Garveyism and the Eschatology of African Redemption in the Rural South, 1920-1936'. *Religion and American Culture: Journal of Interpretation*, Vol.20, Issue 1. (2010) pp.24-56, p.28.

<sup>30</sup> Erik S. McDuffie, Garveyism in Cleveland, Ohio and the history of the diasporic Midwest 1920-1975. *African Identities*, Vol.9, No.2 (July 2011), pp.163-182, p.167.

<sup>31</sup> Roll, 'Garveyism and the Eschatology of African Redemption', p.41.

<sup>32</sup> Manfred Berg, *Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration*, (Gainesville, Florida, 2005), p.38.

<sup>33</sup> McDuffie, Garveyism in Cleveland, p.167.

<sup>34</sup> Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie*, p.135.

<sup>35</sup> Hill, ed. *Marcus Garvey and UNIA Papers*. Vol. 5, p.583.

<sup>36</sup> Hill, ed. *Marcus Garvey and UNIA*. Vol. 4, p.933.

NAACP Director of Branches abused Garvey at a public meeting.<sup>37</sup> He described him as, ‘a Black of unmixed stock, squat, stocky, fat and sleek, with protruding jaws and heavy jowls...pig-like eyes...bulldog-like face...tyrannical, intolerant, cunning, shifty’.<sup>38</sup> Bagnall was using Jamaican and Nigerian dialect, describing Garvey as ‘pig-like’ and a traitor who had ‘sold out’ naïve Blacks to the Klan.<sup>39</sup> Garvey was a ‘handkerchief-head’ referring to a degraded slave who worked in return for old clothes and ‘victuals’ left out for him on the back porch of the ‘Big House’.<sup>40</sup> This was a deadly insult.

The issue of race was also reduced to personal abuse by DuBois, whose favourite target was the Executive Secretary, of whom he wrote, ‘Walter White is white. He has more white companions and friends than colored. He goes where he will in New York...and naturally meets no Color Line, for the simple...reason that he isn’t colored’.<sup>41</sup> DuBois distanced himself further from the NAACP by attacking its policies. He questioned the bonafides of those ‘American Blacks who...conceive themselves as belonging to the white race’.<sup>42</sup> The hatred between the supporters of the two organisations was obvious and it revealed the sensitivity of the Association to issues of social status and skin colour. When the exchange of insults was at an end the NAACP remained intact, a solvent organisation with thousands of supporters and able leaders, while the UNIA relied on a single, charismatic, flawed personality. The corruption of Garvey’s Black Star Shipping Line was exposed by DuBois’ careful research published in *The Crisis*. Garvey was deported from the US in 1927.<sup>43</sup> He and DuBois continued to share some values, such as pride of race. W.E.B. DuBois observed, ‘We

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<sup>37</sup> *New York Times*, August 21, 1922, [The New York Times at Newspapers.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (Retrieved August 5, 2017).

<sup>38</sup> Robert Bagnall, ‘The Madness of Marcus Garvey’. *The Messenger*, March 1923.

<sup>39</sup> *The New York Times*, August 21, 1922, [The New York Times at Newspapers.com](http://www.nytimes.com) (Retrieved August 5, 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Opinion by W.E.B. DuBois, *The Crisis*, Vol.29, No.2. December 1924, pp.86-94, p.86.

<sup>41</sup> Editorial, *The Crisis*, Vol.40, No.4. April 1934. pp.115-117, p.115.

<sup>42</sup> W.E.B. DuBois: ‘Pan Africa and the New Racial Philosophy’. *The Crisis*, Vol.40, No.11. November, 1933. p.247.

<sup>43</sup> Report by W.E.B. DuBois, *The Crisis*, Vol.25, No.3. January 1923, pp.120-133, p.121.

believe that the Black people, as a race, have a contribution to make to civilization and humanity, which no other race can make'.<sup>44</sup>

DuBois and Garvey were each hostile to white empires, for example in opposing the US Marines' occupation of Haiti in 1915. Supporters of the NAACP took a moral stand on the rights of 'colored peoples' and they saw no distinction between foreign and domestic policy. The United States' invasion of Haiti was a regular subject of NAACP protests since they advocated freedom for victimised 'inferior races' anywhere in the world.<sup>45</sup> In *The Crisis* American intervention was said to be driven by greed and business interests. To serve the interests of an American corporation, American bullets were used to shoot down 'peaceful citizens.' An American Admiral was appointed to be that country's dictator.<sup>46</sup>

### **The economic crisis of the 1930s**

Racism intensified the economic crisis faced by African Americans, encouraging extremism on the Left. It took the form of discrimination by government agencies during the 1930s.<sup>47</sup> Work by activist John Preston Davies demonstrated this through research by the Joint Committee on National Recovery. The NAACP relied on Roosevelt's New Deal to solve social problems, while it continued its programme of publicity, lobbying and litigation. In an unusual initiative the NAACP sent Roy Wilkins undercover to report on low pay in Mississippi, where the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers paid ten cents an hour to men building dams and levees.<sup>48</sup> He presented his evidence to a Senate inquiry and wages were raised to twenty cents an hour. The records show few such substantive achievements in the 1930s but rather a glut of meetings, committees and rhetoric. The historian Harvard Sitkoff said, 'Using its influence with Eleanor Roosevelt and other New Dealers, the NAACP sought to protect

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<sup>44</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, *The Conservation of Races*. (Washington D.C., 1897), p.15.

<sup>45</sup> Pictures from Haiti, *The Crisis*, October 1915 Vol.10, No.6, p.272.

<sup>46</sup> Opinion, *The Crisis*, October 1915 Vol.10, No.6, p.293.

<sup>47</sup> Report by John P. Davis, *The Crisis*, May 1935. pp.141-2. p.142.

<sup>48</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, p.119.

African Americans in federal programs like the Works Progress Administration'.<sup>49</sup> Sitkoff asserts that the Association made significant progress, 'in the interests of the Black American'.<sup>50</sup> These achievements seem generally vague and numinous.

Walter White was determined to pursue a ban on lynching and segregation. He did not give a high priority to social and economic reform. His lobbying against lynching brought him into close contact with the President and Eleanor Roosevelt during the 1930s. The President appeared to be sympathetic to the NAACP but, in reality he made little effort to prevent the atrocities. White's aim was to get the Costigan-Wagner Bill against lynching through the Senate. The Bill was intended to punish participants in lynch mobs as well as the law officers who failed to protect their victims.<sup>51</sup> Scholar Kenneth R. Janken argues that Roosevelt was really indifferent to the issue and was only interested in the support of southern senators for his New Deal programme, especially the passage of the Social Security Act.<sup>52</sup> Eleanor Roosevelt was sympathetic to the cause of anti-lynching and spoke to the President on several occasions, conveying White's point of view. At meetings White personally tried to persuade the President to act but in time accepted his failure to change FDR's mind. The historian Melissa Cooper argues that the President had a completely different approach to the issue. His concern was not to pass an Anti-Lynching Bill at all, but to make the entire system of government more effective.<sup>53</sup> The President was a superbly convincing politician but White eventually realised that he was not achieving anything. Discreet lobbying over afternoon tea in the White House Rose Garden was not successful.

Eleanor Roosevelt wrote to White explaining the President's view that federal action against lynching would be unconstitutional, 'The President feels that lynching is a question of

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<sup>49</sup> Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, p.193.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Melissa Cooper, 'Reframing Eleanor Roosevelt's influence in the 1930s Anti-Lynching Movement around a New Philosophy of Government'. *European Journal of American Studies*. (Spring 2017), pp. 1-15, p.1.

<sup>52</sup> Janken, *White. The Biography of Walter White*, p.210.

<sup>53</sup> Cooper, 'Reframing Eleanor Roosevelt's influence'. pp. 1-15, p.11.

education in the states...rallying good citizens and creating public opinion so that localities themselves will wipe it out...it seems a terrible thing to stand by'.<sup>54</sup> This angered White, who had been hearing the same weak, flawed and disingenuous arguments since the 1920s. He was angry that a major Government conference on crime was convened by the President and J. Edgar Hoover which ignored the whole issue of lynching.<sup>55</sup> White wrote to Eleanor Roosevelt to ask if he was being deceived and used as mere political cover? He told her he believed 'you and the President will be able through vigorous action' to ensure passage of the anti-lynching Bill through the US Senate.<sup>56</sup> White was disappointed again by the President's failure to support the reform. Melissa Cooper states that Eleanor consistently misled Walter White, letting him think that the President was in favour of the Bill, which was not the case. This was at best 'wishful thinking' on Eleanor's part.<sup>57</sup>

The real reason for FDR's policy was a careful political calculation. As late as 1940, Ralph Bunche professor of Government at Howard University, reported that only 2.5 per cent of eligible Blacks had voted in the elections in Georgia, Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas, North and South Carolina.<sup>58</sup> This lack of votes made it easy for FDR to ignore the issue of racial violence. Historian Manfred Berg estimates that the number of registered Black voters in the South did not exceed five per cent of the voting age Black population.<sup>59</sup> Harvard Sitkoff argues that genuine efforts were made by federal officials to help African Americans with government aid, often in areas where sympathetic liberal officials had powerful positions. The Works Progress Administration (WPA) was led by a

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<sup>54</sup> LoC Letter from Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White detailing the First Lady's lobbying efforts for federal action against lynching, March 19, 1936. (Retrieved June 6, 2015).

<sup>55</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, p.132.

<sup>56</sup> LoC Letter to Eleanor Roosevelt to Walter White.

<sup>57</sup> Cooper, 'Reframing Eleanor Roosevelt's influence', pp. 1-15, p.10.

<sup>58</sup> Michael Davis, Hunter Clark, *Thurgood Marshall: Warrior at the Bar, Rebel on the Bench*. (New York, 1992), p.112.

<sup>59</sup> Berg, *Ticket to Freedom*, p.88.



civil rights campaigner, Will Alexander.<sup>60</sup> Federal New Deal agencies sent millions of dollars to aid cotton farmers in the South, but distribution was controlled by white-dominated county committees. President Roosevelt's plan was to raise farmers' incomes by cutting their output and providing them with federal funds. Black farmers were mostly sharecroppers or tenants, so landowners were able to keep federal aid for themselves and force their tenants to reduce their outputs and incomes.<sup>61</sup>

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) were all designed to raise living standards for the poor, but they often favoured whites in practice. The model town of Norris, Tennessee for example provided federal housing for TVA staff working at the Norris Dam, but African Americans were excluded. This resulted in continued discontent.<sup>62</sup> African Americans were unhappy with the performance of the NAACP and an alternative appeared in Chicago in 1936 with the formation of the left-wing National Negro Congress, led by John Preston Davis, a Black Harvard Law School graduate. The NAACP leaders felt threatened by the NNC and were in a competition for the hearts and minds of African Americans.<sup>63</sup> The NNC was created to address social and economic problems, unlike the NAACP.

### **A shift to the Left**

The Association was affected by the activities of the bi-racial Congress of Industrial Organisations, a national organisation of left-wing trade unions. Socialist ideas had long had a place in the NAACP and the Socialist Party had recruited leading members, including Mary W. Ovington, Charles E. Russell, W.E.B. DuBois and William E. Walling. In 1934 each of them was still on the National Board of Directors. DuBois had visited the Soviet Union with

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<sup>60</sup> Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks*, p.55.

<sup>61</sup> Robert Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt: A Political Life*. (New York, 2018), p.146.

<sup>62</sup> Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois*, p.565.

<sup>63</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Roy Wilkins to John P. Davis, May 1935: Box 1, B11, Folder 5.

Lincoln Steffens, another leading member, who famously remarked of the USSR that Communism was the future, 'I have been over into the future - and it works!'<sup>64</sup> The American Communist Party was created in 1919 with a few Black activists, led by Harry Haywood, Otto Hall, William L. Patterson and James W. Ford. Recruitment of African Americans was a high priority, in competition with the NAACP. In 1925 the CPUSA founded the American Negro Labor Congress to campaign on segregation, lynching and labour issues. It remained a small, weak organisation, so the CPUSA closed it down in 1930. The League of Struggle for Negro Rights (LSNR) replaced it, under the leadership James Langston Hughes and Harry Haywood. The League was soon competing with the NAACP for scarce resources. The International Labor Defense was formed in 1925 and, unlike these others, was a highly effective legal pressure group. It was also set up by the Communists. This was the closest that the communists came to replacing the NAACP.

Campaigners on the Left were a small group led by E. Franklin Frazier, Ralph Bunche and Abram Harris. They believed that the 'Black problem' was not one of race but of social class. Their aim was the founding of a non-racial labour party based on the interests of the working classes. Socialist Party member Abram Harris gave his solution, 'The Black worker must be made conscious of his relation to white labor...the white worker must be made conscious that the purposes of labor cannot be achieved without full participation by the Black worker'.<sup>65</sup> Leaders of the Association were challenged by their opinions. Left-wing intellectuals rejected the laissez-faire view that balanced budgets would produce economic recovery if only the market was not interfered with. Overseas, deficit financing was being used to support massive Government projects and create jobs in Italy and Germany. President Roosevelt's New Deal was contemplating similar solutions, encouraged by the unorthodox Cambridge economist, John Maynard Keynes. The NAACP showed no interest in trying new

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<sup>64</sup> Quoted in Peter Hartshorn, *I Have Seen the Future: A Life of Lincoln Steffens*. (Berkeley, CA., 2011), p. 315.

<sup>65</sup> NAACP: LoC Findings Report by Abram Harris. Part 1, Box B 1, Folder 16.

economic approaches. None of the leaders had a background in economics, while almost all had legal training and were wedded to the eighteenth century ideas of Adam Smith.

Scholar Beth Tompkins Bates has analysed the repeated attempts made by reformers to change the NAACP, for example Abram Harris' Future Plan and Program of 1935. I question the view set out in her article of 1997, where she argues that by 1941 White had produced 'a new order of things' in the NAACP.<sup>66</sup> This was apparently based on a new relationship with labour and White had successfully used this approach to generate an increase in membership. My view is that White's reforming credentials have been exaggerated. His record is a deeply conservative one which he called, 'cautious conservatism'. He admitted that his approach had kept the NAACP 'standing still'.<sup>67</sup> Bates' argument confirms that he favoured the 'gradual legal approach' which had been its hallmark since 1910.<sup>68</sup> This approach is said to have changed between 1938 and 1939 resulting in an increasing NAACP membership, rising from 3,283 to 6000.<sup>69</sup>

I argue that Bates' interpretation needs amendment as the major growth in numbers took place later on in the war years. Evidence shows that White remained preoccupied with lobbying Congress and supporting litigation before the Supreme Court. He maintained this policy until at least 1941. Bates writes on the strike at the Ford Motor Company, describing it as a turning point for Walter White. I believe this to be exaggerated. He visited the huge factory at River Rouge, Detroit in 1941 to support the strike for recognition of the United Auto Workers. This action was out of character for White, who had firmly opposed cooperation with the Left-wing, such as Abram Harris' 1935 plans to reform the Association.

Walter White's usual response to ideas for change was to demand to know how such

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<sup>66</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p.375.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.370.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.340.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p.373.

schemes would be paid for, finance being a recurring theme in all his activities. He received funding from business, such as special annual payments from Edsel Ford, paid through a secret account.<sup>70</sup> This explains White's determination to maintain good relations with wealthy businessmen. He was also keen to co-operate with the conservative members of the NAACP, for example the leaders of Detroit NAACP who were opposed to the strike. They were as 'definitely anti-union as would have been a meeting of the Board of Directors of the Ford Motor Company'.<sup>71</sup> White realised he had to retain the support of conservatives.

### **Abram Harris: The Future Plan and Program**

Abram Harris joined the Socialist Party and wrote articles for *The Messenger* newspaper. His academic research was on labour history and economics in the northern industrial city of Pittsburgh.<sup>72</sup> Harris' major work was *The Black Worker*.<sup>73</sup> He planned to radically change the NAACP using his position as chairman of The Committee on the Future Plan and Program for the NAACP. He turned the lively debates of thirty young intellectuals at the Amenia Conference of 1933 into a strategy for dealing with the Great Depression. He agreed with DuBois that the Wall Street Crash had added to the misery of the African American poor and that radical change was essential. Harris believed reforms had to include social and economic solutions. American society was fundamentally racist and its component parts combined to oppress African Americans. W.E.B. DuBois and Abram Harris worked together at the Amenia Conference and set out to transform the Association using its ideas. Harris' proposal was a Report of the Committee for the Future Plan and Program.

Harris' report was an historical analysis of the economy written from a Marxist point of view. He recommended radical changes to the NAACP, to transform it into an organisation devoted to social and economic progress for the working class, Black and white. The report

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<sup>70</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.213.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p.215.

<sup>72</sup> Jonathan Scott Holloway, *Confronting the Veil. Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941.* (Chapel Hill and London, 2002). p. 2.

<sup>73</sup> Harris and Spero, *Black Worker*, p.149.

provided an extended analysis of American capitalism. Capitalism was described as a social system of exploitation, producing relentless downward pressure on wages by employers who were determined to maximise profits. The system created a landless proletariat who owned nothing and had nothing to sell except their 'labor power'.<sup>74</sup> Walter White and the Board of Directors repeatedly discussed The Plan and seemed to give it serious attention. He set up a small committee to discuss the document and report back to the Board. At a meeting on December 10, 1934 they amended the plan but made no decision on further action. On February 11, 1935 the Board decided to delay action until the document could be edited to make it manageable.<sup>75</sup> At that time the Board included wealthy people such as Robert Reed Church, Mary White Ovington, James Weldon Johnson and Isadore Martin. Other veteran members were Charles Edward Russell, William English Walling, Joel Spingarn, Arthur Spingarn and Oswald Villard.<sup>76</sup> These established members had been committed to the Association for several decades and were not inclined to countenance drastic changes in direction for the organisation. Proceedings were controlled by Walter White, who pointed out that radical proposals could be extremely costly. The proposals were weakened during these repeated delays, as recorded in the Minutes of the Board of Directors.<sup>77</sup> At the June 1935 National Conference The Plan was accepted but no practical action followed because its cost was said to be excessive.<sup>78</sup> The most fundamental proposal was to change the purpose of the Association to serve the working-class.<sup>79</sup>

Supporters of The Plan were disappointed by White's response. He had opposed it

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<sup>74</sup> NAACP: LoC Abram Harris, *Report of Committee on the Future Plan and Program for the NAACP*. Part 1, Box 1, Folder 16, p.2.

<sup>75</sup> NAACP: LoC Minutes. Box B1, A1-A29, Part 1: Board of Directors File, 1909-1959. Folder 16.

<sup>76</sup> NAACP: LoC Board of Directors file, 1909-1959. Letter from Walter White to Board of Directors. January 2, 1935.

<sup>77</sup> NAACP: LoC Minutes. Part 1 Box B1, A1-A29: Board of Directors File, 1909-1959. Folder 16.

<sup>78</sup> NAACP: LoC Part I Board of Directors File, Box I: A3, Reel 2.

<sup>79</sup> NAACP: LoC *Report of Committee on the Future Plan and Program for the NAACP*. Part 1, Box B1, Folder 16.

from its inception because of its left-wing bias, its radical proposals and his scepticism concerning organised labour. Conference voted in favour of the Plan but White failed to implement it on the grounds of cost. Income from membership had fallen drastically during the Depression.<sup>80</sup> The Board had conducted a classic campaign of delay, while watering down the proposals. W.E.B. DuBois had resigned over the issue of reform in 1934.<sup>81</sup> The departure of Abram Harris in 1935 left Walter White securely in control of policy direction, supported by the National Board. Several reformers split from the NAACP in 1936.

Harris' main criticism had been that 'the work of the Association in the economic field was conducted as an incidental phase of its civil liberty program'.<sup>82</sup> The actions of the NAACP were based on civil liberties, not on economic theory. The Association's objective remained to secure the civil rights of African Americans, while Harris believed that the economic needs of the working class should have priority; the NAACP's 'eighteenth century liberalism' was an outdated philosophy. Its aim was to secure civil rights 'as an American citizen under the prevailing economic and social conditions'.<sup>83</sup> Harris believed that the NAACP's philosophy would leave the American social system unchanged. He oversimplified his account of the working-class by ignoring skilled men such as carpenters, masons, machinists and plumbers.<sup>84</sup> Harris' ideas were accepted by NAACP rank and file members. In a motion passed by the National Conference they urged the leadership to devise an economic programme for the working-class. It argued that,

The American Negro is going to find freedom...mainly through an improvement in his economic status...We are becoming convinced that it is because we are poor and voiceless in industry that we accomplish so little...We are going to use our political power to the utmost. But we believe that what the Negro needs primarily is a definite economic program.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> Janken. *White: The Biography of Walter White*, p195.

<sup>81</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd Challenges', p. 352.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> NAACP: LoC *Report of the Committee on The Future Plan and Program of the NAACP*. Part I, Box B1, Folder 16. August-December 1935. p.2.

<sup>84</sup> Harris and Spero, *Black Worker*, Table 10, p.160.

<sup>85</sup> NAACP: LoC Annual Conference NAACP, Washington D.C., May 17-22, 1932. Part 1, Box 1, B7.

There was no chance of the NAACP adopting this left-wing programme. The scholar August Meier claimed it proposed such ‘sweeping changes’ as to make acceptance impossible.<sup>86</sup> This comment by Meier emphasises the radicalism of Harris’ proposals in the Future Plan for the NAACP. The key to his approach was a Marxist analysis of dialectical materialism and collectivism. These values were diametrically opposed to the liberalism of the Founders. Harris’ ideas were characterised by discontinuity with the past. A group of dissidents gave up on their attempt to change the NAACP and met at Howard University led by Ralph Bunche to create the National Negro Congress.

### **W.E. B. DuBois and segregation.**

The economic conditions seemed right for the NNC as unemployment was still rising after five years of depression. Radical ideas were emerging from the membership at the NAACP grassroots. A press release put the anxious question, ‘How far to the Left, towards radicalism, shall the NAACP go?’<sup>87</sup> W.E.B. DuBois was drawing up his own plans to change the organisation. He had been angered by the rise of mass poverty among African Americans, which he considered to be approaching famine conditions. DuBois supported Harris’ proposals and added that the 1917 Russian Revolution had changed the world forever; the NAACP must now serve the economic interests of the people.<sup>88</sup> He questioned the NAACP’s *raison d’être*, since it had been established to achieve equality and integration. DuBois argued that after decades of effort the Association had failed in this task.

Critics like DuBois and Ralph Bunche maintained that the Association was too conservative, as the leadership had no programme to help the working class. In a letter to Joel Spingarn, Roy Wilkins admitted that they had no programme for social reform. ‘Among

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<sup>86</sup> Quoted in Bates, ‘A New Crowd Challenges’, p. 355.

<sup>87</sup> NAACP: LoC Press release: St. Louis, June 6, 1935. Part 1, Box 1, B11, Folder 7.

<sup>88</sup> W.E.B. DuBois. Draft of speech at NAACP Conference given May 18, 1932.

<https://credo.library.umass.edu/>(Retrieved March 12, 2018).

liberals and radicals, both Black and white, the impression prevails that the Association is weak because it has no economic program and no economic philosophy...we do not embrace Karl Marx and the class struggle...as the solution of the Negroes problems.' He goes on to suggest that, 'we could satisfy the bulk of our conservative membership and the bulk of colored people generally by a more vigorous campaign on employment'.<sup>89</sup> Roy Wilkins conceded that most NAACP members would support a change to introduce, 'a radical economic philosophy'.<sup>90</sup> Wilkins denied that the Association was designed for the benefit of 'upper-class Negroes'. He did not believe the leadership of the Association was only concerned to help the elite.

W.E.B. DuBois addressed the 1932 conference with a blunt question; 'What is wrong with the NAACP?'<sup>91</sup> He argued that the Association was not helping the poor, because it was an 'autocratic and centralized' organisation led by an unaccountable clique. It was failing to recruit young members and had turned itself into 'a conservative stronghold' run by old men. DuBois had his own radical proposals for the 'economic reconstruction' of African American life, an idea which had disastrous results. He advocated a self-sufficient 'state within a state' where African Americans would live separately from whites.<sup>92</sup> His aim was the voluntary segregation of the Black population, in a separate economy where they would only do business with each other, in an exclusively 'Negro nation within a nation'.<sup>93</sup> Most African Americans were, he claimed, living segregated lives already and the NAACP had 'never officially opposed' separate organizations like the Black churches.<sup>94</sup> DuBois gave as an example the Fifteenth Street 'Colored Church' in Washington D.C. which provided a range of social services for the local community. DuBois' arguments met with vigorous opposition

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<sup>89</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Roy Wilkins to Joel Spingarn, May 23, 1935. Box 1, B11, Folder 5.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> NAACP: LoC W.E.B. DuBois, speech at NAACP Conference May 18, 1932. Box1, B7.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, June 26, 1934 [W.E.B. Du Bois, "A Negro Nation Within a Nation" • \(blackpast.org\)](http://blackpast.org) (Retrieved March 12, 2018).

<sup>94</sup> Postscript by W.E.B. DuBois, *The Crisis*, Vol.41, No.2 February 1934 pp.52-53, p.53.



from pastor Francis J. Grimke, a leading member of the NAACP. Grimke explained, ‘The attempt of one race to put the stamp of inferiority upon another is the most shameful spectacle of which I can conceive’.<sup>95</sup> Segregation was detested because it was forced on African Americans. DuBois provoked shock and dismay with his proposal. His arrogance did not help his case, as he demanded that the Board of Directors answer his questions, ‘Does it believe in two hundred Black newspapers? Does it believe in Negro spirituals? Is it afraid to say so?’<sup>96</sup> His friend Joel Spingarn immediately announced his response; the NAACP had a profound objection to segregation and this would never change.<sup>97</sup>

The Board of Directors was a conservative body and had no wish to undermine a basic principle of the Association. Members of the Board included businessmen like Oswald Villard and Isadore Martin. Several of them and the National Legal Committee were founding members close to retirement, such as Mary W. Ovington, William E. Walling, Charles Edward Russell, Clarence Darrow, Arthur Spingarn and Jane Addams.<sup>98</sup> The Board rejected DuBois’ proposals and concluded, ‘Thus, both principle and practice necessitate unyielding opposition’.<sup>99</sup> Joel Spingarn explained that the leadership was ‘opposed to segregation...without any reservation, whatever’.<sup>100</sup> The Board found DuBois’ attitude intolerable, so they took over control of *The Crisis*, installing a new editor. DuBois had no choice but to resign and he left in July 1934.

This dispute was the mirror image of a previous controversy between the NAACP and Marcus Garvey during the 1920s. In a remarkable reversal of that period, DuBois was now taking the Black Nationalist, right-wing position. Garvey had attacked the NAACP on

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<sup>95</sup> Francis Grimke, ‘Segregation’. *The Crisis*, Vol.41, No.6. (1934), p.173.

<sup>96</sup> Postscript, *The Crisis*, Vol. 40, No.5, May 1934 pp.147-149, p.149.

<sup>97</sup> Ross, *J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP*, p.192.

<sup>98</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to the Board of Directors. January 2, 1934. Box 1, A3, Reel 2.

<sup>99</sup> NAACP: LoC Board of Directors File. Minutes. Part 1, Box 1, A3, Reel 2.

<sup>100</sup> NAACP: LoC Memorandum from J. E. Spingarn to the Board, January 10, 1934. Box 1, A3, Reel 2.

grounds of ethnic 'inauthenticity'. DuBois now found himself in conflict with the NAACP leadership because the NAACP had refused to engage with his desire for major economic reforms. Defiantly, he argued he had tried to work with the organisation to reform it. He concluded, 'I have been absolutely unsuccessful'.<sup>101</sup> DuBois was deeply disillusioned with the organisation.

Walter White had an ambiguous attitude towards the African American working class, claiming that the most serious obstacle to progress for them was the white working-class who took the lead in aggressive racism. Whites deprived African Americans of their rights and heaped on them, 'the public insults of open color discrimination'.<sup>102</sup> DuBois believed that working-class racism in the labour movement was permanent and would never be overcome.<sup>103</sup> He argued, 'First of all, Colored labor has no common ground with white labor'. The American Federation of Labor was accused by DuBois of helping to keep Black workers trapped 'in a lower proletariat' so they were unable to take a good job, join a union, gain an education or live in a decent home.<sup>104</sup> African Americans were rarely union members while research by the National Urban League showed that out of 2,500,000 African Americans engaged in non-agricultural work, only 81,658 belonged to a union.<sup>105</sup> Many of these were in small unions of Post Office workers or Pullman porters.

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<sup>101</sup> Postscript by W.E.B. DuBois, *The Crisis* August 1934. Vol.41, No.8, pp.244-245, p.245.

<sup>102</sup> W.E.B. DuBois: Marxism and the Negro Problem, *The Crisis*, Vol.40, No.5 May 1933, pp.103-4, p.104.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>105</sup> Quoted in Lewis, *W.E.B DuBois*, p.508.

## **Walter White and 'The New Deal'**

The NAACP now faced the difficult problem of how to respond to the Great Depression and the New Deal of President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Throughout the 1930s White persisted in engaging with the federal Government and working through Congress. The 'New Deal' involved much greater government intervention than before. African Americans desperately needed government assistance, especially in the rural south. Government figures show that between 1933 and 1935 the number of African Americans receiving relief went up from eighteen per cent of the total to twenty-nine per cent.<sup>106</sup> John Preston Davis, an active critic of the government, blamed the 'deepening economic crisis for black America'. Davis argued from these figures that the relief measures appeared to be making the situation worse. Increased spending was an index of widespread hardship, not the generosity of officials; the New Deal was heavily weighted against African Americans, especially in the rural south, where aid policy favoured white landowners.<sup>107</sup>

As individuals, some senior members of the NAACP presented evidence on the problem of discrimination. In 1935 the Social Security Bill came before Congress and was passed in August. The Act established old-age benefits, benefits for victims of industrial accidents, unemployment insurance and for the blind or physically handicapped.<sup>108</sup> Charles H. Houston for the NAACP gave evidence that out of almost six million Black workers in employment, approaching four million would not benefit from the plans. He complained that the Bill seemed specifically designed not to help African Americans.<sup>109</sup> A tiny pressure group called the Negro Industrial League was more effective than the NAACP in researching discrimination. Led by John Preston Davis it became the Joint Committee on National

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<sup>106</sup> John Preston Davis, 'A Black Inventory of the New Deal'. *The Crisis*, Vol.42, No.5. May 1935, p.141.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>108</sup> The Social Security Act 1935 <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/list>

<sup>109</sup> Donna Cooper and Charles V. Hamilton, 'The Dual Agenda of African American Organizations since the New Deal: Social: Social Welfare and Civil Rights', *Political Science Quarterly* (Autumn 1992), Vol.107, No.3. pp.435-452, p.440.

Recovery (JCNR).<sup>110</sup> The JCNR sponsored the meeting at Howard University from which emerged the National Negro Congress as a rival to the NAACP. After a brief period working for the NAACP, Davis left to set up the NNC. In May 1935 he met with supporters to discuss ‘The Position of the Negro in our National Economic Crisis’ and plan the first NNC meeting in Chicago where he became the leader of the new organisation.<sup>111</sup> Also present were W.E.B. DuBois, the CPUSA, A. Philip Randolph, Ben Davis and Ralph J. Bunche. Bunche was convinced that only Marxism could help the four million African Americans who were estimated to be living in poverty.<sup>112</sup> In *Marxism and the Negro Question* he called for ‘the overthrow of capitalist democracy through the concentration of political power in the hands of the proletariat’. Bunche was an advocate for the economic interests of the working class, regardless of race or colour.<sup>113</sup>

### **The NAACP and the class system**

Roy Wilkins, Deputy Executive Secretary, admitted in private among colleagues to the role played by social class in the NAACP, ‘It is perfectly obvious that the branches we have now are not reaching all the people who could be interested in the Association’. He asserted that this was due to the differences existing between ‘the levels of society’.<sup>114</sup> In short, class barriers ruled the Association. The NAACP’s failure to focus on the working-class was due to domination of the branches by businessmen and professionals. Ralph Bunche reported in an academic study that, ‘Control of branches...rests largely in the hands of an exclusive, often class and color-snobbish, self-appointed...upper class. The NAACP had

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<sup>110</sup> John Preston Davis; ‘What price national recovery?’ *The Crisis*, Vol.40, No.12. (December 1933), p.272.

<sup>111</sup> William P. Jones, *March on Washington: Jobs, Freedom and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights*. (New York, 2013), p.18.

<sup>112</sup> Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights*, (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012), p.16.

<sup>113</sup> Henry, ed., *Ralph J. Bunche*, p.35.

<sup>114</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Roy Wilkins to Daisy Lampkin, March 23, 1935. Part I, Box C, Folder 8.

failed dismally to...reach the ears of the masses'.<sup>115</sup>

Walter White and other Black leaders emphasised the class distinctions, perhaps unconsciously, between themselves and working-class African Americans. Their personal attributes contributed to this as they were articulate, highly educated and accomplished. They had musical, literary, academic and artistic achievements to their credit. White was a published author of two novels, *Fire in the Flint* (1924) and *Flight* (1926). He wrote *Rope and Faggot: A Biography of Judge Lynch* (1929). This was a serious study of lynching as a social and cultural phenomenon. The leaders were active patrons of the arts during the Harlem Renaissance.<sup>116</sup> Walter White mentored the poet J.M. Langston Hughes.<sup>117</sup> W.E.B. DuBois was an extensive patron of the arts in *The Crisis*, publishing almost a thousand original poems, songs, short stories and dramas by unknown authors.<sup>118</sup>

Historian Jenny Weldon claims that the NAACP leaders favoured white, conservative high culture, but this is not wholly true. Walter White organised exhibitions of lynching images designed to shock white audiences.<sup>119</sup> On the other hand, the Philadelphia NAACP Ladies' Auxiliary in 1928 arranged a programme of poetry readings and violin solos.<sup>120</sup> DuBois argued that Art had a serious purpose for the NAACP and its role was to promote the African American image of respectability. He criticised Carl Van Vechten, the white author of *Nigger Heaven* complaining that the average 'conservative, conventional colored man' in Harlem had been ignored by the author who wrote lurid tales of nightclubs, orgies 'gin and sadism'.<sup>121</sup> DuBois was concerned that he had failed to promote the respectable image that the NAACP leadership wanted.

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<sup>115</sup> NAACP: Part 18 Special Subjects: Ralph J. Bunche, *Programs, Ideologies, Tactics and Achievements of Negro Betterment and Interracial Organisations*, p.142.

<sup>116</sup> George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*. (Cambridge, MA., 1997), p.400.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p.221.

<sup>118</sup> Verney, *Long is the Way and Hard*, p.17.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>120</sup> Nelson, 'The Philadelphia NAACP: Race versus Class Consciousness', p.264.

<sup>121</sup> David Levering Lewis, (ed.), *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*. (New York, 1995), p.107.

The culture of the NAACP leaders set them apart from the working-class. The theme of respectability was a constant refrain of *The Crisis*. A favourable image was promoted every year by 'beautiful baby competitions' and photographs of Black college graduates. The August 1931 issue of *The Crisis* was devoted to top students. There were messages of goodwill from the presidents of Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth and Howard University, praising a small number of Black students, for example, seven from Harvard.<sup>122</sup> Details were printed with photographs, results, names and achievements. *The Crisis* in August 1932 was devoted to such success stories. In a seminal essay and speech, DuBois had previously explained the content of his magazine. He believed 'that all Art is propaganda'.<sup>123</sup> He was an intellectual elitist with ideas reaching far beyond mere practical politics. Working class African Americans may have been less impressed. As Langston Hughes observed, 'the ordinary Negroes hadn't heard of the Negro Renaissance. And if they had, it hadn't raised their wages any'.<sup>124</sup> Art emphasised the gap between the NAACP elite and the working class.

Social class became a painful issue in those branches that were split between Black employers and employees. Some were involved in industrial disputes with each other.<sup>125</sup> A strike was called in 1935 at an African American newspaper, *The Amsterdam News* whose management refused to recognise editorial workers' right to join a union. A strike lasted eleven weeks and divided African American owners from African American employees.<sup>126</sup> This incident showed that class conflict could override racial solidarity. Henry Lee Moon was an African American union organiser for the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO) who clashed with Walter White and Charles Houston over the dispute. Conservative leaders

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<sup>122</sup> 'A Report on education of elite African Americans'. *The Crisis* Vol.40, No.8, August 1931.

<sup>123</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, article, *The Crisis*. 'Criteria of Negro Art', October 1926. p.12.

<sup>124</sup> Quoted in Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter*, p.92.

<sup>125</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality 1890-2000*. (New York, 2002), p.184.

<sup>126</sup> Oliver Ayers, 'The 1935 Labor dispute at the Amsterdam News and the challenges posed by Depression era unionism in Harlem'. *Journal of American Studies*. Vol.48, No.3, pp.797-818, p.798.

appealed for unions to show some 'racial solidarity'.<sup>127</sup>

The relationship between the NAACP and labour remained tense. The NAACP held its National Conference in Detroit in June 1937 and for two days delegates debated whether to endorse the bi-racial United Auto Workers. Many UAW members were connected to the National Negro Congress and the CPUSA, causing the NAACP to regard them with deep suspicion. One activist was Joseph Billups, a known communist.<sup>128</sup> The wary delegates voted for an ambiguous resolution which left members in the dark concerning the NAACP attitude towards the NNC.<sup>129</sup>

Social class obstructed the work of Association branches when differences emerged between members. One of the earliest branches created was in Talladega, Alabama in 1913. By 1927 the state had ten branches but by 1930 most of them had collapsed.<sup>130</sup> Historian Robin D. G. Kelley asserts that this was because, 'the Association's local leadership ignored the problems black working people faced daily'.<sup>131</sup> Branch members in the South were drawn from a small group of the middle-classes. They were vulnerable to intimidation, isolation and loss of morale. The violent reaction of Alabama whites encouraged a split on class lines.<sup>132</sup>

### **The National Negro Congress**

In February 1936 the founding conference of the National Negro Congress was held in Chicago. It claimed to welcome 817 delegates who represented 585 organisations, yet Walter White refused to attend. Roy Wilkins estimated that at least seven hundred accredited delegates attended and three thousand people came to a mass meeting in the evening.<sup>133</sup> The keynote speech was given by the new NNC President, A. Philip Randolph. He argued that

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<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.797-818, p.815.

<sup>128</sup> Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit*, p.217.

<sup>129</sup> Report of the 1937 Detroit Conference of the NAACP. *The Crisis*, August 1937, pp.242-246, p.243.

<sup>130</sup> Verney, *Long is the Way and Hard*, p.106.

<sup>131</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p.143.

<sup>132</sup> Dorothy Autrey, 'Can These Bones Live? The NAACP in Alabama, 1918-1930', *The Journal of Negro History* Vol.82, No.1, (1997), pp.1-12, p.7.

<sup>133</sup> NAACP: LoC *A Report* by Roy Wilkins: Part I, Box 1, C383, Folder 5.

‘the united front of all Black organizations’ was ‘the main principle’ of the Congress, ‘The Negro should not place his problems for solution...at the feet of his white sympathetic allies...salvation of the Negro...must come from within’.<sup>134</sup> The NNC founding meeting had two aims; to establish an ‘independent working-class political party’ and to create ‘a powerful Negro civil rights organisation’. The NNC was taking over the largest part of the NAACP’s work and threatening to make the Association irrelevant.<sup>135</sup> The agreed resolutions at the meeting were as diverse as the people who were represented; topics included anti-lynching, ending discrimination by the AFL, civil liberties, the role of churches, Black businessmen and the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>136</sup> The breadth of the NNC as a ‘Popular Front’ organisation was planned by the CPUSA and was a communist policy across the world. It also had ambitions to be active and militant. Randolph reflected this approach in his choice of language, ‘True liberation can be acquired and maintained only when the Black people possess power; and power is product and flower of organisation...of the masses in the mills and mines, on the farms, in the factories’.<sup>137</sup> His vocabulary was the language of revolution, power and violence. The mobilization of a united working class was a challenge to the American social system, in contrast with the NAACP’s strategy, which had always been a ‘moral’ one, dedicated to reaching the ‘conscience of America’.<sup>138</sup> Persuasion of the white majority remained essential to Association strategy.

Attitudes to the NNC were mixed and they led many of the NAACP to question themselves and their organisation. Roy Wilkins advocated cooperation with them at first and in a report to the NAACP Board of Directors wrote that rumours of the NNC being financed by Communists were, ‘wholly without foundation’. He argued that the NNC should be taken

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<sup>134</sup> Lawrence Wittner, ‘The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment’, *American Quarterly*, Vol.22, No.4 (1970), pp.883-901, p.886.

<sup>135</sup> Jones, *March on Washington*, p.18.

<sup>136</sup> NAACP: LoC Report on the National Negro Congress, Roy Wilkins, February 1936: Part I, Box 1, C383, Folder 5.

<sup>137</sup> Bates, *Pullman Porters*, p.106.

<sup>138</sup> Meier, ‘The NAACP as a reform movement’, p.7.



seriously ‘to counter...the widespread feeling among great numbers of people that the Association is not a true representative of the aspirations of the race and is not attacking the problems as vigorously as they should be’.<sup>139</sup> This was a devastating admission from a leading member of the NAACP. He added that these were familiar claims often made by their enemies, but they would be ‘intensified a hundredfold’ if the Association refused to cooperate with a body whose aims appeared identical to its own.<sup>140</sup> At the grassroots level, NAACP branches cooperated with the NNC, for example in Chicago, Detroit and Baltimore.<sup>141</sup> Walter White remained convinced that the NNC was a ‘Red Front’ being used to exploit African Americans and win their loyalty to a hostile foreign power, ‘Then as now the Kremlin ordered followers to propagandise...the most disadvantaged...to vilify US democracy’.<sup>142</sup> In his unpublished memoir, White explains that he had been scarred by his experience of communist attacks during the Scottsboro affair.

John Preston Davis published a booklet, *Let Us Build a National Negro Congress* which set out the NNC aims. ‘At the heart of the NNC will be an...organization of hundreds of thousands of...Black workers. We feel the necessity of throwing the whole influence of the Black population...behind organized Labor’.<sup>143</sup> Davis gave equal weight to economic issues and civil rights, including the abolition of lynching.<sup>144</sup> He warned his readers of the need for Black and white to organise unions together, ‘Certainly, as long as workers, both Black and white, are unorganised, employers will pay them as little and work them as long, as human endurance will allow’.<sup>145</sup> Working class solidarity was essential to Black and white alike, a lesson which the NAACP had failed to teach. In a speech, Randolph emphasised the

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<sup>139</sup> NAACP: LoC Memorandum from Roy Wilkins to Board of Directors, March 9, 1936. Part I, Box I, C383.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>141</sup> Bates, ‘A New Crowd challenges’, p.366.

<sup>142</sup> NAACP: LoC *Memoir of Walter White*. Part VIII, C455, Folder 1, p.267. Unpublished.

<sup>143</sup> Wittner, ‘The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment’, p.891.

<sup>144</sup> Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow*, p.47.

<sup>145</sup> NAACP: The NNC, John Preston Davis, *Let us build a National Negro Congress*. (New York, 1935). p.11.

need to 'break down the color line in the trade unions which now have it'.<sup>146</sup> The NNC aimed for a desegregated, progressive labour movement led by the Congress of Industrial Organisations, an alliance of unions founded by John L. Lewis in 1935. This strategy was a bold one and was designed to challenge the American power structure.

The NNC made plans for each region across the country to choose a council representing all industries and trades. They would form an alternative centre of power leading the working classes. Seventy-five of these councils were planned by the NNC to build regional labour alliances such as the Steel Workers Organising Committee (SWOC). In 1936 steelworks employed 85,000 Black employees under harsh conditions for low, discriminatory wages. The NNC helped the CIO to unionise them, providing Black activists, organising meetings and producing literature.<sup>147</sup> The NNC forced the steel companies to recognise the United Steel Workers.<sup>148</sup> They targeted the U.S. Steel (South) Works in Chicago, which had twelve thousand workers and forced the company to negotiate.

In Birmingham, Alabama Black workers were SWOC's strongest supporters, including communists Ebb Cox, Henry O. Mayfield and Hosea Hudson.<sup>149</sup> African Americans were ready to follow the ideas of the Left as they were often the lowest paid members of the workforce.<sup>150</sup> Many organisers were hardened communists who managed to achieve success even in hostile areas, where the NAACP barely existed. In Memphis, Tennessee the AFL had control of all skilled jobs and excluded Black workers, while a repressive city government prevented the NAACP from even setting up a branch.<sup>151</sup> Yet by 1939 the CIO had established city-wide unions for dockworkers and cotton processors. The NNC also encouraged Black workers to combine bids for higher wages with voter

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<sup>146</sup> Hall ed. *A Black Communist*, p.225.

<sup>147</sup> Wittner, 'The National Negro Congress: A Reassessment', p.894.

<sup>148</sup> Janken White: *The Biography of Walter White, Mr NAACP*, p.245.

<sup>149</sup> Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson*, p.249.

<sup>150</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p.143.

<sup>151</sup> Michael Honey, 'Popular Front in the American South. The view from Memphis' *International Labor and Working-Class History*, No.30. (1986), pp.44-58, p.49.

registration campaigns.

The two organisations were in direct competition especially over the issue of lynching. Many of the positions adopted by the NNC were identical to those of the NAACP. Roy Wilkins claimed that NNC plans to oppose lynching could have been lifted from the NAACP handbook. Leading NAACP members cooperated with the NNC, including Marion Cuthbert, a member of the National Board of Directors, who became their Treasurer. Yet when NAACP Branch Secretary, Charles McPherson, tried to work with a Communist NNC organiser in Alabama, Walter White emphatically instructed him to have nothing to do with him.<sup>152</sup>

Roy Wilkins noticed a strong presence of communists at the founding and he was impressed by their organisation. He observed a 'Great group of younger people. There are communists in every discussion...No matter what session is being held, there are some CPs there...Not actually leading but always with their hand in'.<sup>153</sup> The NNC clerical staff were predominantly white and were suspected of being communists. The choice of national officers, despite being described as democratically elected, was said to be already 'cut and dried' before the votes had been cast. Most disturbing of all, there was much talk amongst the delegates of the NNC 'replacing the NAACP'.<sup>154</sup> Wilkins recalled the attitude of Davis, 'After the meeting, John took me aside and predicted confidently that the Negro National Congress would soon replace the NAACP as the country's leading race and civil rights group. It was only a matter of time'. He added to Wilkins, 'We'll have a job for you'.<sup>155</sup>

The NNC was revealed as a rival but Wilkins turned against Davis after a meeting at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem on March 5 1936. He complained that 'ignorant and

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<sup>152</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p.124.

<sup>153</sup> NAACP: LoC Report of Roy Wilkins, February 1936. Part I, Box 1, C383, Folder 5, p.1.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>155</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, p.161.

derogatory' remarks were made about NAACP speakers. The NNC delegates appeared to be a 'heterogeneous collection of malcontents' motivated by spite, jealousy and anti-white feeling.<sup>156</sup> 'I can assure you' he added that, 'As I sat there my enthusiasm for possible alliance...suffered severe blows. All the old myths about the NAACP were paraded last night as truths'. He supported Walter White's view, having abruptly changed his mind.<sup>157</sup> The Executive Secretary was confirmed in his hostility by such reports. White refused to coordinate his campaign against lynching with the NNC, fearing that he would lose control of his central campaign. He refused to develop a joint strategy at a conference proposed for March 1938.<sup>158</sup> In his best bureaucratic language, White wrote a rebuke to Davis,

As I have written you previously, there are certain steps now being taken, upon which depends largely whether or not action will be taken by the Senate...Until the course of action is decided upon the NAACP cannot participate in any conference nor divulge the nature of these steps, as to do so would almost certainly forewarn our enemies and insure defeat...for these and other reasons I am instructed to say that the association cannot participate in such a conference...because it deems it at this time ill-advised.<sup>159</sup>

White used language to mystify Davis, emphasising his own access to superior knowledge and a connection with government circles. He warned a colleague, 'There is no doubt that what John (Davis) plans to do is to take over lock, stock and barrel, the entire fight for the bill. Charlie (Houston)...thinks that most people will see through John and his motives'.<sup>160</sup> White wanted to keep control of his most important programme.

As a loyal American White believed the CPUSA was an enemy of freedom and he never changed this opinion. He explained in his unpublished memoirs why he thought African Americans would never support communism, 'First and foremost...having known what 'boss' rule means to the African Americans during...slavery, the Black wants no part of

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<sup>156</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Roy Wilkins to John P. Davis, March 5, 1936: Part 1, Box 1, C383, Folder 5.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching*, p.156.

<sup>159</sup> NAACP: LoC Letter from Walter White to John P. Davis, Part I, Box 1, C383, Folder 7.

<sup>160</sup> NAACP: Letter from Walter White to Gertrude Stone April 5, 1938. Subject File, NNC. April to December 1938.

any system where arbitrary power is vested in one man or a small clique of men'.<sup>161</sup> Liberty and equality would remain his core values. The CPUSA had accepted the authority of a foreign power in the shape of the Communist International in Moscow and could not be trusted.<sup>162</sup> The NAACP leaders sought to reform American society not overturn it, which made them in the long-term 'enemies of the revolution'. They were condemned by the communists for 'distracting the proletariat' from its 'historic task' of destroying capitalism.<sup>163</sup>

### **The decline of the Black Bolsheviks**

The Third Reich came to power in 1933, which was a disaster for the Soviet Union. It had lost the most powerful segment of the international communist movement. The Comintern decided it urgently needed the NAACP as allies in a Popular Front against Fascism.<sup>164</sup> Nazism was a serious threat and the communist movement would need help to defeat it.<sup>165</sup> The decision was announced in Moscow at the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International in 1935. This gave the approval of 'the highest body of world communism' to Popular Front alliances in the United States.<sup>166</sup> The NAACP responded that the CPUSA's support for the African American cause was insincere and would lead them into a disastrous revolution. These abrupt changes of policy confirmed the conservative view that communists were cynical and untrustworthy.

The careers of men like Harry Haywood demonstrate that African American communists had divided loyalties. He was brought up in Omaha, served in the US Army during the First World War, joined the CPUSA and lived in the Soviet Union for more than four years, training at Lenin University in Moscow. Haywood fought in the Spanish Civil

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<sup>161</sup> NAACP: LoC Walter White, *Unpublished Memoirs*; Part VIII, Box 45, Folder 1, p.271.

<sup>162</sup> Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, p.171.

<sup>163</sup> Janken, *White. The Biography of Walter*, p.229.

<sup>164</sup> Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson*, p.26.

<sup>165</sup> James W. Ford, 'The Communists. Way Out for the Negro'. *The Journal of Negro Education*. Vol.5, No.1 (1936), January pp.88-95, p.93.

<sup>166</sup> Solomon, *The Cry was Unity*, p.292.

War and campaigned for left-wing causes when living in America.<sup>167</sup> He believed the USSR was a utopian society where race discrimination was unknown.<sup>168</sup> African Americans were regarded by Stalin as an ‘oppressed minority’ who were entitled to self-determination and control of their own state in the region known as the Black Belt where they were a majority. Communists even argued for the right to secede from the union.<sup>169</sup> This policy was defended for a while by the CPUSA, but it was anathema to the NAACP as it violated the US Constitution.<sup>170</sup> The dismissal by the NAACP of the CPUSA as dupes or traitors has been criticised by the scholar Robin D. G. Kelley.<sup>171</sup> He believed that Black radicalism was caused by the daily hardships of African American lives. The scholar Mark Solomon observed, ‘Contradictory though this was, it spoke perfectly to the split personality of many American Communists’.<sup>172</sup> The relationship between the two forces, internal and external, acted on them to determine their actions.

### **The Second World War 1939-1945**

In August 1939 the Soviet Union shocked the world by signing a non-aggression pact with its deadly enemy Nazi Germany. The cynicism of Stalin outraged many supporters and the CPUSA’s defence of his policy seemed to prove the NNC had been a puppet of Moscow all along. It also brought war with Germany palpably closer. This made the communists unpopular since Americans were generally committed to neutrality.<sup>173</sup> Arguments flared up at the NNC conference in May 1940, when CPUSA supporters demanded that the NNC adopt a pro-Soviet line, prompting Randolph’s resignation as NNC President as he rejected their ‘communitistic’ agenda. He added, ‘I consider the Communists a definite menace and a danger to the Black people’. He added that ‘Black people cannot afford to add to the handicap of

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<sup>167</sup> Harry Haywood, *A Black Communist in the Freedom Struggle*, p.228.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, p.151.

<sup>170</sup> Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson*, p.103.

<sup>171</sup> Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe*, p.124.

<sup>172</sup> Solomon, *The Cry was Unity*, p.170.

<sup>173</sup> Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p.146.

being black, the handicap of being red'.<sup>174</sup> Randolph called for a new leadership, one which was 'free from intimidation, manipulation or subordination...a leadership responsible to no-one but the Black people'. Many communist delegates had walked out by the end of his speech.<sup>175</sup> Randolph was moving away from the discredited communists towards the centre ground where he hoped to find new allies. He was welcomed onto the NAACP Board of Directors, as the Association had begun to appreciate his rejection of the CPUSA. The BSCP union was becoming increasingly successful.<sup>176</sup>

Intense conflict between moderation and radicalism was a characteristic of the 1930s. The NAACP struggled with groups, both internal and external, who had contrasting attitudes to the traditional values of the US Constitution. Walter White persisted with the conservative view that communists and nationalists were a threat to the Constitution and must be resisted. At the same time he was in conflict with many members of the NAACP as he resisted their radical proposals. Underlying this contest was a range of pressures arising from the prevailing conditions in American society. These forces were a threat to the NAACP which however, maintained its established programme of litigation for civil rights. This continued throughout the 1930s and 1940s.

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<sup>174</sup> NAACP: LoC Speech of A. Philip Randolph, October 1939. Part I, Box 1, A444, Folder 6.

<sup>175</sup> Wittner, 'The National Negro Congress, A Reassessment'. p.898.

<sup>176</sup> Larry Tye, *Rising from the Rails: Pullman Porters and the Making of the Black Middle Class*. (New York, 2004), p.161.

## **CHAPTER SEVEN: An end to segregation? The Margold Plan 1928-54.**

This chapter portrays Walter White at the height of his power, pursuing a legal strategy that was true to the fundamental nature of the NAACP, concentrating on ending segregation, lynching and discrimination against African Americans. White had defeated attempts to change the direction of the NAACP. His commitment to this strategy confirms his conservatism, as he returned the Association to its original aims. White's career as Executive Secretary illustrates the nature of the NAACP, with its moral stance. inspired by abolitionism. He had a conservative attitude towards strategy and he continued to give priority to ending lynching. Lynchers frequently chose uneducated young Black men to murder, as their lack of social status left them open to attack. The 1900s saw a greater intensity in the practice of lynching with the addition of sadistic torture since the crowd was not satisfied by death alone. Drama was required for the audience.<sup>1</sup> The case of Sam Hose was known for a new level of cruelty; tied to a tree by a mob, he was burned alive in front of a large crowd.<sup>2</sup> Walter White believed such crimes would horrify decent people if publicised.

Another nationally known case strengthened Walter White's determination. The murder of Claude Neal in 1934 had several distressing features. It involved savage treatment and careful organisation of his death. It started in Florida and ended with Neal's death in Brewton, Alabama, over two hundred miles away. Neal was a farmhand held by the police, accused of raping and murdering a young white woman. He was taken from custody and plans for his torture were publicised in advance using radio announcements. Special excursion trains brought a large audience to the scene. Neal's body was mutilated and hung from a tree outside the Brewton Courthouse in front of several hundred witnesses. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, p.286.

<sup>2</sup> NAACP: LoC *Analysis of lynchings, 1880-1910*. Subject File, *Lynching*. Part 1, Box 1, C 371.



introduction to an eye-witness report, Walter White wrote that the account had been, ‘published with the hope that its sadism and abnormal cruelty may stir...Americans to action’.<sup>3</sup> Federal, state and local authorities made no effort to protect Neal, despite urgent pleas from Walter White and the local members of the ASWPL. This case increased the NAACP’s commitment to the long-standing campaign for a federal ban.

The perpetrators were often admired by the local press; *The Lincoln Daily Star* editor praised the local men who had ‘chased the victim and the sheriff for twenty-four hours’. The lynching then took place before a mass of witnesses.<sup>4</sup> They were participants in a psychological drama, with the newspaper acting as a Greek chorus. The victim was described as a ‘black brute’ who had ‘spilt blood’ and had to be punished with a purifying fire. Bodies of victims were often left in full view on a tree. A Louisiana headline read; ‘Negro accused of assault on white woman is found hanging on Court House Square’. Accounts often ended by stating that ‘the body was riddled with bullets’.<sup>5</sup> This emphasised the killing was a corporate undertaking rather than a private matter. The historian Leon Litwack argues that lynching was designed to terrorise African Americans, even for trivial ‘offences’ against the unwritten racial Code of the South, such as ‘talking big’ or failing to show enough respect for whites.<sup>6</sup> White oppression would crush any resistance and eliminate signs of initiative among African Americans. Thus lynching was defined by the NAACP as ‘murder with the support of the community’.<sup>7</sup>

The Association had limited resources following the Wall Street Crash. Charles H. Houston had to debate its priorities with the Board of Directors and his colleagues. His

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua Youngblood, “ ‘I haven’t quite shaken the horror yet.’ Howard Kester. Lynching of Claude Neal and Social Activism in the South in the 1930s.” *The Historical Quarterly*, Vol.86, No.1, (2007), pp.3-38, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> *The Lincoln Daily Star*, November 12, 1909. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/309639832> (Retrieved 10 July, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> *The Monroe Star*, March 16, 1918. p.1. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/82375034/?terms=> (Retrieved 10 July, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Litwack, *Trouble in Mind*, p.286.

<sup>7</sup> NAACP: LoC Nash, *A Memorandum*. Part I, Box 1, C371. p.14.

approach to litigation led him to select a single target for the Association's efforts. This was to eliminate segregation in higher education because he considered this had the best chance of success. It would mean abandoning work on vital issues such as transport, housing and teachers' salaries. In practice only a handful of students were to benefit from this policy in the short term, reinforcing the impression that the organisation was dedicated to the interests of an educated elite. This version of 'equality' concentrated on a tiny proportion of the middle class; it would not raise working class wages or end the exploitation of sharecroppers in the South.

The 1930s witnessed a continuing shift within the leadership of the NAACP. The white founders who controlled the organisation were approaching the end of their careers; Moorfield Storey, Oswald Villard and Mary Ovington were of a generation born between 1840 and 1870. A new cohort gained influence when Walter White and James W. Johnson emerged from Atlanta University in the 1920s, to become the first Black Executive Secretaries. They proved their abilities and ambition by rising to the top of the NAACP from the prejudiced, segregated South. Charles H. Houston, E. Franklin Frazier, Ralph Bunche and Abram Harris emerged from the fringes of the Association to attend the Second America Conference in 1933. The conference was convened by the president Joel Spingarn and was attended by thirty academics, intellectuals and activists. Their message was that the NAACP strategy must change in response to social and economic pressures. People living in the northern states competed with migrants for employment and housing. Those who stayed in the South were often landless labourers with few resources. In their vulnerable state they were at risk of exploitation and violent attack. African American incomes were subject to downward pressures from automation on the cotton plantations and the fall in the price of cotton on the world market. Abram Harris argued that the NAACP programme on civil rights was in danger of becoming irrelevant, as its priority should be to find collective answers for

social problems generated by the capitalist system. An alliance with the labour movement seemed essential to Harris, transcending issues of race. Supporters of a left-wing policy claimed that the working classes could never be satisfied by a programme of litigation designed to protect the legal principles of due process and the ballot. An economic strategy was essential to build support among the mass of African Americans.

Abram Harris wrote on Black labour and produced numerous articles for socialist periodicals, including *The Messenger* which was based in Harlem, founded by A. Philip Randolph in 1917. He was joined by West Indian activists and intellectuals Hubert Harrison and Cyril Briggs, who was another war veteran.<sup>8</sup> His long-term aim was to take ideas from the Second America Conference to the NAACP and make it a party of labour. He argued that the philosophy of the NAACP was outdated and relied on an ideology of individualism and narrowly defined legal rights. Harris claimed the situation of African Americans resulted from the interaction of race with social class. The NAACP saw civil rights alone as the solution, while the Left advocated collective action by Black and white workers. The alternative was to continue with labour divided and incapable of cooperation. The NAACP leadership clung to the philosophy of laissez-faire, self-help and 'racial uplift'. This was their response to poverty, rather than relying on the state. The leadership observed that education and effort could produce an African American middle class, who could escape poverty by their own efforts. Economic forces need not drive them down into the proletariat, despite Karl Marx's prediction in *The Communist Manifesto*.<sup>9</sup>

The NAACP remained committed to ending segregation by court action using rational argument and deploying evidence. The key battleground was a debate over the right to 'equal protection of the laws' in the Fourteenth Amendment. African Americans had a right to equal

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism 1883-1918*. (New York, 2010).

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter Five.

access to the courts, which was protected by the Civil Rights Acts of 1866, 1870 and 1875. The ratification of the Fourteenth Amendment provided an additional protection as part of the Constitution. In *Strauder v. West Virginia* (1880) the Supreme Court had interpreted the Amendment according to the recent intentions of Congress, 'It was designed to assure to the Coloreds all the civil rights...enjoyed by white persons...it denied to any State the power to withhold from them the equal protection of the laws'.<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the Court struck down a West Virginia state law limiting jury service to whites, as it was a blatant case of racial discrimination.<sup>11</sup> Jury service was one right on which there was general agreement.

In the decades that followed, African American rights were steadily eroded by white supremacists and the Supreme Court. The doctrine of 'strict construction' influenced interpretation of the Constitution. It held that amendments meant exactly what they said and no more; the boundaries of protection for the citizens were narrowly drawn and could not be extended to broader issues like transport, which had not been directly mentioned in the text. In addition, the doctrine of 'states rights' reserved wide powers to the states, such as over the justice system. Campaigning against segregation in education risked the Association being involved in lawsuits across fifty states and thousands of local authorities and school boards.

Moorfield Storey was an expert on the constitutional right to a fair trial, the subject of a NAACP lawsuit in *Moore v. Dempsey* (1923). The NAACP was aware that underlying the court case was a social and economic issue. The class system produced the 'economic exploitation of colored men and women under the sharecropping system'.<sup>12</sup> The NAACP was only interested in narrowly defined civil rights and success in *Dempsey* was followed by the

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<sup>10</sup> US Supreme Court, *Strauder v. West Virginia*. <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/100/303/> Retrieved December 12, 2015).

<sup>11</sup> Peter Irons, *A People's History of the Supreme Court*, (New York, 1999), p.227.

<sup>12</sup> NAACP *Eleventh Annual Report 1921*, p.16. <https://www.hathi.trust.org>

case of *Nixon v. Herndon* (1927), defending the African American right to vote.<sup>13</sup> The NAACP filed suit on behalf of Dr. Nixon, an African American who wished to join the Democratic Party in Texas. The Party was in several states a white supremacist organisation which controlled access to politics by setting up ‘white primaries’ and claiming they were private clubs. This allowed them to exclude anyone they wished. The White Primaries were an electoral abuse but they were not abolished until 1947, following several lawsuits.

Weaknesses in the NAACP strategy became apparent in the 1920s and 1930s. Winning supreme court cases was valuable, but judgements were carefully drafted to cover a specific set of circumstances in a case, so it was difficult to use them as precedents for future cases. The Association had to litigate repeatedly to make any progress, despite having won in similar circumstances. Twenty years after *Moore v. Dempsey* the case of *Lyons v. Oklahoma* (1944) was taken up by Thurgood Marshall.<sup>14</sup> *Lyons* dealt with the effect on due process of confessions obtained by torture, even though this had been settled in *Dempsey*.<sup>15</sup> The legal system thus added to delays and costs, leaving the Association chronically short of funds.

Strategy for the NAACP was decided by a handful of people: Nathan R. Margold, Walter F. White and Charles H. Houston; funding was pivotal to their decisions. Walter White attacked the work of the labour unions which were in competition with the NAACP. He argued that giving money to union officials would be like ‘pouring it down a drain’.<sup>16</sup> The Garland Fund offered one hundred thousand dollars to finance anyone who could devise and run a programme to eliminate segregation.

Middle-class African Americans were committed to progress through education including segregated schools for the elite, such as Washington’s ‘M’ Street High School, later

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<sup>13</sup> US Supreme Court *Nixon v. Herndon*. [Nixon v. Herndon :: 273 U.S. 536 \(1927\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#).

<sup>14</sup> Mark V. Tushnet, ed., *Thurgood Marshall; His Speeches and Writings*. (Chicago, 2001), p.3.

<sup>15</sup> US Supreme Court *Lyons v. Oklahoma* [Lyons v. Oklahoma :: 322 U.S. 596 \(1944\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#) (Retrieved December 12, 2015).

<sup>16</sup> NAACP: LoC File; American Fund for Public Service (Garland Fund) June 1933, Part 1, Box1, C196.

re-named Paul Laurence Dunbar High School. Opportunities for the middle-classes remained strictly limited. The NAACP launched a campaign designed to eliminate segregation for all students. A quota applied to African Americans at Harvard Law School.<sup>17</sup> The President of Harvard, Abbott Lowell, insisted on imposing a ‘color bar’ on the student dormitories, separating Black and white.<sup>18</sup>

The NAACP continued to oppose segregation in education, housing and transport but this was difficult to achieve. Politicians at all levels supported it up to the United States Senate and the White House. Segregation had been challenged repeatedly in the courts, yet by the 1930s the institution seemed more secure than ever. After *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) lawyers could claim that segregation was rooted in human nature and beyond the reach of government. This idea had been tested in the New York Supreme Court in *The People, ex. rel. King v. Gallagher* (1883).<sup>19</sup> A Black girl living in Brooklyn demanded admission to a nearby white school, claiming the head teacher’s refusal denied her ‘equal protection’. She lost her case, as the New York Appeal Court ruled that the school board must provide equally ‘efficient’ education for all races but did not have to provide education for Blacks and white in the same place.

The NAACP commissioned Nathan Margold in 1928 to work full time on a legal plan to attack segregation at its root. Margold was a Harvard-trained lawyer whose aim was to cancel the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine handed down by the Supreme Court in *Plessy*. The Supreme Court had ruled that it was legal to pass a law compelling a Louisiana railroad to create ‘Jim Crow’ facilities. Moreover, it was wrong to compel Blacks and whites to study together, ‘An attempt to enforce social intimacy...between the races, by legal enactments, would probably tend only to embitter prejudices...between them, and produce an

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<sup>17</sup> L. Vibert, Charles H. Houston and Black Professional leadership, *The National Black Law Journal*, Vol.11 (1988-1990), pp.330-347, p.333.

<sup>18</sup> Nell Painter, Jim Crow at Harvard. *The New England Quarterly*, Vol.44, No.4 (Dec.1971). pp.627-634, p.628.

<sup>19</sup> US Supreme Court *King v. Gallagher* [People, ex Rel. King, v. Gallagher, 93 N.Y. 438 | Casetext Search + Citator](#)

evil...result'.<sup>20</sup> The weakness of this argument was its basis in white prejudice rather than the law. The judgement was that transport could be provided separately for the races. The only condition was that provision must be equally good, otherwise it would be unconstitutional. Nathan Margold was concerned primarily with education and he argued that although US schools were segregated, the quality of provision was certainly not equal.

In 1928 Margold was given the task by Walter White of researching the problem of segregation in education, transport and housing. He stated in his Preliminary Report of 1930 to the American Fund for Public Service (Garland Fund) and the NAACP, that education should be the priority. It was a service provided by the states, who were subject to the Fourteenth Amendment on the 'equal protection of the laws'. Litigation could be directed at the States as they were education authorities. His research revealed a case that could act as the 'controlling precedent' for NAACP litigation. He chose the obscure case of *Yick Wo v. Hopkins* (1886).<sup>21</sup> Yick Wo was running a Chinese laundry in San Francisco when he was fined by the city council for trading without a licence. The Court released him on the grounds that he was a victim of racial discrimination by a local official. Yick Wo was a subject of the Chinese Emperor, yet he was protected by the US courts. The NAACP could use this case to argue that discrimination in schools was unconstitutional. The only justification for it was equality of treatment. An example of inequality was the South Carolina School Board spending ten times as much on white pupils as on Black.<sup>22</sup> African American taxpayers were, in effect, subsidising the white schools which was unconstitutional.

Margold and the NAACP planned to 'boldly challenge the constitutional validity of segregation, if it was accompanied irremediably by discrimination'.<sup>23</sup> Evidence of

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<sup>20</sup> US Supreme Court *Plessy v. Ferguson* [Plessy v. Ferguson :: 163 U.S. 537 \(1896\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#).

<sup>21</sup> Supreme Court: *Yick Wo v. Hopkins*, 118 U.S. 356 | Casetext Search + Citator

<sup>22</sup> NAACP: LoC Nathan Margold, *Preliminary Report*. Admin. File Part 1, Box 1, C200, p.17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.93.

discrimination would undermine the separate but equal defence of segregation. His work paved the way for litigation against states in the South who could be proven guilty of racial discrimination. Education was a vital service for NAACP members, many of whom were teachers. To prove that segregation *per se* was unconstitutional would be difficult and the attempt had failed before. Collecting sufficient evidence would present a huge task of research.<sup>24</sup> There were three parts to racial discrimination in education: the systemic inequality of teachers' salaries, despite possession of equal qualifications, rural school bus services which were free but for whites only and lastly, differences in per capita spending between Black and white students.<sup>25</sup> Margold concluded that public education in many southern states was being carried out in an unconstitutional manner. This was not because schools were segregated, but because the promise of equality made in *Plessy* was rarely delivered.<sup>26</sup> This had not been questioned in the Supreme Court before.

A plan of litigation was prepared to prove that education authorities were acting *ultra vires*. Using a sample of seven states in the Deep South, Margold provided egregious examples: Florida, Alabama, Louisiana, Arkansas, Georgia, South Carolina and Mississippi. Crucially, Margold also concluded that traditional legal remedies, such as a writ of mandamus or an injunction would be available for the NAACP to use against the states in court.<sup>27</sup>

In 1933 Margold left for another post and the NAACP nominated Charles Hamilton Houston as his replacement. He took over the Margold Plan and began to change it because The American Fund for Public Service was in financial difficulties.<sup>28</sup> Houston proposed a new legal doctrine to prove segregation was causing actual harm to African Americans,

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<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p.29.

<sup>26</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin. File. American Fund for Public Service: Reports on favourable cases. p.10., Part 1, Box 1, C199.

<sup>27</sup> A writ of *mandamus* was a court order forcing an official to cease and desist discrimination.

<sup>28</sup> McNeil, *Groundwork*, p.115.



through economic hardship, stagnation, feelings of inferiority and loss of confidence.<sup>29</sup> He observed, ‘Economically, an inferior education makes them less able to stand competition with whites for jobs’ and saps their confidence.<sup>30</sup> The Houston Plan was devised to put African American lawyers in the vanguard of a struggle to win over white opinion. It was organised by Houston in stages to accommodate the NAACP’s limited resources. His policy was to choose a few cases presenting clear legal issues and use them to create new precedents in the Supreme Court.

Developing public support was also vital.<sup>31</sup> In a speech to the National Bar Association, Houston claimed that together these actions would undermine segregation by proving it was unconstitutional.<sup>32</sup> He hoped to strike at the root of discrimination and presented the American Fund with a bid for financial support from them. In a Memorandum of September 1934 Walter White set out the problem of resources; the original bid for \$100,000 was dropped when the fund offered \$17,400.<sup>33</sup> Houston presented a new plan on October 26 1934 to a Joint Committee of the NAACP and the American Fund. The NAACP had been promised money for a campaign on education, although most of it was never paid as the fund was hit by the Wall Street Crash.<sup>34</sup> The Fund failed to produce the \$100,000 promised for the NAACP campaign and a small donation turned out to be a loan and The Fund was soon pressing for repayment.<sup>35</sup> Houston was flexible and pragmatic, so he responded by limiting his targets. ‘Due to lack of money and...manpower, we have to select our points of attack. It would be ideal if we could attack every discrimination, but we have to

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<sup>29</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin File. Charles Houston’s Speech to the National Bar Association, August 1, 1935. Part 1, Box 1, C45.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> McNeil, *Groundwork*, p.219.

<sup>32</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin File. Charles Houston’s Speech to the National Bar Association, August 1, 1935. Part 1, Box 1, C45.

<sup>33</sup> Walter White, *Memorandum to Garland Fund Committee on Negro Work*, September 1934, I-C-197.

<sup>34</sup> NAACP: LoC Legal Subject File: American Fund on Public Service. Part 1, Box 1, C197. Report of the Garland Fund Committee On Negro Work. p.14.

<sup>35</sup> NAACP: LoC Subject File: Garland. Letter from Garland Fund to Walter White, May 27,1934. Part 1,Box 1, C96.

choose'.<sup>36</sup>The plan had elements of continuity and gradualism which suited the NAACP's approach. A network of volunteer lawyers would carry out the work involved in preparing cases. The NAACP had relied on a few white lawyers: Moorfield Storey, Louis Marshall, Clarence Darrow and Felix Frankfurter, each of them born in the 1840s or 1850s.<sup>37</sup> The strength of the NAACP would now consist of a large group of able Black lawyers working in teams in the branches led by Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall.

The Association benefited from social trends favourable to African Americans. In the 1920s the range of opportunities in the legal profession grew rapidly. The total number of African American lawyers in the United States rose by twenty-two per cent between 1910 and 1920. By 1930 that figure had increased by another thirty per cent.<sup>38</sup> Jurisprudence was a popular choice for the most able students, ideally at Howard University or Harvard Law School. Harvard's alumni included: Archibald Grimke, William H. Hastie, Raymond Pace Alexander, Charles H. Houston, John P. Davis and Benjamin J. Davis Jr. who were all lawyers. Legal training gave them the self-discipline, confidence and forensic skills in debate which they would need in the Civil Rights campaign. Experience of racial discrimination at Harvard made them more determined to succeed. They left law school well-prepared to defend equal rights and ready to demand respect from white society. Walter White was not a lawyer but he supported the NAACP legal teams by creating a Legal Defense and Educational Fund, known as NAACP Inc. or The Fund. This was a separate entity established to accept tax-deductible donations for the work of the NAACP.<sup>39</sup> It would help ensure the finances needed for expensive legal cases, demonstrating White's practical, cautious strategy of raising the maximum amount of money before spending it.

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<sup>36</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin File. Charles Houston's Speech to the National Bar Association, August 1, 1935 Part 1, Box 1, C45. p.1.

<sup>37</sup> McNeil, *Groundwork*, p.132.

<sup>38</sup> Mack, *Representing the Race*, p.39.

<sup>39</sup> Gilbert Ware, 'The NAACP-Inc. Fund Alliance: Its Strategy, Power and Destruction', *Journal of Negro Education*. Vol.63, No.3 (Summer, 1994), pp.323-335, p.324.

Charles Houston, Raymond Pace Alexander and Thurgood Marshall were characterised by professionalism, determination and legal skill. Marshall would become Solicitor-General and an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. Charles Houston was an able academic who inspired young lawyers with the belief that the law must have a social purpose and serve the African American community. Black lawyers were expected to be, ‘a mouthpiece of the weak and a sentinel...against wrong...using law as an instrument available to the minority...to achieve its place in the community and nation’.<sup>40</sup> They had to be impeccable in their legal work, so white-run courts would respect their opinions. Houston showed his commitment to the cause by his meticulous preparation and ruthless cultivation of the strongest cases that could be used as precedents against segregation. His long-term aim was to compel white society to carry out the principles of *Plessy v. Ferguson* as the Supreme Court had ruled. This entailed the NAACP’s agreement to a temporary accommodation with the racist education system. In return for a show of outward acceptance of the *Plessy* principle of ‘separate but equal’, Black schools would receive equal funding and increased resources. This would be the reward for briefly appearing to support segregation.<sup>41</sup>

Budgets for Black schools in the South were being cut in the 1930s and there was general agreement that poor education was a serious handicap for African Americans.<sup>42</sup> The vast scale of inequality was a challenge and Houston took another pragmatic decision by choosing the aspect of segregation which was easiest to prove with his limited resources. The strongest case was the lack of opportunity for Black postgraduates who wished to study at the highest levels. Graduate and professional students received grossly unequal treatment in the South, with Black students being given inferior teachers and facilities. In 1939 a study found that nine southern states had no provision whatever for African Americans’ postgraduate

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<sup>40</sup> Quoted in McNeil, *Groundwork*, p.217.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p.117.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.132.

education. The South contained fifteen medical schools in 1945 for whites and none for Black students; sixteen law schools were for whites and only one for African Americans.<sup>43</sup> The southern states systematically took income from Black taxpayers to subsidise white schools and this was an injustice that would impress the Supreme Court. Houston argued that, 'Black education was being sacrificed...to save white education from being curtailed' in a period of widespread hardship.<sup>44</sup> Under the Houston Plan states would be compelled to equalise per capita funding for Black and white students.<sup>45</sup> The change implied introduction of equal pay for Black teachers. The Association's research revealed that in Maryland a teacher might receive \$600 per annum if he or she was Black, but \$1,100 if white, despite equal qualifications. Thurgood Marshall won several lawsuits for the equalisation of salaries, which gave a substantial benefit to the Black teachers involved, who were mostly women. The campaign for equalisation was abandoned because of the huge effort required in dealing with hundreds of school boards.

Houston challenged the Court to enforce its own doctrine of 'separate but equal'. The states would be compelled to spend more on African American education until their provision had been brought up to the level of the white schools; the only alternative would be integration. He explained his intention was 'to fight segregation by making it so expensive to the State that there will be a disposition on the part of the taxpayer to do away with it'.<sup>46</sup> If they insisted on keeping segregation it would become so costly that the system would become unpopular and thus would destroy itself. Walter White had the task of explaining the plan to the Board of Directors, so they would understand he was not supporting segregation. He explained his plan, 'It is proceeding upon the theory that the most effective attack upon

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<sup>43</sup> Cushman, Clare and Urofsky, Melvin I. (eds.) *Black, White and Brown: The Landmark School Desegregation Case in Retrospect*. (Washington D.C., 2004), p.69.

<sup>44</sup> NAACP: Charles H. Houston, Memorandum for the Joint Committee of the NAACP and the American Fund for Public Service, October 26, 1934, p.1.

<sup>45</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, p.162.

<sup>46</sup> NAACP: Houston. Memorandum, p.10.

segregation and Jim Crowism, to which it is irrevocably opposed, is to exhaust every legal recourse to secure...identical accommodations for white and colored pupils in all the states where there are separate schools'.<sup>47</sup> The dual system would prove to be unsustainable.

The NAACP now had a clear strategy to reconcile its short, medium and long-term goals. Houston believed his gradual assault on segregation would be effective because judges were by nature conservative and the NAACP's case would be rooted in legal precedent. Houston used an analysis which was based on social class, 'We must never forget that the public officers...are servants of the class which places them in office...It is too much to expect the Court to go against the established...social customs'.<sup>48</sup> Segregation was too strong to be challenged openly and directly. The NAACP plan was to create a succession of precedents by placing a few students in the segregated law schools.<sup>49</sup> Law graduates would have more success with fellow lawyers on the Supreme Court, proving their worth by excellent academic track records.

Houston calculated that there were only 487 Black lawyers practicing below the Mason-Dixon Line in 1930 while in Mississippi there was only one for every 168,286 African Americans.<sup>50</sup> The NAACP gathered a handful of law graduates who had accepted a duty imposed on them to help the African American community. Charles Houston wrote a document on the role of Howard University Law School in which he affirmed the moral obligation and social role laid upon lawyers, 'Every group must justify itself in terms of the general welfare...Howard Law School...is doing...necessary work for the social good...eliminating discrimination in America'.<sup>51</sup> Lawyers would have a vital role to play as

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<sup>47</sup> Wilson (ed). *In Search of Democracy*, p.161.

<sup>48</sup> NAACP: LoC Admin File. Charles Houston's Speech to the National Bar Association, August 1, 1935 Part 1, Box 1, C45. p.1.

<sup>49</sup> NAACP: Houston, Memorandum, p.2.

<sup>50</sup> Houston, 'Need for Negro lawyers', p49.

<sup>51</sup> Houston, Charles H., *Personal Observations*, May 28, 1929

<https://www.charleshamiltonhoustonfoundation.org/> (Retrieved June 3, 2016).

leaders in the civil rights struggle. These ideals were closely connected with the origins of the NAACP in the U.S. Constitution.

The Houston Plan had serious weaknesses, as Houston was aware, and after his victory in the case of *Murray v. University of Maryland* (1936) he wrote an article in *The Crisis*, 'Don't Shout Too Soon'. He observed that, 'Lawsuits mean little unless supported by public opinion...The really baffling problem is how to create the proper kind of public opinion'.<sup>52</sup> Houston understood the danger faced by his plan. By concentrating on a small group of students the NAACP strategy would run the risk of being irrelevant to ordinary African Americans. Houston's Plan was characteristically based on continuity and conservatism.<sup>53</sup> The strategy was conservative because its starting point was the doctrine of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, with its formal acceptance of the principle of segregation. Houston planned to use the courts to set a series of precedents, so that litigation could be started against states which flouted the law.

The advantage to working-class African Americans was hard to see.<sup>54</sup> In this period thirteen cases were taken to the Supreme Court and the NAACP claimed twelve of them as victories for equality.<sup>55</sup> The Houston Plan had innovative aspects but it was based on education policy set in 1909, when the founders had resolved; 'We...demand of Congress and the Executive...equal educational opportunities for all...that public school expenditure be the same for the Black and white child'.<sup>56</sup> The Association's strategy helped a handful of cases whose success had limited effect in practical terms. Benefits would be felt by a small number of graduate students. Houston himself felt uneasy about this, while opponents complained about cases which consumed huge resources for the benefit of a few privileged students.

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<sup>52</sup> C.H. Houston, 'Don't Shout Too Soon'. *The Crisis*, Vol.43, No.3 March 1936. p.79.

<sup>53</sup> Meier, *The NAACP as a reform movement*, p.15.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> Thurgood Marshall, 'Equal Justice under Law' *The Crisis*, Vol.46 No.7 July 1939 p.199.

<sup>56</sup> James MacPherson, ed. *Proceedings of the National Negro Conference of 1909*, p.223.

Houston himself proposed that the NAACP pay more attention to economic issues for the working class, declaring, 'Lots of us feel that a fight for anti-lynching legislation without just as vigorous a battle for economic independence is to fight the manifestation of the evil and ignore its cause'.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, he continued with his plan by supporting two African American graduates to become lawyers. Donald Gaines Murray was a graduate of the elite Amherst College, Massachusetts who applied to the University of Maryland Law School in 1935. He was accepted until the University realised that he was African American. The response to his immediate lawsuit was that it maintained the Princess Anne Law Academy for 'Negroes' and awarded scholarships to those who needed to pursue advanced studies. This was unsatisfactory because he would have to go to an out of state college to do so.<sup>58</sup>

Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP supported Murray and argued this arrangement was unconstitutional because the Academy was *not as good* as the segregated white law school. This was the first time the NAACP had challenged in court a state's failure to make equally effective provision for the races. Maryland Court of Appeal ruled that a scholarship in another state failed to provide the 'equal protection' to which Murray was entitled under the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>59</sup> The NAACP had proved discrimination and the State of Maryland was liable. Judge O'Dunne ordered the University to admit Murray to the white Law School immediately, the first time such a judgement had been given.<sup>60</sup> In 1936 the Maryland Court of Appeals upheld the NAACP claim, and the University accepted the ruling, 'Compliance with the Constitution cannot be deferred at the will of the State. Whatever system it adopts...must furnish equality of treatment now'.<sup>61</sup> Murray had a personal right to equal treatment and there must be no delay in granting this. The NAACP victory was

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<sup>57</sup> Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois*, p.575.

<sup>58</sup> Floyd Delon, 'The Legacy of Thurgood Marshall'. *The Journal of Negro Education*. Vol.63, No.3. (1994), pp.278-288, p.279.

<sup>59</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, p.164.

<sup>60</sup> Davis, *Thurgood Marshall*, p.87.

<sup>61</sup> Judge O'Dunne, *Murray v. Pearson*. [Pearson v. Murray \(Md. 1936\) \(howard.edu\)](#) (Retrieved May 3, 2017).

incomplete, since the case did not reach the U.S. Supreme Court as planned. Maryland raised its spending on Black teachers and colleges but retained its segregated facilities.<sup>62</sup> The NAACP had to pursue the principle of equality with a new lawsuit.<sup>63</sup> This was on behalf of Lloyd Lionel Gaines, a highly qualified law graduate.

In the case of *Missouri, ex. rel. Gaines v. Silas Canada* (1938) Chief Justice Charles Hughes ruled that States providing only one educational institution must allow Blacks and whites to attend together if there was no separate school for African Americans. The Registrar for Missouri Law School was Silas Canada, who had rejected the Black student Lloyd Gaines on the grounds of race. The case rested on Section One of the Fourteenth Amendment.<sup>64</sup> No State shall ‘deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the *equal protection of the laws.*’ [emphasis added]. Gaines was denied a place at Missouri University Law School but was offered a scholarship to continue his studies in another state. Lloyd was a citizen of the State of Missouri with a B.A. degree from Lincoln University. He had an excellent academic record and was of ‘good moral character’. The NAACP had carefully selected him to support his lawsuit.<sup>65</sup> In his handwritten notes on the case, Charles Houston pointed out that as a citizen of Missouri he had certain rights. There were ‘unique advantages from attending the University of Missouri Law School for a citizen of the state’.<sup>66</sup> These would be lost to Gaines if he had to study out of state, for example, the use of the excellent Missouri Law Library. Houston demanded that Missouri State either admit Gaines to the white law school or open an equally good law school for him alone. The state was forced to admit that it always had had separate facilities for the races but never secured equal quality.

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<sup>62</sup> Davis, *Thurgood Marshall*, p.89.

<sup>63</sup> Daniel T. Kelleher, ‘The Case of Lloyd Lionel Gaines: the demise of the Separate but Equal Doctrine’, *Journal of Negro History*, Vol.56 No.4 (1971), October, pp.262-271, p.262.

<sup>64</sup> US Supreme Court *Gaines v. Canada* [Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada :: 305 U.S. 337 \(1938\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#) (Retrieved November 11, 2016).

<sup>65</sup> NAACP: LoC Legal File. Cases supported: Gaines Case, Missouri. Part 1, Box1, D95.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*



The existence of discrimination by the university was proven, but Missouri University tried to win the argument by telling the State Appeal Court it was committed to providing a law school solely for African Americans. The NAACP took Missouri University to the U.S. Supreme Court and after two years of debate the Court found in Gaines' favour in 1938, when Chief Justice Hughes ruled, 'The admissibility of laws separating the races in the enjoyment of privileges afforded by the State rests wholly upon the equality of the privileges which the laws give to the separated groups within the State'. Gaines was entitled to the equal protection afforded to citizens.<sup>67</sup> The State was obliged to provide an equally good law school for African Americans, even if only one wanted to study law. Since that was not possible in the time available, the Court ordered that Gaines be admitted to the white law school immediately. He had a personal, individual right to equal treatment as a citizen and the State had no right to delay it.

Houston had inflicted a theoretical defeat on the institution of segregation. However, in 1939 Gaines disappeared and was never heard of again. This illustrated another weakness of the NAACP, who relied on a tiny group of activists who were vulnerable to isolation, accidents or violence. Segregation was intact at Missouri University, since rather than admit African Americans, the State allocated \$200,000 to build a separate Black law school. Three years of work had left the NAACP at the place where it started. It was 1950 before three African American students were admitted to the University of Missouri, this time by agreement.<sup>68</sup> The NAACP had illustrated its patience and legal skills but also the limitations of its conservative strategy which took up vast resources of time and money in return for limited results.

The Houston Plan was well-designed to achieve success, but the strategy also had

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<sup>67</sup> US Supreme Court Chief Justice Hughes, *Gaines v Silas Canada: Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada :: 305 U.S. 337 (1938) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center* (Retrieved November 11, 2014).

<sup>68</sup> Kelleher, 'The Case of Lloyd Lionel Gaines', p.271.

serious weaknesses. Rather than causing social change, judgements by the Supreme Court reflected the prevailing state of public opinion with its carefully drafted decisions. Legislation to resolve the problems was blocked by the United States Senate; the results of litigation were uncertain, and any benefits were long delayed. It was 1954 before the Supreme Court ruled that segregation was *per se* unconstitutional, after eight separate lawsuits had been brought asserting that point. It was 1955 before the Court ruled in the case *Brown II* that school segregation must be eliminated 'with all deliberate speed'. The result of this year long delay was the appearance of a programme of 'massive resistance' by white opponents in the South, a campaign which continued to obstruct desegregation for several decades. The NAACP strategy remained unchanged, while Thurgood Marshall continued to defend a policy of legal gradualism, ironically using the same arguments deployed in *Plessy* in 1896.

While it may be true that laws and constitutions do not act to right wrong and overturn established folkways overnight, it is also true that the reaffirmation of these principles of democracy build a body of public opinion in which rights and privileges of citizenship may be enjoyed, and in which...attempts at deprivation may be halted.<sup>69</sup>

Thurgood Marshall was the NAACP's most formidable lawyer, so his comments are evidence of the weaknesses from which the strategy suffered. Houston argued from the beginning that it was essential to build public support alongside legal proceedings.

The NAACP remained a conservative organisation which was reliant on gradual changes in public opinion. Its faith in the eventual victory of equal rights was unshakable, however long it took. This conservative strategy demonstrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the Association. The NAACP put immense resources of time and money into the success of a few Black graduate students seeking admission to segregated law schools. This project was slow and costly but reflected the nature of the organisation and its orientation towards the elite of the Black community. It pursued the interests of professionals in law and medicine. The *Brown* victory in 1954 before the Supreme Court was the result of

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<sup>69</sup> Thurgood Marshall, *The Crisis*. Vol. 46 No.7 (July 1939), pp.199-201, p.199.

the plan first prepared in 1928 by Nathan Margold.<sup>70</sup> Walter White was determined to take this long-term approach to campaigning, with a strategy spread over two decades or more.

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<sup>70</sup> US Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* [Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka :: 347 U.S. 483 \(1954\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#) (Retrieved 11 November, 2014)

## **CHAPTER EIGHT: The NAACP goes to war; 1917 and 1941.**

In this chapter I evaluate the effect of war on the NAACP. The Association was subject to social changes which impacted the African American working class and a new relationship was forged between them. The centre of this process lay in the industrial heartlands of the United States, to where millions of migrants had been drawn. The Midwest became part of 'The Arsenal of Democracy'.<sup>1</sup> Chicago and Detroit were spectacular examples and the Great Migration grew on an even bigger scale in wartime than it had in peace time. I observed a marked change in the Association before and after the two world wars. The attitudes of the NAACP changed drastically, with the huge increase in its working-class membership. Wars and migration brought extraordinary pressures to bear on the NAACP. It adapted to the demands of the war in a patriotic manner. I assert that the leadership maintained a high degree of continuity with their founding principles based on a conservative reading of the Constitution and an emphasis on litigation.

### **World War One**

Historian David F. Krugler explains how U.S. involvement in the First World War began to unsettle the customary state of race relations, which was characterised by white supremacism.<sup>2</sup> The industrial town of East St. Louis, Illinois was one of many which experienced rapid population growth as an industrial centre preparing for the Great War. In 1917 white workers in the town were in dispute with the Aluminium Ore Company, which had hired 470 non-union African Americans to defeat the strikers. Local whites saw their arrival as a threat to their way of life. Racial tensions gradually increased in the town, encouraged by leaders of the Central Trades and Labor Union (AFL) until violence broke out.

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<sup>1</sup> A.J. Baime, *The Arsenal of Democracy: FDR, Detroit, An Epic Quest to Arm an America at War*. (Boston, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Krugler, *1919: The Year of Racial Violence*, p.79.

The result of race riots, as reported by W.E.B. DuBois, was the murder by ‘shooting, burning and hanging’ of between ‘one and two hundred human beings, who were black’. Six thousand were driven out of their homes.<sup>3</sup> Local journalist Carlos F. Hurd wrote an eyewitness account.<sup>4</sup> He explained that African Americans had arrived in town looking for work in the meat packing plants and on the railroads, where they were promised good wages. In all, ten thousand African Americans were brought in to replace foreign workers who had been deported.

The NAACP called for indictments of those involved, but this had little effect, since local officials were reluctant to act against suspects who could be their friends, neighbours or colleagues. African Americans faced attack in hundreds of local communities across the nation, motivated by prejudice and economic rivalry. Riots and lynching in some cases appeared to be spontaneous; others were organised by labour leaders or local politicians. White workers saw the migrants as a threat to their jobs, a fear which fed into the labour movement’s traditional hostility towards strike-breakers. The NAACP leaders Martha Gruening and W.E.B. DuBois investigated the 1917 massacre in East St. Louis for *The Crisis* and added a powerful analysis of the role played by white labour.

W.E.B. DuBois accused local white trade union leaders of responsibility for these attacks. His account adds detail to the narrative. He exposed the role of social class, describing how workers and farmers came from nearby towns to join in, seeming to revel in the violence, ‘Around a corner came miners, fresh from work, pickaxes over their shoulders, who plunged joyously into the arena...on their backs dripped blood’.<sup>5</sup> His interpretation emphasises social status, contrasting his elite Harvard education with union leaders’

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<sup>3</sup> Martha Gruening, ‘The Massacre of East St. Louis’, *The Crisis*, Vol.14, No.5 September 1917, pp.219-238, p.226.

<sup>4</sup> Article by Carlos Hurd, *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, July 3, 1917, p.1.

<sup>5</sup> Martha Gruening, ‘The Massacre of East St. Louis’, p.226.

ignorance. He mocked the union's pretentious Latin motto and the leaders' ungrammatical use of English.<sup>6</sup>

The Great War unsettled the civilian population, especially the working-class, as the disruption of normal life poisoned race relations. The NAACP membership had increased at extraordinary speed and the leaders had high hopes of winning equal rights from President Woodrow Wilson, since the NAACP had willingly cooperated with the war effort. The end of the war brought a bleak, disappointing reality. Racial violence was worse than ever and during the 'Red Summer' of 1919 seventy-seven African Americans were lynched, including several returning soldiers in uniform.<sup>7</sup> Civil rights made no progress at this time, primarily because of racial tensions which were the result of the post-war economic slump. Disappointment was increased by the failure of the NAACP's anti-lynching legislation.

Chicago was affected by massive population movements. The city's African American population rose from 44,103 in 1910 to 109,000 in 1920.<sup>8</sup> Overcrowded housing caused racial tension on the streets and in public areas such as parks and beaches. Race riots broke out in the hot summer of July 1919, following an incident among crowds on the beach of Lake Michigan and in a nearby park.<sup>9</sup> The riots caused at least thirty deaths. The dislocation of everyday life was caused by conscription to the U.S. Army of thousands of African Americans for service in France. The NAACP encouraged educated men to volunteer for the Army but some were radicalised by their experiences of a rigidly segregated organisation. Charles Hamilton Houston was a young, educated patriot who volunteered to train as an officer in 1917 and served in France. He was angered by discrimination in the Army and was threatened by a potential lynch mob of American soldiers in the French town of Vannes. He encountered a group of white racists and had to be rescued by French

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p.238.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Lynching Industry'. *The Crisis*: Vol.19, No.4, February 1920, pp.183-186, p.184.

<sup>8</sup> Krugler, *The Year of Racial Violence*, p.101.

<sup>9</sup> Grossman, *Land of Hope*, p. 179.

officers.<sup>10</sup> His experiences made him a radical. Second Lieutenant Houston wrote to his mother explaining that he had learned not to trust authority, 'I don't expect to become a Bolshevik but I am going to do my best to secure what belongs to me'.<sup>11</sup> Houston returned to Philadelphia to study law but never forgot his war-time experience, 'I made up my mind that I would never get caught again without knowing something about my rights; that if luck was with me, and I got through this war, I would study law and use my time fighting for men who could not strike back'. He became NAACP Special Counsel and prepared the Houston Plan of Litigation that would in time strike a decisive blow against segregation.<sup>12</sup>

War contributed to industrialisation and migration especially during the prelude to the Second World War. Industrialists like Henry Ford took advantage of these conditions. He used the arrival of African American migrants in a long-term plan to build a loyal workforce at his huge new Detroit factory. In the 1930s the Ford Motor Company hired 9,825 non-union African Americans at River Rouge.<sup>13</sup> Ford's aim was to control his workforce with the help of a conservative clergy under his patronage.<sup>14</sup> If a job vacancy arose in the factory, the local pastor would be contacted to ask for someone to be recommended. Meanwhile apprehension was growing amongst whites of African American competition for their jobs at key places on the production line.

In the 1930s the NAACP appeared to change its strategy by cooperating for the first time with left-wing groups such as the Congress of Industrial Organisations (CIO). In 1935 the United Auto Workers had been founded as the first bi-racial and industry-based union. It was joined by the United Mine Workers, led by the formidable John L. Lewis. The CIO unions were actively recruiting Black workers and were opposed to discrimination. The

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in McNeil, *Groundwork*, p. 44.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>13</sup> Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit*, p.213.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

scholar Risa Goluboff argues that economic hardship in the 1930s provided the NAACP with an opportunity to strengthen its campaign for civil rights.<sup>15</sup> This analysis, I believe, needs some amendment. Cooperation between labour and the NAACP was not typical of the Association's behaviour, as it took place in the extraordinary circumstances created by approaching war.

Large numbers of working-class African Americans joined NAACP branches in Chicago, Detroit, Harlem and Philadelphia as the war effort developed between 1941 and 1943. Growth in the war economy was rapid, generating a huge demand for labour in these cities. The speed of this change caused massive social problems, resulting in serious violence which Walter White worked to prevent. He was active in opposing the Harlem riots of August 1943.<sup>16</sup> These were caused in his opinion by exorbitant rents and general poverty.<sup>17</sup>

Discrimination worsened during 1940 despite several meetings between Walter White and President Roosevelt requesting government action. Segregation would continue, an official statement announced on October 9. All present and future Black units were to be officered by whites. New arrivals in the North demanded that the NAACP deal with their grievances and their numbers caused them to dominate the branches. They needed help to deal with discrimination in housing and the armed forces. Overcrowding was a common problem. Detroit had 8,000 Black inhabitants in 1915 and by 1925 it had risen to 85,000.<sup>18</sup> In 1943 Detroit was housing 200,000 people in the same amount of space occupied twenty years earlier by only 50,000.<sup>19</sup> The Detroit branch became the nation's largest, with 12,204 members who expected the NAACP to speak for them.<sup>20</sup> The influx north consisted of 1,700,000 people between 1900 and 1940. Migrants often joined the ranks of the proletariat

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<sup>15</sup> Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights*. (Cambridge MA., 2007), p.199.

<sup>16</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.233.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p.239.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> NAACP: LoC Segregation: Letter from A.C. MacNeal to Joel Spingarn, June 30, 1937. Part I, Box 1, C404, Folder 1.



who generally had nothing to offer employers except their labour.<sup>21</sup>

## **World War Two**

In 1940 the Association had 50,556 members with 352 branches, which was a recovery from the low point of 1929. In Savannah, Georgia one new branch had 1,297 members while Chicago had 5,025, thanks to the activism of A. Clement MacNeal. This represented an unprecedented growth rate and by 1946 it had reached its post-war peak, with 1,048 branches and 394,747 individual members.<sup>22</sup> Historians Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein describe the change that took place as the beginning of the modern civil rights movement, which was linked to the labour movement of the 1940s. In Chicago and Detroit, they noted that ‘Black workers poured in from the...unionized foundries, tire plants, and converted auto/aircraft facilities, from city Government, streetcar lines, restaurants, and retail stores’.<sup>23</sup> In 1941 Chicago had 5,000 members and Baltimore 4,500. The same branches’ memberships rose to 12,204 and 7,800 respectively in 1942.<sup>24</sup> The NAACP announced it had twenty-four branches which had over a thousand members each.

The NAACP dealt with workers issues during the war, but this was not the normal business of the Association, which had given a low priority to social and economic reform. This was a temporary change in policy for the NAACP. In 1939 white racism in the labour movement presented another problem. A dispute had occurred in a shipyard at Tampa, Florida. A segregated AFL union, The International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, refused to work with African Americans and cooperated with employers to allow twelve of them to be dismissed. Walter White investigated and found the ‘Tampa situation to be a perfect

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<sup>21</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion; Second Reconstruction and Beyond 1945-2006*. (Jackson, Miss., 2007), p.11.

<sup>22</sup> James Gregory, NAACP Membership. <https://public.tableau.com/app/search/vizzes/NAACP%20membership> (Retrieved April 5, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Robert Korstad, Nelson Lichtenstein. ‘Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement’. *The Journal of American History*. Vol.75, No.3 (1988), pp.786-811, p.797.

<sup>24</sup> Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White*, p.261.

illustration of double- crossing of Black workers by labor unions'.<sup>25</sup> White remained hostile towards cooperation with labour unions, contrary to the account given by Beth Tompkins Bates.<sup>26</sup> She argues that White was developing positive relationships with labour unions in the years approaching the outbreak of war. I conclude that White and Roy Wilkins were not persuaded to alter the NAACP's policy until at least 1939 when White finally admitted, 'our cautious conservatism has kept us standing still'. The people were 'demanding a leadership of uncompromising action'.<sup>27</sup> The need to change policy was accepted but this would prove to be a temporary shift until after the war.

In 1940 a change in NAACP priorities had been discussed. In the minutes of the Board of Directors meeting, the only proposal recorded was the need to address the problems of labour. The Board signalled lukewarm agreement to this approach by receiving a regular report from a Special Committee on Economic Problems affecting the African American.<sup>28</sup> The NAACP modified its attitude towards labour with the cooperation of some unions. The UAW/CIO called a strike in April 1941 to achieve union recognition for the Ford Corporation's workforce in Detroit. The workers consisted of thousands of non-union African Americans, as well as southern white migrants. Ford was the last remaining carmaker in the U.S. to negotiate with unions. It was also the only major company to employ African Americans above the grade of porter or labourer.<sup>29</sup> At first, they loyally supported Henry Ford by opposing the strike and crossing union picket lines. The NAACP supported a strike because the union had agreed to recruit African American members. The Association had 'effected on a national level an alliance between the CIO and the NAACP'.<sup>30</sup> Cooperation with a union of the UAW's left-wing reputation was a major change of policy for Walter

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<sup>25</sup> Quoted in Janken, *White. The Biography of Walter White*, p.243.

<sup>26</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd challenges', p.341.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.370.

<sup>28</sup> NAACP: LoC Board of Directors File. Agenda February 13, 1940. Part 1, Box 1, A4, Reel 2.

<sup>29</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.211.

<sup>30</sup> Janken, *White. The Biography of Walter White*, p.252.

White.

White declared that all African American workers should support the Union. He went to the River Rouge plant himself, travelling round the site with sound equipment mounted on a lorry.<sup>31</sup> This was a novel experience for the Executive Secretary. The local press dismissed him as one of a series of Black leaders whose intervention had little effect.<sup>32</sup> During the strike race relations were characterised by violence. Two African Americans were described as being found in part of the steel-mill where they did not belong. As a result they were mobbed by union members.<sup>33</sup> However, White was given credit for having taken a decisive stand for the union, earning their gratitude. The UAW went on to gain recognition from the Ford Motor Corporation after winning union elections on May 21, 1941.<sup>34</sup> This marked a decisive shift towards the NAACP cooperating with labour and White's personal intervention in travelling alone to Detroit demonstrated his importance within the NAACP and over the National Board of Directors.

Chicago was another location where social problems were made worse by war. Branch leader A. Clement MacNeal complained to Joel Spingarn that segregation and restrictive covenants had created an 'emergency' for the 'Colored citizens' of the city.<sup>35</sup> The NAACP's traditional methods of persuasion and litigation failed to stop racists using these laws. In the Supreme Court case *Corrigan v. Buckley* (1926) it was ruled that the Fourteenth Amendment did not prevent whites refusing to sell or let a house to an African American. 'Not by any of these Amendments...are private lot owners prohibited from entering into mutual covenants not to sell to any person of negro blood or race'. Lower courts had ruled since before *Plessy* that this Amendment referred to racial discrimination carried out by a

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<sup>31</sup> Bates, 'A New Crowd challenges', p.341.

<sup>32</sup> Detroit Free Press, April 9, 1941. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/98589225> p.3. (Retrieved August 13, 2017). p.24.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit*, p.249.

<sup>35</sup> NAACP: LoC Segregation: Letter from A.C. MacNeal to Joel Spingarn. June 30, 1937. Part 1, Box 1, C404.

state government, not by an individual entering into a private contract.<sup>36</sup> Restrictive covenants were not eliminated until the judgement in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) when lawyer Thurgood Marshall established that racial covenants were unenforceable in the courts.<sup>37</sup> Housing remained a flashpoint. A federal housing scheme, Sojourner Truth Homes, in Chicago was built with two hundred housing units. Cooperation continued with the UAW when the NAACP campaigned alongside the union for the project to be racially integrated, in defiance of local customs of segregation. In 1942 outraged whites rioted against integration, encouraged by the local Ku Klux Klan.<sup>38</sup>

Participation in the Second World War had an even more powerful effect on U.S. society than the Great War had in 1917. Population movements in the 1940s were driven by an urgent need to equip the armed forces with vast quantities of aircraft, weapons, vehicles and ships. The war became a battle of organisation, output, production and large workforces.<sup>39</sup> Shipyards grew rapidly in the Southern states.<sup>40</sup> War drove expansion of the giant Ford plant in Detroit, making it the world's largest horizontally integrated factory, producing tanks, jeeps, aircraft and engines. The war disrupted travel, work and housing for tens of millions of people.

Wartime conditions encouraged racial conflict, causing a series of 'hate strikes' in Philadelphia, Chicago and Detroit, often organised at the grassroots in defiance of union leadership. The NAACP became involved as the strikes were blatantly based on racial discrimination. The Packard engineering plant in Detroit became a literal battleground of race relations, with African American workers using wildcat strikes to secure fair treatment and

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<sup>36</sup> US Supreme Court, *Corrigan v. Buckley* (1926) <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/271/323/> (Retrieved March 5, 2017).

<sup>37</sup> US Supreme Court, *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948) [Shelley v. Kraemer :: 334 U.S. 1 \(1948\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#) (Retrieved March 5, 2015).

<sup>38</sup> Louis E. Martin, 'The Truth about the Sojourner Truth Homes'. *The Crisis* Vol.49, No.4. April 1942, pp.112-114, p.112.

<sup>39</sup> Baime, *The Arsenal of Democracy*, p.233.

<sup>40</sup> Marable, *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, p.10.

promotion. Whites used the same tactic to reserve skilled jobs for themselves. Packard's production line made engines for bombers and torpedo boats. It was manned from 1943 by a unionised workforce of Polish immigrants and white migrants from the South. Walter White arrived at the plant gates to hear a local orator with a strong southern accent announce to a crowd, 'I would rather see Hitler and Hirohito win the war than work beside a nigger on the assembly line'.<sup>41</sup> In one incident three African American workers were upgraded by the company to more skilled jobs and as a result 25,000 whites went on strike.<sup>42</sup>

Walter White demanded federal intervention to prevent strikes, condemning them as sabotage. He was concerned to link the NAACP with the cause of American patriotism. The strikes were, he claimed, designed 'to hamper war production...weaken morale, and to deny Blacks the opportunity to participate in the war effort on the same basis as other Americans'.<sup>43</sup> He blamed white unions and 'active agents' within the plant, such as the Klan and supporters of an extreme right-wing radio priest, Father Charles Coughlin.<sup>44</sup> Strikes led to violence, which spread to the nearby city of Detroit. The city mayor described the tense relations existing between the races, such that any rumour could trigger a major riot. He reported how, 'One of the coloreds raced downtown to a club and had it announced over the public address system that a Black woman and her baby had been thrown into the river. Then it started'.<sup>45</sup> Detroit race riots left thirty-four people dead, who the NAACP claimed were killed by police and troops.<sup>46</sup> Walter White points out that the struggle was not a simple matter of whites fighting black mobs. White union members fought white 'mobs' to protect African Americans who wanted to join the union. At the same time union members protected

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<sup>41</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.225.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.224.

<sup>43</sup> NAACP: LoC Telegram from Walter White to FDR. June 21,1943. Part 2, Box 1, A495.

<sup>44</sup> Dallek, *Franklin D. Roosevelt*, p.251.

<sup>45</sup> NAACP: LoC Press release from the Associated Negro Press, August 4,1943. Part 2, Box 1, A495.

<sup>46</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.227.

whites against African Americans who were opposed to working with the union.<sup>47</sup> Social class appeared to have been as important as race.

Packard's work for the military allowed Walter White to deploy patriotic arguments, including this declaration, 'Tokyo and Berlin tonight rejoice at the effective and unexpected aid given them'. Details of the strike action 'would be broadcast throughout the Pacific to colored people, there to turn them further towards Japan'.<sup>48</sup> As a patriotic organisation the NAACP placed the ideal of equality within a narrative of American loyalty. White warned that, 'The Japanese...have industriously spread in the Pacific stories of lynchings, segregation and discrimination against the African American in the American Army...and of race riots in Philadelphia'.<sup>49</sup> White was able to strengthen his message by drawing on his recent experience of touring the battlefields in Europe and the Pacific, talking to thousands of people, Black and white about their experience of race and segregation in the armed forces.

White argued that racism did great harm to the U.S. war effort and was a theme used by Japanese propaganda. 'Colored peoples, particularly in the Pacific, believed whether correctly or not, that in its later stages the war was being fought to restore empire to Great Britain, France, Holland and Portugal'.<sup>50</sup> The number of African American industrial workers increased as the war went on, and conflict spread between African American workers and skilled white labour. White used the opportunities provided in wartime to expand the NAACP including developing a youth wing led by his protégé, the charismatic Juanita Jackson. This was a necessary step. 'Many of our branches are officered by loyal and faithful but elderly people, who...discourage initiative on the part of young people'.<sup>51</sup> The youth section was

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p.217.

<sup>48</sup> Walter White; *Speech given at Emergency Conference on the Negro in the War for Freedom*. Bodleian Library, Oxford. Ms. p1, rII,1218.

<sup>49</sup> Walter White, *The Rising Wind*. (New York, 1945), p.148.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p.147.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas L. Bynum, 'We Must March Forward. Juanita Jackson and the origins of the NAACP Youth Movement', *Journal of African American History*. Vol.94, No.4, Special Issue: Documenting the NAACP's First Century. (Fall 2009), pp.487-508, p.489.

encouraged to use radical methods of non-violent direct action such as a ‘Don’t Buy where you Can’t Work’ campaign, inspiring older members to join in.<sup>52</sup> Walter White was pictured in *The Crisis* picketing a branch of Safeway with a banner saying, ‘United Action means more jobs for Blacks: Buy where you can Clerk’.<sup>53</sup> In 1941 the Youth NAACP in Detroit backed a UAW/CIO strike, although the senior branch refused to take part. The policy of cooperation with organised labour was bringing a surge of recruits for the NAACP.<sup>54</sup> This vindicated Walter White’s new policy.

Walter White was in a strong position to carry out changes. He was the most powerful officer in the organisation and as Secretary had a strategic role, controlling the Association’s finances and access to the Board of Directors. His radical opponents had departed the scene and he had the support of the Board. He controlled information flows through committee reports and minutes of meetings but the weakness of his position was the continued lack of a programme to benefit the working-classes. They were unlikely to be impressed by the Association’s main policy of litigation, which, for example, managed to place one Missouri student in a segregated law school. Schools and universities would remain overwhelmingly white-dominated for several decades.<sup>55</sup>

The NAACP remained determined to use the courts to fight segregation. One response by Walter White was a patriotic campaign against segregation of fighting troops. In *The Crisis* he complained that Roosevelt was pandering to the South by ‘giving his blessing to Jim Crow’ in the armed forces. The President was simultaneously blocking a bill to discourage lynching from being passed by Congress. In 1940, the President affirmed the racist policy of the War Department by openly giving his support to segregation. He ordered

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<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.487-508, p.488.

<sup>53</sup> Illustration. *The Crisis* Vol.48, No.7 (July 1941), p.226.

<sup>54</sup> Korstad, ‘Opportunities Found and Lost’, p.797.

<sup>55</sup> See Chapter Seven.

the Army 'not to intermingle' Black troops with white, claiming that separation of the races had proven to be both 'satisfactory' and 'extremely effective'.<sup>56</sup> Walter White denounced this view, arguing that segregation caused conflict, wasted talent and damaged morale. African American mistreatment was 'weakening our war effort'.<sup>57</sup> The U.S. believed it was fighting for liberty but he asserted, 'A Jim Crow army cannot fight for a free world'.<sup>58</sup> In 1944 Walter White's argument was vindicated in *The Crisis* by Army chaplain Grant Reynolds, who stated that white supremacy angered the troops and impaired their morale, 'Black soldiers are damn tired of the treatment they are getting'.<sup>59</sup> The NAACP was under pressure to respond to this crisis of race relations.

Race relations continued to worsen with strikes spreading across the country, organised by workers. The Philadelphia Transit Company was one of many examples. It was led by members of white AFL unions who intended to prevent the recruitment or promotion of African Americans as bus drivers. The strike was openly announced by whites as a protest against the employment of African Americans and involved 4,500 staff.<sup>60</sup> The local NAACP branch played a leading role in opposing the strike. Such disputes occurred when workers came under pressure to abandon peacetime attitudes, customs and practices. Walter White's message of equality and patriotism was listened to because of the Government's urgent need to raise industrial production. In its editorial, *The Crisis* published a leaked letter from the Office of Production Management in Washington D.C., written by chief executive Sidney Hillman. He officially warned all defense contractors that labour shortages were harming output and moreover, racial discrimination was adding to the problem. This supported Walter White's argument, and Roy Wilkin's editorial quoted the letter at length, arguing that racism

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<sup>56</sup> Editorial, 'White House blesses Jim Crow'. *The Crisis*, Vol.47, No.8 November 1940, pp.350-351, p.350.

<sup>57</sup> Editorial, 'The Negro in the US Army' *The Crisis*, Vol.49, No.2, February 1942, p.47.

<sup>58</sup> Editorial, *The Crisis*, Vol.49, No.1, January 1942, p.7.

<sup>59</sup> Grant Reynolds 'What the Negro Soldier Wants'. *The Crisis*, Vol.51, No.11 November 1944, p.352.

<sup>60</sup> *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 2, 1944. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/171787303/?terms=%22> (Retrieved August 13, 2017). p. 1.



was unpatriotic as it clashed with the war effort.<sup>61</sup>

The NAACP used patriotic themes in a range of different contexts, including opposition to poll taxes which discouraged African Americans and whites from voting. The Association argued that they were saving democracy and Walter White condemned those who defended the tax as no better than the enemies in, 'Tokyo, Rome and Berlin'.<sup>62</sup> The NAACP joined the National Committee to Abolish the Poll Tax. Similar racist arguments were played out in the armed forces who applied rigid segregation. This was explained by the White House before the war as a successful application of the 'separate but equal' principle. In practice it meant that African American soldiers were often confined to inferior positions as cooks, servants or labourers. The Association claimed that segregation wasted abilities and meant African American status was 'inferiority, pure and simple'.<sup>63</sup>

One anonymous sailor complained in *The Crisis* that they were expected to train as servants for white officers, who were frequently from the southern states and brought their racial attitudes and expectations with them. 'The African American in the navy is a servant and an indentured servant in the worst sense of the word'. This meant, 'No honor from our people. They know we are not real sailors, but merely white men's servants, wearing a uniform'.<sup>64</sup> A persistent theme of African American discourse was the demand for respect or self-respect. Prestigious opportunities were closed to them, such as the U.S. Marine Corps, Navy divers and pilot training programmes. An 'experimental' group of thirty-three Black pilots were trained at Tuskegee, Alabama. This was at a time when the United States Air Force required thirty thousand pilots a year.<sup>65</sup> The Air Force was allowing prejudice to obstruct the needs of the war and only six hundred Black pilots graduated from Tuskegee

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<sup>61</sup> Editorial, *The Crisis*, Vol.48 No.5, May 1941, p.151.

<sup>62</sup> NAACP: LoC Press release from November 27, 1942 Part II, A479. Press release November 27, 1942.

<sup>63</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing fast*, p181.

<sup>64</sup> Anonymous. 'The Negro in the United States Navy', *The Crisis*, Vol.47, No.8 July 1940, pp.200-201, p.201.

<sup>65</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing Fast*, p181.

Flight School. In action as a separate squadron they won a total of 150 Distinguished Flying Crosses for bravery.<sup>66</sup>

African American soldiers were frustrated as an Army chaplain reported, 'I have found Black soldiers bitterly resentful of their lot in the war'.<sup>67</sup> Walter White's global tour in 1944 led to many meetings with US troops on the front line and caused his attitudes to become more radical.<sup>68</sup> In England he spoke to all ranks and heard many complaints of unjust treatment, 'Black soldiers were court-martialled, convicted and sentenced to long prison terms for minor offences, while white soldiers who committed far more grievous crimes were either acquitted or punished lightly'.<sup>69</sup> White commented in a memoir, *The Rising Wind*, that the men were bitter. 'As we talked, I was puzzled by the frequency...and bitterness of the phrase, "the enemy"'. He realised later African American soldiers were referring not to Nazis, but to their 'white fellow Americans'.<sup>70</sup> On the Pacific island of Guam, White encountered forty-four African American sailors who were under arrest accused of riot. They claimed to have been attacked by white soldiers who were not being punished. Walter White was pressed into the role of defense counsel at their court-martial, where he was able to put their defense on record. He followed up with the usual NAACP strategy by lobbying the authorities for the soldiers right to due process.

White balanced his complaints with a positive argument that African Americans were loyal and keen to serve their country. He singled out for praise those who volunteered for combat and displayed heroism, 'Several of the Black volunteers won The Distinguished Service Cross or The Silver Star and were otherwise cited for bravery above and beyond the

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<sup>66</sup> Tuskegee <https://www.history.com/topics/world-war-ii/tuskegee-airmen>.

<sup>67</sup> Grant Reynolds 'What the Negro Soldier thinks'. *The Crisis*, Vol.51, No.9, September 1944. p.289.

<sup>68</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.246.

<sup>69</sup> Thomas Hachey, 'Walter White and the American Negro Soldier in World War II: A Diplomatic Dilemma for Britain', *Phylon* (1960), Vol.39, No.3 (3rd Qtr., 1978), pp.241-249, p.245.

<sup>70</sup> White, *The Rising Wind*, p.18.

call of duty'.<sup>71</sup> On his return to the United States he was acutely aware of racism because of his experiences. Racism was spreading across the nation with the growth of the Army. African Americans from the North were encountering discrimination for the first time and were shocked by the treatment they received from the Army, including White's son, Walter Jr. His father wanted to protect him in the Army but he hesitated to intervene, because it would mean asking for special treatment and could lead to criticism of the NAACP.<sup>72</sup>

The armed forces insisted on segregation even when stationed overseas, with whole towns in France and England placed out of bounds to ensure the separation of the races. The NAACP attorney Charles H. Houston wrote about the injustice in *The Nation*, a liberal magazine in 1944. He accused the Army of allowing bullying and violence against African Americans, doing nothing to prevent it. He complained, 'The Army puts Blacks in uniform, transports them south and then leaves them to be kicked, cuffed and even murdered with impunity by white civilians'.<sup>73</sup> Houston was at this time a member of the newly established President's Committee on Fair Employment Practice, whose role was to investigate discrimination. He further complained, 'All Negro women' were banned from the Naval Reserves and 'there is still not a single Negro lieutenant in the U.S. Marines'.<sup>74</sup> Houston advocated the 'assignment and promotion of Negroes in all the armed forces, strictly according to service, experience and merit'.<sup>75</sup> The demands of wartime were undermining discrimination in the Army, as occurred in December 1944. During the German offensive in the Ardennes the need for U.S. troops in Belgium was so critical that the Defense Department had to accept integration of all units above the level of platoon; larger units were to be mixed. These numbers demonstrate the limited progress of the NAACP campaigns.

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<sup>71</sup> Walter, *A Man Called White*, p.250.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, p.340.

<sup>73</sup> Charles H. Houston quoted in Herbert Aptheker ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States Vol.4 From the New Deal to the End of World War Two*. (New York, 1992), p.508.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

Many African Americans were convinced by President Franklin Roosevelt's simplified version of civil rights which he referred to as the Four Freedoms: Freedom from Want, Freedom from Fear, Freedom of Speech and Freedom of Worship. It was obvious to observers that abolishing discrimination was as relevant in segregated Mississippi as it was in Nazi-occupied Europe. Roy Wilkins noted wryly that the U.S., having 'denied democracy to millions of its citizens in the South, was suddenly rousing itself to defend democracy in Europe, thousands of miles away across the Atlantic'.<sup>76</sup> A narrative was needed to resolve this confusion. The Second World War was portrayed in U.S. propaganda as a Manichaean struggle to preserve Democracy against Fascism, with the aim of inspiring the maximum war effort from Americans. This was a challenge for them, as they were treated as second class citizens and not allowed to take a full part in this struggle. As explained by W.E.B. DuBois, they experienced a dual identity reacting to changing circumstances both as members of a minority with its own grievances and as patriots wishing to serve their country.<sup>77</sup>

Sociologist Gunnar Myrdal observed in the 1940s that world war was creating a new dynamic in the civil rights campaign becoming, 'an ideological war fought in defense of democracy'. America needed to justify its rhetoric of liberty and 'stand before the whole world in favor of racial tolerance, co-operation and racial equality'.<sup>78</sup> This idea inspired the short-lived 'Double V' campaign, started on February 7, 1942 by a reader's letter to the *Pittsburgh Courier*. It called for African Americans to combine pursuit of 'Victory over Nazism in Europe with Victory over Racism at home'. The aim was to reject any idea that civil rights and military victory over fascism were incompatible. The NAACP campaigned relentlessly for African Americans to be free and equal citizens who would contribute fully to the war effort. Roy Wilkins commented on the linkage between the two, 'African Americans

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<sup>76</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing fast*, p.175.

<sup>77</sup> DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 6.

<sup>78</sup> Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, p.1004.

did not need the NAACP to tell them that it sounded pretty foolish to be against park benches marked 'JUDE' in Berlin, but to be *for* park benches marked 'COLORED' in Tallahassee, Florida'.<sup>79</sup> Support for the war needed to be combined with a demand for equality.

The USA and USSR became allies against Nazi Germany and the Japanese Empire in December 1941.<sup>80</sup> In the United States campaigns for left-wing causes had become easier to defend, such as the creation of bi-racial labour unions and better housing for the African American working class. Soviet influence in the United States was increased by pressure groups such as the Second Front Movement. One indication was *Time Magazine's* choice of Joseph Stalin as Man of the Year in both 1942 and 1943. Charles H. Houston and Thurgood Marshall were encouraged by their successes before the Supreme Court in the 1940s which protected African American voting rights in the South. However, the laws' delay was as protracted as ever. The case of *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) took four years to reach a judgement in the Supreme Court, starting from the day when Doctor Lonnie Smith was refused admission to a 'white primary'. White Primaries controlled entry to the Democratic Party and excluded African Americans from mainstream politics in Texas and several other states. The NAACP's arguments were finally accepted by the Supreme Court and a major barrier to voting was removed. Yet the Association still had to sue recalcitrant officials and petition the Attorney General to enforce the law.

Violence and intimidation remained forces to reckon with in the South. A voter registration drive in 1940 at Brownville, Texas ceased abruptly when the body of its organiser was found floating in the river. A white mob, including police officers, drove six Black citizens out of town at gunpoint.<sup>81</sup> This type of incident had a discouraging effect on the African American vote. The armed forces also continued to resist change and when the

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<sup>79</sup> Wilkins with Tom Mathews, *Standing fast*, p.184.

<sup>80</sup> Korstad, 'Opportunities Found and lost', p.797.

<sup>81</sup> Editorial, August 1940. *The Crisis*, Vol.47, No.8, p.232.

war ended the Army had 22,672 second lieutenants of whom only 818 were Black.<sup>82</sup> Out of 5,220 colonels, seven were Black. Nevertheless, because involvement in World War Two was deeper and longer than in the previous war the substantive social changes would be greater.

Historian Michael J. Klarman argues there was a crucial weakness to the NAACP strategy, which was that the Supreme Court could not change the American people's attitudes.<sup>83</sup> Judges did not exist in an ideological vacuum when they ruled on racial issues and they generally reflected majority white opinion. Segregation was part of what sociologist William Graham Sumner called the 'folkways', the fixed ideas and customs of American society. This concept was developed in the 1900s and implied that desegregation could only happen over generations and with the consent of white people. Laws did not create racial prejudice and courts could not abolish it, said the judgement in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 'Legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts. If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution...cannot put them upon the same plane'.<sup>84</sup> The gradualist argument was popular among white liberals who told the NAACP to practice patience and rely on education to do its slow work of change. A practical example was the attitude of President Roosevelt. Walter White met with the President and Eleanor Roosevelt on several occasions to demand desegregation of the defense industries and the armed forces. He received no response.

The Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP) was planning a demonstration in Washington D.C. to oppose discrimination. The union had only ten thousand members but it was the most significant Black labour union in America. Randolph had been highly critical of the NAACP during the 1920s post-war period in his magazine *The Messenger*, where he

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<sup>82</sup> Langston Hughes, *Fight for Freedom*, p.100.

<sup>83</sup> Michael J. Klarman, 'Is the Supreme Court Sometimes Irrelevant? Race and the Southern Criminal Justice System in the 1940s', *Journal of American History* Vol.89, No.1 (June 2002), pp. 119-153, p.122.

<sup>84</sup> US Supreme Court in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896). [Plessy v. Ferguson :: 163 U.S. 537 \(1896\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center.](#)

advocated left-wing social reform. These two leaders of the African American race, one socialist and one conservative, decided to cooperate in 1942 against the racist common enemy which was segregation.

Walter White was disappointed by his failed negotiations with the White House and President Roosevelt's weak proposal on discrimination; he dismissed the President's latest document as 'emasculated' and 'worthless'.<sup>85</sup> He enthusiastically joined Randolph in organising the 'March on Washington Movement'.<sup>86</sup> Randolph and White insisted on the need to develop a 'militant, sustained, organised public opinion' that would achieve real change. This was a radical move for White, who affirmed, 'I very much agree with you that only a mass demonstration is going to have any effect on the situation...in Washington'.<sup>87</sup> He added, 'It is time we Blacks stopped talking at the big gate and got down to business, to demonstrate that we are not going to be satisfied with anything less than unqualified democracy for ourselves'.<sup>88</sup> The two leaders made plans together for a demonstration of 100,000 marchers in the centre of Washington D.C.<sup>89</sup> They gambled that Roosevelt was afraid of the embarrassing international publicity this would cause.

Walter White was at a turning-point in his career when he became enthusiastic about the new strategy of working with labour. In the past, the NAACP had been reluctant to cooperate with labour, as AFL unions were hostile to the Association and the few African American unions were suspected of socialist views. This had been the NAACP's position for several decades and in 1924 the Board of Directors had refused to work with the labour movement. The Board declared, 'Organized labor does not come under the scope of the

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<sup>85</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.193.

<sup>86</sup> John Bracey, p.8.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> NAACP: Letter from Walter White to A. Philip Randolph, quoted in John Bracey and August Meier: *Allies or Adversaries?* p.11.

<sup>89</sup> William P. Jones, *The March on Washington. Jobs, Freedom, and the Forgotten History of Civil Rights*. (New York, 2013). p. 43.

Association'.<sup>90</sup> It would take the drastically changed circumstances of wartime to alter this attitude.

After the threat of a 'March on Washington' was conveyed by White and Randolph, the President agreed to issue Executive Order 8802 decreeing, 'There shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries and in Government, because of race, creed, color or national origin'. Roosevelt set up the Fair Employment Practices Committee to monitor the Executive Order, with two African Americans as committee members, including Charles Houston. The NAACP took an active part in resolving the five thousand complaints about discrimination which the FEPC received annually.<sup>91</sup> This reform appeared so radical at the time that Randolph was labelled 'the most dangerous Black in America' by an African American congressman. The NAACP had broken no laws, but skilfully used the threat of a mass demonstration in the nation's capital to win a concession.

Walter White was playing two different roles in the 1940s. He was a spokesman for the oppressed African Americans and at the same time a conservative patriot who supported the war effort. This would prove a demanding task and, acting out of character, he recognised that social disorder in Harlem had social and economic causes, 'Crowding...rents, poverty...caused the outbreak and nothing could prevent its repetition except correction of those evils'.<sup>92</sup> White's attitude to social problems and the working classes had changed, as had the behaviour of the NAACP, which was responding to the needs of the working class as never before. Changes were percolating through all levels of the NAACP. The Philadelphia branch had a pre-war reputation for elitism and lack of political activity, yet by 1944 the African American population of the city had risen to 300,000 and the NAACP branch had

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<sup>90</sup> Harmsworth Library, Oxford. Minutes of the Board of Directors, October 14, 1924. mf, p1, r1.

<sup>91</sup> Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White*, p.261.

<sup>92</sup> White, *A Man Called White*, p.239.



8,000 members.<sup>93</sup> Working class problems came to the fore, especially rents and prices. Members of the branch worked to resolve these problems and they campaigned for two years alongside the Union of Transport Workers (CIO) in the city. They helped union members upgrade to better jobs such as motormen, bus drivers, cashiers, mechanics and conductors.<sup>94</sup> Cooperation with organised labour had become policy for the NAACP.

In the latter stages of the war Walter White led the NAACP in another bold change of direction. Vague plans for a post-conflict world had been set out in 1941 by President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill on a battleship off the coast of Canada. The key to this 'Atlantic Charter' was self-determination for all peoples. The NAACP took the Allies at their word, claiming that there was a commitment to be carried out as soon as possible. Hundreds of millions of colonial citizens living in India, Africa and the West Indies were restive under colonial rule, so the NAACP supported their desire for freedom. There was a display of continuity between the Association in the 1940s and its anti-imperialist origins. The 1944 NAACP National Conference heard Walter White proclaim that colonial 'subjects' were aware of American ideals and he announced that, 'They take literally the shibboleths of the Four Freedoms'. The NAACP's aim was to end the 'old order' where men were exploited just because they were 'colored'.<sup>95</sup>

The National Board of Directors passed a resolution on March 12, 1945 regarding the founding of the United Nations. It called for a declaration of race equality and a promise of self-determination for all colonies. Natural resources were to be owned by the inhabitants. The NAACP was committing to a policy of world-wide democracy. 'We sincerely believe that no action less than this is going to rescue this world from continued war and the

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<sup>93</sup> Allan M. Winkler, 'The Philadelphia Transit Strike of 1944'. *The Journal of American History*. Vol.59, No.1 June 1972. pp.73-89, p.74.

<sup>94</sup> Carolyn D. Moore. 'The NAACP in Philadelphia'. *The Crisis*, Vol.51 No.5, May 1944, pp.144-147, p.147.

<sup>95</sup> Herbert Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States Vol.4: From the New Deal to the End of World War Two*, (New York, 1992), p.475.

persistent exploitation of a large portion of mankind if not indeed the majority of human beings'.<sup>96</sup>

The leaders of the NAACP were returning to the ideals of the Anti-Imperialist League, while White argued that freedom had been promised by the Allies.<sup>97</sup> He used his position in the organisation to consolidate support for the policy of anti-colonialism. The Association was concerned that as peace approached America's costly defeat of the Japanese Empire would be wasted. White pointed out, 'Thousands of Americans have died and billions of dollars have been spent in the Pacific to oust the Japanese - apparently only to restore the islands to European powers'.<sup>98</sup> Across this vast region stretching from the West Indies to Indochina, he believed that national independence must prevail. White bravely asserted, 'The day of the white man's imperialistic rule is over'.<sup>99</sup> He had become a radical opponent of U.S. Government policy.

In 1944 W.E.B. DuBois re-joined the NAACP to help Walter White challenge U.S. Government policy and plan a campaign for decolonisation. White was keen to use DuBois' experience, prestige and contacts to develop policy.<sup>100</sup> DuBois had a long record of opposition to imperialism, attending conferences on Pan-Africanism since the 1890s and leading the Pan-African Congress in Paris in 1919. Support for this policy had been secured in advance from the Board of Directors.<sup>101</sup> White also had the Board's support in 1945. On March 12, the Board passed a 'Resolution re The Prevention of War' which had been prepared by DuBois in his new post as Director of Special Research. The NAACP displayed a high degree of continuity in its beliefs, returning to the ideas of Moorfield Storey. In the

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<sup>96</sup> NAACP: LoC Minutes of the Board of Directors. March 12, 1945. Spool 3 1944-953. p.7.

<sup>97</sup> Aptheker, ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States Vol.4.* p.558.

<sup>98</sup> NAACP Press Release, April 12, 1945.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted in, Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation 1941-60*, (Cambridge, 2015), p.21.

<sup>100</sup> Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White*, p.297.

<sup>101</sup> Clarence G. Contee, 'Du Bois, the NAACP, and the Pan-African Congress of 1919' *The Journal of Negro History*, Vol.57, No.1 (January 1972), pp.13-28, p.15.

Board's resolution it declared, 'the ownership of colonies, protectorates and dependencies, by any country, has been and still is a frequent and repeated cause of war and oppression'.<sup>102</sup>

This was a radical view.

White clashed with the United States Government when he warned that a series of bloody wars would be waged in the future to maintain the white man's hold on his empires. He argued that if the U.S. was true to its values, it would support movements of national liberation active in Ireland, Africa, Indochina, Algeria and India. White supported *An Appeal to the World*, a document drafted by W.E.B. DuBois on the denial of human rights to African Americans, which was presented to the United Nations in 1947.<sup>103</sup> The NAACP could argue that the liberal elite was returning to its first principles of freedom and equality, as practiced by Moorfield Storey in his advocacy of self-determination for the Philippines. Dutch, British and French empires were damaged by the Second World War and as it ended whites made plans to return to status quo ante bellum, supported by the United States. Walter White warned that this policy of global inequality would cause endless warfare, 'The United States, Great Britain, France, and other Allied nations must choose without delay...revolutionize their racial concepts and practices, abolish imperialism and grant full equality to all its people, or else prepare for World War Three'.<sup>104</sup> Arguably, he was proved right by the many colonial wars which occurred in the post-war decades. The British Empire in Cyprus, Kenya, Rhodesia, Palestine, India and Northern Ireland, the French in Algeria and the Dutch in Indonesia would be taught costly lessons.

Walter White promoted anti-colonialism as NAACP policy, supported by other leading members. In 1944 Charles H. Houston attacked the 'old colonial system with the

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<sup>102</sup> NAACP: LoC Minutes of Board of Directors. March 12, 1945. Spool 3, 1944-1953. p. 6.

<sup>103</sup> NAACP. *An Appeal to the World*, (New York, 1947).

<sup>104</sup> White, *The Rising Wind*, p.154.

white man's heel on the colored man's neck'.<sup>105</sup> W.E.B. DuBois convened an Anti-Colonialism Conference in New York on April 6, 1945, at which ten colonies were represented. The delegates demanded self-determination. W.E.B. DuBois argued that 'Colonialism must go, for...it has caused poverty and the primary object...shall be to improve the economic and social condition of the colonial peoples'.<sup>106</sup> Walter White on his tour of Europe and the Pacific in 1944 pursued the same argument, even with members of the ruling class, including Lady Astor, an American-English politician who was the first female Member of Parliament in Great Britain. White complained that she represented the selfish elite who wanted to recreate the British Empire as it had been before the war. 'But in nothing she said was there any hint of a newer world in which there would be much change from the old one...one knew she was convinced that control of the destinies of the world would remain in the hands of those who had held the reins before'.<sup>107</sup> White believed that this opinion was widespread.

The U.S. government was admonished, 'Resumption of white arrogance and domination in the face of such facts may be disastrous to the peace of the world'.<sup>108</sup> Once again, White advocated the view of Moorfield Storey on racism and human rights. 'The persistent refusal of Americans to see the connection between the colored American and the colored peoples abroad, the continued, and it seems wilful, ignorance which will not investigate the connection are agony to those loyal and anxious Americans who know all too well the dangerous possibilities'.<sup>109</sup> New strategies and allies were necessary because of the demands made by world war.

Walter White reflected on the effects of the war on the Association. He found new

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<sup>105</sup> Charles H. Houston in Aptheker ed., *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States Vol.4.* p.509.

<sup>106</sup> Quoted in Carol Anderson, *Bourgeois Radicals: The NAACP and the Struggle for Colonial Liberation 1941-60.* (Cambridge, 2015), p.58.

<sup>107</sup> White, *The Rising Wind*, p.55.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p.150.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p.153.

allies in the labour movement on the political left. The future peace and the role of the NAACP had to be considered. DuBois helped change White's attitudes. Two important conferences were at this time debating the shape of the post-war world at Dumbarton Oaks, Washington D.C. and Bretton Woods, New Hampshire. Equality of African Americans was not on the agenda despite the sacrifices they had made. Walter White was not invited to Bretton Woods even as the future of global economic policy was determined. This rebuff led White and DuBois to pursue with even greater determination the policy of anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism.

## CONCLUSION

The NAACP has the longest continuous history of any civil rights organisation. The reasons for its longevity are to be found in its character as a conservative association with an elitist leadership whose roots were deeply embedded in the structures of American society. Other civil rights organisations faded into obscurity while the NAACP survived the first fifty years of its' turbulent history. The Association was able to draw on the resources of a growing African American middle-class who identified with the aspirations and values which it promoted. The NAACP benefited from leaders of the highest quality with a range of different backgrounds and traditions, including academics, socialists, social workers and members of the Jewish community. Nevertheless, among the leaders were a few well-educated men and women from the New England elite, several of whom were graduates of Harvard University Law School. At a time of racial discrimination and violence the bi-racial character of its leadership would prove to be an advantage in future campaigns.

My thesis explored the nature of the NAACP, the character of its supporters and the reasons why it came into existence. My focus on the founders revealed that Moorfield Storey played an outstanding role which has not been acknowledged in the literature and was far more significant than appeared. This judgement was based on my research of primary sources which merit more attention from scholars. The Association has often been criticised by its opponents for conservatism and failure to deal with social and economic problems. Despite this, I found an unexpected radical aspect to the NAACP in its consistent policy of anti-imperialism which placed it in direct opposition to U.S. foreign policy. The Association supported movements of national liberation in Africa, Haiti and the Philippines.<sup>1</sup> It

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<sup>1</sup> Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights. Race and the Image of Democracy*. (Princeton and Oxford, 2011).

maintained this policy throughout the twentieth century, including the early years of the Cold War, a time when this was a difficult position to defend.<sup>2</sup>

Moorfield Storey actively supported the fight against imperialism and colonialism because he rejected racial prejudice of all kinds; he continued to campaign for self-determination of the Philippines. The National Convention of the Democratic Party in 1913 adopted an anti-imperialist resolution which Storey quotes with approval. ‘We oppose, as fervently as did George Washington himself...a policy of colonial exploitation, no matter where or by whom invoked or exercised’. Storey adds, ‘All men under the American flag are entitled to protection of the institutions whose emblem the flag is’.<sup>3</sup> The connection between attitudes to Filipinos and the treatment of African Americans was obvious to Moorfield Storey.

The task of my thesis was to explain the nature of the NAACP and its underlying values as expressed in the U.S. Constitution. The principles of the Constitution derived from philosophers of the Enlightenment, including Thomas Hobbes and Adam Smith.<sup>4</sup> They were concerned with liberty and resistance to tyranny.<sup>5</sup> Equality and individual rights were written into the Constitution. ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal...endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness’. The Association believed in equality but there was a long running debate over its definition. The interpretation varied widely between the views of Moorfield Storey and W.E.B. DuBois. Storey believed in equality before the law, within the secure boundaries of the Constitution. DuBois took his definition from the works of Karl

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<sup>2</sup> Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line. American Race Relations in the Global Arena*. (Cambridge, MA., 2001), p.161.

<sup>3</sup> Moorfield Storey, *The Democratic Party and Philippine Independence*. May 1913. p.2. <https://archive.org/details/democraticparty01storgoog> (Retrieved June 25, 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *The Leviathan*, (1651). Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Social Contract*, (1762). John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Civil Government*, (1690). Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, (1776).

<sup>5</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*. (Cambridge, MA.,1967), p.173.

Marx.<sup>6</sup> Liberty for the individual citizen was the essence of U.S. politics. Individual rights had to be protected from interference by tyrannical governments or a radical working-class.<sup>7</sup> Each citizen had an opportunity for the pursuit of happiness; this was the philosophy of liberal individualism, which many Americans believed was a unique feature of the American system. These values were taken up by the NAACP at the founding.

The dissertation sets out to explain the nature of the NAACP and the society in which it operated. The context included the effects of social class, which shaped the work of the leadership. Initially it was founded by a small number of white conservative men and women. The membership grew and by 1916 the majority were African American who formed a new, confident, middle-class in the suburbs of the burgeoning cities. Their attitudes were based on the social class they identified with, setting them apart from the working-class. They believed in a property-owning democracy, the importance of education and the opportunity for social mobility. This class identity led them to consider themselves superior to working-class members of their own race. By the 1920s the NAACP was a predominantly middle-class organisation, one which was in danger of alienating the working-class members by their attitudes of class superiority. They gradually took control of the branches and the national organisation.

I re-interpreted evidence of the NAACP's development to emphasise the role of Moorfield Storey and the importance of anti-imperialism in his thinking. This factor proved far more significant than appeared at first. One of the original aspects of my dissertation was a study of the interaction between Moorfield Storey, W.E.B. DuBois and Walter White. The politics of these leaders contained contradictions, but I found among them a shared opposition to imperialism and colonialism. Each had a history of campaigning against white

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<sup>6</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, Henry Louis Gates, ed. *The World and Africa*. (Oxford, 2007), p.35.

<sup>7</sup> Henry Steele Commager, *The Empire of Reason; How Europe Imagined and America realized the Enlightenment*. (London, 1978), p.122.



empires in Africa and supported the cause of self-determination for small nations. This was also in the tradition of Jeffersonian democracy.

Moorfield Storey had a successful career as a corporate lawyer for a railroad company and was president of the American Bar Association. He came from a family of lawyers descended from New England Puritans. His most important work was done after his retirement from the law when he became an activist resisting U.S. government aggression in foreign policy. As a Christian he opposed the war with Spain in 1898 and was anxious about the increasing amount of violence in American society. Storey saw this as a violation of the American ideals, freedom and self-determination. He often quoted his hero Abraham Lincoln, 'No man is good enough to govern another, without that other's consent'.<sup>8</sup> Storey entered national politics as a leading member of the Anti-Imperialist League.<sup>9</sup> However, nothing was more important to him than obedience to the law, which was a conservative principle. He condemned labour unions, whose power he considered a danger to the Constitution.<sup>10</sup>

Moorfield Storey's longevity linked his career with the eras of Abolitionism, Radical Reconstruction and the growth of the NAACP. He had a unique set of skills, including legal expertise which were used to mount a vigorous challenge to U.S. foreign policy. Storey attacked imperialism and colonialism, gathered evidence of government deception and publicised allegations of war crimes. He was exasperated by the U.S. government's false claims. 'The war in the Philippines has been conducted by the American army with scrupulous regard for the rules of civilized warfare, with careful and genuine consideration for the prisoner and the non-combatant'.<sup>11</sup> The aim of the Anti-Imperialist League, taken up later by the NAACP, was to defend the principles of the U.S. Constitution and use the free

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<sup>8</sup> Hixson, *Moorfield Storey*, p.59.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>10</sup> Storey, *Obedience to the Law*, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Storey, '*Marked Severities*', p.1.

press to turn public opinion against imperialism. Storey brought this strategy to the civil rights movement, where it became an essential aspect of the NAACP. He led a committee of supporters, which included national figures such as Senator Carl Schurz. Storey played a central role in the organisation, yet today he is almost forgotten. He exposed the lies and hypocrisy of the U.S. government's claims. The reality was that they were not protecting the Filipino people or obeying the rules of war. American soldiers displayed racist attitudes and described the Filipino leader as a 'Chinese half-breed'.<sup>12</sup>

My work emphasised that despite the NAACP's reputation for conservatism, it went through marked changes during its first four decades of existence. At the 1910 founding conference supporters of the new association were diverse, including men and women with a range of conflicting opinions. Storey was a highly educated, prosperous white man, who led a majority African American organisation. His contribution to the NAACP included his commitment to democracy and equality before the law; he embedded these principles in the NAACP through his leadership of the Association's programme of litigation. His originality lay in the connections he made between anti-racism and anti-imperialism. He was horrified by war and believed the key to world peace was to oppose the growth of empires; the U.S. Constitution was endangered by an imperialist policy which threatened America with a future of costly wars, loss of liberty and excessive spending on armaments. These sentiments were reflections of his respect for law and hatred of violence.

Storey committed the NAACP to its legal strategy throughout the 1920s. He advanced the cause of civil rights, succeeding by his consistent pursuit of a few fundamental issues, especially due process and access to the ballot. These were calculated to make the maximum difference to the lives of African Americans. His accurate judgement was crucial to the NAACP which was a small organisation with limited resources and could only succeed by

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p.6.

being disciplined and focused.

The causes of anti-imperialism and anti-racism were united by Storey through his positions as President of the Anti-Imperialist League and National President of the NAACP. His global achievement was to promote the definition of civil rights to include Filipinos, the peoples of the Caribbean as well as African Americans. His campaign for equality was designed to spread the idea of civil rights to the entire world. The U.S. foreign policy was seen as an urgent problem by anti-imperialists. Storey was the first public figure to voice the fear that imperialism abroad encouraged violent racism at home in America. This insight inspired the NAACP but has not been widely explored by historians.

The Association was evolving constantly and divisions were appearing amongst the leadership. Storey represented the continuity of the white leadership, with a rigid devotion to legality and peaceful persuasion. His leadership brought the NAACP several legal victories for civil rights. However, there were areas of disagreement. The most dramatic split was over U.S. support for the Great War between pacifists like Oswald Villard and patriots who included Joel Spingarn. Storey overcame his detestation of war in general on the grounds that defence against aggression was justified. He was convinced that German militarism was an evil which had to be opposed at all costs. An allied victory was desirable because in his opinion 'this war was brought on by Germany'. Storey argued 'It was she who took the initial step, it was she who gave Austria her support in making the extraordinary demand upon Serbia, it was she who prepared down to the last point for war, and it was she apparently who desired it'.<sup>13</sup>

In 1917 on the U.S. declaration of war, he developed his argument further, stating that 'the German people are in substance a mad dog at large in the community, and until the Hohenzollerns and their theories of government are overthrown for good and all, there will be

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<sup>13</sup> Moorfield Storey, *Report of the 18<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting*, December, 1916. (Boston, 1917). p. 26.

no such thing as peace in this world'.<sup>14</sup> The Association reached a turning-point soon afterwards, when James Weldon Johnson and Walter F. White took over as Executive Secretary and Deputy in 1916 and 1918. The membership grew to an unprecedented level by 1919. The white executive officers were replaced to reflect the majority of the members, who were African American. This change of ethnicity was pivotal to the NAACP's development. However, more profound changes were taking place. A group of members known as the 'New Crowd' was growing in numbers and influence. This change encouraged a class system to develop in the North as migrants separated out into a Black elite, middle-class and working-class. They spread out to find homes in the cities like Chicago, but their movements were limited by local policies of segregation and discrimination.

African Americans used the concept of social class in different ways from the traditional approach of scholars. Abram Harris and Ralph Bunche used classical Marxist definitions relating to ownership of the means of production.<sup>15</sup> The 'New Crowd' in the NAACP can be broadly defined as middle-class. This is a description based on a category of African American who valued property, professional status, educational achievement and respectability. 'In the Baptist Church the positions of authority were monopolized by men'.<sup>16</sup> They controlled the local branches of the NAACP and their special characteristics also included racial pride and self-respect. This group was particularly secure in the branches in the northern cities, where the Association was at its strongest. Ironically, segregation helped this group to grow in the prosperous suburbs of Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia and New York. Their class consciousness alienated many African Americans, whose unfulfilled needs were social and economic. At the same time, radical working-class movements of the Left and Right emerged during the 1920s, led by the Communist Party and the UNIA respectively.

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<sup>14</sup> Moorfield Storey, *The Right Ethical Attitude of the American People*. (Boston, 1917). p.1.

<sup>15</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Marxism and The Negro Problem', *The Crisis*, May, 1933. pp.103-104, p.103.

<sup>16</sup> Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontents*.p.18.

African American intellectuals in the 1920s and 1930s were attracted by Karl Marx's works on social class, dialectical materialism and the importance of economics. In *Marxism and the Negro Question* (1929) the scholar Ralph Bunche argued that Marxism, rather than race, was the only valid explanation of trends in society such as the Great Depression. Communism also claimed to provide the solutions with the proposal for the 'overthrow of capitalist democracy through the concentration of political power in the hands of the proletariat'.<sup>17</sup> He poured scorn on the NAACP's belief in the rule of law, legal equality and civil rights, in favour of the economic interests of the working classes. Bunche mocked their obsession with the protection afforded by that 'sacred document' the U.S. Constitution, which he called 'an illusory banner'.<sup>18</sup> W.E.B. DuBois took a similar view in *The Crisis*, where he described Karl Marx as 'a colossal genius' who understood the history of class struggle which was a 'contest between exploiting and exploited, ruling and oppressed'.<sup>19</sup> In a similar vein, Bunche held out the ironic promise that the African American would 'quaff the full draught of eighteenth century democratic liberalism'.<sup>20</sup> This was his dismissal of the NAACP ideals as old fashioned and out of date.

In the 1930s left-wing views spread amongst the NAACP membership, who were aware of mass unemployment and poverty. Evidence for this emerged at the 1932 NAACP Annual Conference which passed a resolution entitled, *An Address to the Country*, arguing that civil rights alone would not satisfy the masses,

The American Negro is going to find freedom...mainly through an improvement in his economic status...We are becoming convinced that it is because we are poor and voiceless in industry that we are able to accomplish so little...We are going to use our political power to the utmost. But...what the Negro needs primarily is a definite economic program.<sup>21</sup>

This debate split the Association, as its most active members were socialists who supported

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<sup>17</sup> Henry, ed., *Ralph J. Bunche*, p.35.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.57.

<sup>19</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, 'Marxism and The Negro Problem', *The Crisis*, May, 1933. pp.103-104, p.103.

<sup>20</sup> Henry, ed., *Ralph J. Bunche*, p.57.

<sup>21</sup> NAACP: Proceedings of Annual Conference NAACP, Washington D.C., May 17-22. Part 1, Box1.

the motion.<sup>22</sup> However, leaders like Mary White Ovington were restrained by an unwillingness to risk dividing the organisation and damaging the movement.<sup>23</sup>

The 1933 Amenia conference took the process of reform one stage further, by producing Abram Harris's Future Plan and Program for the NAACP. This document was a radical challenge to the status quo of the class system and so was blocked by the conservative leadership. The National Board of Directors took all key decisions for the Association, and it had a conservative majority. Members included Mary White Ovington and James Weldon Johnson, long-serving leaders who were now semi-retired. Ovington had profound objections to Harris' proposals, 'Ours is predominantly a white Organisation...Dr Harris preaches economic determinism, class struggle, communism...A middle-class organization like ours...would fuddle it'.<sup>24</sup> Oswald Villard, Isadore Martin and Robert Church were wealthy businessmen and also members of the Board.

Walter White took on the task of managing Harris' proposals for the Board from the conservative viewpoint. He claimed to find a huge range of problems in them and asked numerous questions of detail. Harris refused to engage with issues of implementation,

I do not consider it a part of the Committee's job to ascertain how the Executive Officers of the Association will carry this program into operation. You raised the question of the additional cost that this program will entail if put into operation and seem to think that the Committee ought to tell you how the money is going to be raised, this would require a study of the Association's finances.<sup>25</sup>

White's most powerful argument was a shortage of money, an issue which Harris would not address, suspecting that White merely wished to sabotage the Plan. Roy Wilkins put this argument in his usual blunt manner, 'It is in this section on finances that it seems to me the committee has failed utterly to make suggestions of any value. It may be that the committee

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<sup>22</sup> Ross, *J.E. Spingarn and the rise of the NAACP*, p.17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.19.

<sup>24</sup> NAACP: Letter from Mary Ovington to Walter White, September 23, 1934. Board of Directors Committee on Future Plan and Program.

<sup>25</sup> NAACP: Letter from Abram Harris to Walter White, September 17, 1934. Board of Directors Committee on Future Plan and Program.

conceived its duty to be that of laying out a program merely'. The burden of raising finance would fall upon the staff.<sup>26</sup>

In 1936, after the NAACP had failed to implement the *Future Plan*, W.E.B. DuBois, Abram Harris, John P. Davis and E. Franklin Frazier abandoned hope of reform in favour of their own project, the creation of a National Negro Congress. The NAACP was divided between supporters and opponents of cooperation with the Left, but Walter White remained firmly opposed. He regarded a programme to raise living standards among working-class African Americans as an impractical distraction from the tasks of supporting civil rights and obtaining a federal ban on lynching. A. Philip Randolph was president of the new National Negro Congress and a union leader but he was suspicious of the role of the CPUSA in the NNC. He agreed with the popular maxim of American politics that, 'African Americans should not add to the difficulties of being black, the drawback of being Red'.<sup>27</sup> He resisted the influence of the Communist Party over the NNC and in 1940 Randolph disavowed the Communist support. He resigned as its President and soon afterwards joined the NAACP Board of Directors.

Walter White and Roy Wilkins remained opposed to communist ideas throughout their careers in the NAACP, believing that they would be unpopular, divisive and expensive. White was distracted by the perennial problem of funding. Donations from a few wealthy individuals continued to play a significant part in Association finances. Julius Rosenwald had access to huge amounts of capital and made substantial contributions. He began his long association with the NAACP by paying for a defence attorney in the 1910 case. of Pink Franklin.<sup>28</sup> Large donations were essential to the NAACP, especially when membership was

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<sup>26</sup> NAACP: Memorandum from Roy Wilkins to Walter White, September 19, 1934. Board of Directors Committee on the Future Plan and Program.

<sup>27</sup> NAACP: Speech of A. Philip Randolph, *Proceedings of the National Negro Congress, 1940*.

<sup>28</sup> Ascoli, *Julius Rosenwald*, p.94.

falling during the 1920s and 1930s. Walter White was anxious to avoid any association with socialism or communism for fear of offending these rich donors and believed the capitalist system was fundamentally sound. Scholar B. Joyce Ross explains the NAACP belief that liberal capitalism could provide success and ‘economic uplift to all of those allowed to freely partake of it’.<sup>29</sup> This opinion was no help to the working-class in the 1930s who were suffering from the effects of mass unemployment, which approached one quarter of the general labour force by 1933.<sup>30</sup>

The editors of *The Crisis* published copious material on anti-colonialism, including support of the African National Congress, which was founded in South Africa in 1912 to oppose segregation. The magazine invited articles from independent communists such as George Padmore.<sup>31</sup> Anti-imperialism was a concept which had been developed by NAACP legal scholar Moorfield Storey in an earlier controversy about the Philippines. The idea was essential to the work of the NAACP, as Storey represented a continuity of belief between the Founding Fathers of the Constitution, Radical Reconstruction and the anti-imperialism of the NAACP. My reading of the historiography of imperialism led me to examine critically the interpretations of previous scholars. The influence of anti-imperialism is rarely mentioned in works such as Gilbert Jonas’ *Freedom’s Sword*, or Patricia Sullivan’s *Lift Every Voice*. The reason for this omission may be that during the Cold War of the 1940s and 1950s anti-imperialism was associated with communist movements. This made them suspect in the view of many Americans. The balance has been restored recently by the ground-breaking work of scholar John Munro.<sup>32</sup> He quotes extensively from *The Crisis* on the process of decolonisation which was taking place in Africa during the post-war era.

The NAACP supported the cause of freedom for people of colour across the world

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<sup>29</sup> Ross, *J.E. Spingarn and the rise of the NAACP*, p.14.

<sup>30</sup> US Department of Labor.

<sup>31</sup> George Padmore, ‘For the Right to Exploit Dark Peoples’. *The Crisis* Vol. 46, No.11, November 1939, p.327.

<sup>32</sup> John Munro, *The Anti-colonial Front: African American Freedom Struggle and Global Decolonisation, 1945-1960*. (Cambridge, UK., 2017).



and remained consistent throughout the period. W.E.B. DuBois put the global view in a document which was presented to the United Nations. The UN was created in San Francisco with the American government playing a vital role. The NAACP and DuBois insisted that the treatment of African Americans was an international issue and the United Nations was entitled to intervene. 'This question then, which is without doubt primarily an internal and national question, becomes inevitably an international question'.<sup>33</sup> This argument justified an appeal by the NAACP to the UN seeking the redress of African American grievances. *An Appeal to the World* was a document written by experts and edited by DuBois, with Walter White's approval. It gave a concise, factual account of the treatment inflicted on African Americans since the time of slavery. White attempted to have the *Appeal* presented to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights but Eleanor Roosevelt, who was a key American government delegate, rejected his proposal. This was in spite of her liberal reputation and position on the Board of the NAACP. As the Cold War rivalry between the U.S. and the Soviet Union came out into the open, the American government was to become increasingly embarrassed internationally by issues of lynching and segregation in the Southern states.<sup>34</sup> James F. Byrnes was caught by a diplomatic trap of this kind in debate with leaders of the Soviet Union in 1946. He was Governor of South Carolina, U.S. Secretary of State under Truman and served on the U.S. Supreme Court. When he protested at Soviet denial of voting rights in the Balkans in 1946, the Soviets replied correctly that 'the Negroes of Mr Byrnes' own state of South Carolina was denied the same rights.' Byrnes had no answer.

Anti-imperialism continued to shape the organisation and Walter White criticised the plans for a rapid return in 1945 of France and the Netherlands to the empire pre-war status

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<sup>33</sup> W.E.B. DuBois, ed. *An Appeal to the World*. (New York, 1947). p.13.

<sup>34</sup> Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line*.p.75.

quo. He condemned the British Empire as a vast system of economic exploitation and discrimination. White argued for the freedom of India from British rule, as in his interpretation the subjects of the King-Emperor George VI were in a parallel predicament to the African Americans. White worked closely with W.E.B. DuBois to express the global view before the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. He observed that white supremacy was a global problem, becoming more urgent with the post-1945 turmoil that was spreading in Asia and Africa. He stated the Association's philosophy which was 'The NAACP's growing conviction that the battle for the Negro's freedom must be fought on a world-wide, rather than a merely American front'.<sup>35</sup> This belief led him to a meeting in the British West Indies in 1947, where he complained to British representatives about the 'desperate plight' of the British West Indian poor farmers who were being exploited by absentee landlords living in England. 'Squalor and poverty' had 'fanned the flame of demand for freedom in the West Indies, as it has all over the world'. White established a campaign to achieve self-determination for the West Indies. This was the American Committee for West Indian Freedom, based in New York.<sup>36</sup>

The aim of the NAACP was to introduce long-term changes in the law to provide equal opportunity for all Americans. This involved replacing the *Plessy* judgement of 1896, which was used by white supremacists to support a system of segregation. The NAACP resisted by using the Fourteenth Amendment and its principle of 'equal protection of the laws'.<sup>37</sup> This was cited repeatedly in courts by the Association's lawyers during the first half of the twentieth century. The long-term result would be a landmark case before the Supreme Court, *Oliver Brown v. the Board of Education at Topeka, Kansas* (1954) which was presented by NAACP attorney Thurgood Marshall. The Supreme Court's unanimous

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<sup>35</sup> DuBois, ed. *An Appeal to the World*, p.13.

<sup>36</sup> White, *A Man called White*, p.357.

<sup>37</sup> US Supreme Court: <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/>

judgement was that segregation had no place in public education since separate schools were judged to be inherently unequal.

The NAACP was entering a new era of civil rights where it would play a vital role, in cooperation with Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Improvement Association. In November 1956 the NAACP branch won a court victory in *Browder v. Gayle* (1956) with a ruling that segregation of the bus system in Montgomery was unconstitutional.<sup>38</sup> Arguably, this saved the boycott from defeat. Such cases exemplify the virtues of the organisation. The plan to defeat segregation had been in preparation since 1928, with initial work being carried out by the young NAACP lawyer Nathan Ross Margold.<sup>39</sup> Scholars Clare Cushman and Melvin Urofsky describe the immense task involved to complete the task. Thirteen families from six jurisdictions were taken to trial at the Supreme Court, where five separate cases had to be consolidated into one.<sup>40</sup> These cases demonstrate the virtues of the NAACP; continuity, professionalism and attention to detail. Thorough preparation was the hallmark of the mostly volunteer African American lawyers in the branches, working in teams.

The NAACP combined the liberal values of the Founding Fathers with a conservative ethos shaping their attitudes to social class. They believed in respect for private property and other conservative characteristics, such as a tendency to look back in history for inspiration; the campaign for the abolition of slavery was a prime example. Social class and education also helped to make the leadership conservative. Oswald Villard and Moorfield Storey displayed an instinctive conservatism in their wary attitude towards labour unions. They supported the Fourth Amendment's protection for the individual citizen and his property, both of which were protected from 'search or seizure' unless a warrant was sworn before a

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<sup>38</sup> Maryland District Court: *Browder v. Gayle* (1956). [Browder v. Gayle, 142 F. Supp. 707 \(M.D. Ala. 1956\) :: Justia](#)

<sup>39</sup> US Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/347/483/>

<sup>40</sup> Clare Cushman, Melvin I. Urofsky, eds. *Black, White and Brown: The Landmark School Desegregation Case in Retrospect*. (Washington D.C., 2004), p.153.

magistrate on the presentation of ‘probable cause’ by an officer of the law.

Traditionally a jury trial was a civil right which included the opportunity to examine evidence and question witnesses, assisted by defence counsel. Each of these rights was underpinned by the ancient concept of ‘due process of law’. The NAACP closely followed the beliefs of the Founding Fathers and due process became a constant theme in courtrooms across the land. The NAACP’s first capital case on due process was *Pinkney Franklin v. South Carolina* (1910). Experienced attorney Albert E. Pillsbury was a colleague of Moorfield Storey. He devised a legal doctrine intended to justify federal intervention against lynching.<sup>41</sup> The established doctrine of state’s rights prevented federal laws from being used against lynching, but Pillsbury found a way around this. His article in the *Harvard Law Review* protested that ‘mob-law’ was leading the U.S. into ‘actual and concrete anarchy’.<sup>42</sup> His new insight was that the ‘equal protection of the laws’ would be a powerful argument for African American equality. On appeal to the Supreme Court Pillsbury argued for the NAACP that Pink Franklin was entitled to claim the right of self-defence. He also argued that all-white juries should be banned, but his argument was rejected. In the 1930s the pressure group International Labor Defense persuaded Supreme Court judges in *Powell v. Alabama* (1932) to change their minds.<sup>43</sup> The abolition of all-white juries would protect African Americans against bias. The NAACP was determined to remove abuses which gave the false appearance of a fair trial. An effective defence was essential in the NAACP’s view but the problem of injustice would be solved within the legal system. The most consistent theme of the NAACP was the prevention of lynching, the cause with which the Association was most identified. The pervasive nature of white supremacy encouraged complicity between lynch mobs and the states. In the most egregious cases victims were handed over by police to the mob. Compliant

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<sup>41</sup> A. E. Pillsbury. ‘An Inquiry into a federal remedy for lynching’, *Harvard Law Review*. July, 1906. pp.707-713, p.708.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p.710.

<sup>43</sup> US Supreme Court, *Powell v. Alabama*, (1932). [Powell v. Alabama :: 287 U.S. 45 \(1932\) :: Justia US Supreme Court Center](#)

coroners and juries would record that death took place, 'at the hands of person or persons unknown'.<sup>44</sup> The NAACP's opposition to this practice was non-negotiable.

American ideals were embedded in the Constitution and were even transmitted to schoolchildren by means of simple narratives and heroic figures from history. The NAACP subscribed to these values which can be seen in history textbooks of the period. *The Mayflower Story* was a widely used book in a series *The Story of Liberty* by Charles Carleton Coffin. The author presents a narrative of American democracy, starting with the Puritan settlers who created their own body politic in New England, without reference to the authority of either Church or King. A covenant was agreed between all male colonists, who promised 'just and equal laws' for all, as was their 'natural right'.<sup>45</sup> Each adult male signed the Mayflower Compact and committed himself to carrying it out.<sup>46</sup> The colonists assumed superiority over the native Americans, having defeated them in war. The experience of war gave white Americans a lasting sense of mission which was renewed in the twentieth century.<sup>47</sup> In the 1900s most whites limited the extent of democratic principles to members of their own race. The NAACP was almost the only group which favoured extending democracy to African Americans.

In the 1930s the NAACP was profoundly divided because the leadership believed in the preservation of the class system, a viewpoint shared by Moorfield Storey.<sup>48</sup> The reformer Abram Harris in his proposal, *The Future Plan and Program of the NAACP*, had a very different view of the organisation and set out to change it. Conservative leaders on the Board of Directors wished to preserve the social system in which they had been secure and

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<sup>44</sup> Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown. The Lynching of Black America*. (New York, 2002).

<sup>45</sup> Charles C. Coffin, *The Story of Liberty*, (New York, 1879), p.203.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Edward Randolph, *King Philip's War*, (London, 1685), p.1.

<sup>48</sup> US Supreme Court *Lochner v. New York* (1905). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/198/45>.

successful.<sup>49</sup> The scholar Seymour M. Lipset describes the ‘American Way’ as including laissez-faire capitalism.<sup>50</sup> The NAACP subscribed to the free market theory, which was upheld by the Supreme Court.<sup>51</sup> The Court ruled on a case of labour law that the City of New York had no power to limit the hours which a bakery worker could be forced to keep. This conservative judgement ruled that a contract between employer and the individual employee was sacred and no one had a right to interfere with it. This was Moorfield Storey’s view as a national expert in contract law.

The character of the NAACP was demonstrated by its attitude to other organisations. Many groups campaigned for civil rights during the twentieth century but did not survive. They included The League of Struggle for Negro Rights, The National Negro Congress, The United Negro Improvement Association and The Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Some were replaced by newer, more relevant organisations, as the NNC was supplanted in the 1940s by the Civil Rights Congress, a left-leaning group set up with Communist Party support.<sup>52</sup> Correspondence between the NAACP and the CRC displays a deep-seated mistrust between the two organisations. The Association was determined to survive as a moderate, conservative organisation. The CRC claimed to have the same aims but this was repeatedly denied by Walter White and Roy Wilkins. In a Western Union telegram Wilkins states, ‘The Civil Rights Congress definitely not on list of approved organisations with which the Association cooperates’.<sup>53</sup> William L. Patterson, National Executive Secretary of the CRC and a long-time communist, corresponded with Wilkins, who refused any cooperation with the CRC. Wilkins recalled the bitter conflicts between them and the Communist Party over Scottsboro in the 1930s. ‘We remember... that the NAACP was subjected to the most

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<sup>49</sup> NAACP: Abram Harris, *Report of the Committee on Future Plan and Program for the NAACP*. p.3.

<sup>50</sup> Seymour M. Lipset, *American Exceptionalism; A Double-edged Sword* (New York, 1997), p.19.

<sup>51</sup> US Supreme Court *Lochner v. New York* (1905). <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/198/45>.

<sup>52</sup> NAACP. The Patterson-Wilkins Correspondence. Part II, Box II, A369 Folder 3. November 23, 1949.

<sup>53</sup> NAACP Western Union telegram. Roy Wilkins to Dr. Carlton B. Goodlet. The Patterson-Wilkins Correspondence. Part II, Box II, A369 Folder 3. April 20, 1949.

unprincipled vilification. We remember the campaign of slander in *The Daily Worker*'. Wilkins complains of, 'the whole unspeakable machinery that was turned loose upon all those who did not embrace the 'unity' policy as announced by the Communists'.<sup>54</sup>

The CPUSA put a high proportion of its resources into winning over African American loyalty during the 1930s but by the 1960s it had virtually ceased to exist. Left-wing groups were placed under intolerable pressure by Cold War measures such as the Smith Act, which was passed by Congress in 1940. This was one among many actions by the U.S. designed to counter communist ideas and the influence of the Soviet Union. The NAACP was affected by these events because its opponents wrongly accused it of having a left-wing agenda. Social class did play a part in the development of the Association and this aspect has not received enough attention from scholars such as Charles F. Kellogg. The NAACP's work was shaped by, for example, the industrialisation of the Midwest. The centre of NAACP activity was in the cities of the North where the newly arrived African American population had settled.

The results of my research centred on Moorfield Storey's role in the history of the Association. He provided a coherent liberal position on imperialism and racism over his two decades as a leader of the Association. My conclusions are derived from an original approach to primary sources, ones which had not been fully studied before. The NAACP founders were a social elite who maintained conservative views despite pressures from their radical wing. They were unpopular with many African Americans who were alienated by their class prejudices. Storey represented the NAACP's conservative belief in the American Constitution; this was continued by Walter White, who was fundamentally conservative. Storey held an honorary position as NAACP President but he also led the litigation strategy that would decide the Association's priorities for decades to come. He contributed ideas of

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<sup>54</sup> NAACP. The Patterson-Wilkins Correspondence. Part II, Box II, A369 Folder 3.

anti-imperialism and anti-racism, without which the NAACP would not have existed.



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