

ROY WILKINS AS A JOURNALIST

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, recently (1964) addressed some strong, straight talk to his own people, and especially young people. In a column written for the New York Amsterdam News, he used the kind of language that would be misunderstood if it came from a white man to a Negro; all who are concerned with and hopeful for justice for the Negro will agree that he spoke words needed to be said.¹

Roy Wilkins, a journalist-turned civil rights leader and syndicated columnist, probably will never be recognized as a journalist of distinction. But the St. Louis-born director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) will long be remembered by thousands of black and white Americans as a journalist who skillfully writes "thoughtful and informative appraisals of news and trends in the changing American life of these new times."²

Wilkins is an articulate journalistic craftsman whose analysis of news from the Negro side is fast drawing acclaim from the journalistic hierarchy.

¹Irwin Ross, "Roy Wilkins--Mr. Civil Rights," Reader's Digest, September 1964, p. 71

²Bruce Horton, vice president and general manager of the Register and Tribune Syndicate, in syndicate's promotional brochure.

Describing Wilkins' column, which appears in 52 American newspapers, Bruce Horton, vice president and general manager of the Register and Tribune Syndicate, says that it is not a "walk on" part, just to make a show of Negro coverage. He said:

It is as quick to deplore Negro indiscretions as it is to expose exploitation or bigotry. Mostly, it is a report on progress and how it affects the daily lives of all Americans.³

Despite his objective writing and his uncommon leadership ability, Wilkins is comparatively unknown in the camps of "The Fourth Estate." But any lack of fame-- as a journalist--by national standards is more than offset by the high esteem he enjoys and the respect and tribute he is paid by the members of America's Negro press, in particular, and the black community in general.

Wilkins was managing editor of the Kansas City Call, a black weekly newspaper, long before he vaulted to the fame he now enjoys.

The career of Wilkins is, in itself, a classic example of the Horatio Alger story. His father, William, was born and reared in Holly Springs, Mississippi, where he attended Rust College. For all his better-than-average

³Bruce Horton, personal correspondence, October 9, 1969.

Negro education, the elder Wilkins "drove mules and plows" before he fled Holly Springs in 1900 "because he was considered a troublemaker, who didn't like the way Negroes were treated."⁴

In St. Louis, where Roy was born on August 30, 1901, his father went to work as a foreman in a brick kiln. When young Wilkins was four, his mother died, and he went with his younger sister and brother to live in St. Paul, Minnesota, with an aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Williams. Wilkins' sister died in 1927 and his brother died in 1941.

For "the great sum of \$85 a month," Mr. Williams was the private carman of the private railroad car of the president of the Northern Pacific Railroad. Mr. Williams taught Wilkins that if a Negro wanted to get ahead he had to be educated and neat, "have learning and clean fingernails."⁵

Wilkins graduated from the integrated Mechanic Arts High School, a block from the Minnesota state capitol. He was editor of the school newspaper in his senior year (1919), after working two years as a reporter.

⁴Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, October 18, 1969.

⁵Ibid.

At the University of Minnesota, Wilkins majored in sociology, supporting himself as a Pullman car porter, red cap, and slaughter house worker. He was also night editor of the Minnesota Daily, the university's newspaper, and served as editor of the St. Paul Appeal, a black community weekly newspaper.

While still a student Wilkins became secretary of the St. Paul chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The lynching of a Negro man in Duluth, Minnesota, prompted Wilkins to enter the university's oratorical contest with a strong anti-lynching speech that won for him first prize.⁶

Upon receiving his Bachelor of Science degree in 1923, Wilkins immediately went to work for the Kansas City Call, a nationally-respected Negro weekly, and, in a short time, he became its managing editor.

Now ranking sixth in circulation among the nation's 126 Negro newspapers, the Call, since its founding 50 years ago, has launched a significant number of "firsts" in Negro journalism. It was the first black newspaper to

⁶Martin Arnold, "There is No Rest for Roy Wilkins," New York Times Magazine, September 28, 1969, p. 23.

join the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC), the organization which certifies the quantity of a newspaper's paid circulation. Also, the Call was the first race paper to subscribe to one of the leading national press wire services, the United Press International. Hence Call readers are assured that their news is timely and it is reported and interpreted by some of the best-qualified journalists.

The Call was among the first Negro newspapers to install an ultra-modern, four-unit Hoe Press. A special building was erected in 1945 to house the new press, the latest and most modern at the time of its purchase by the Call. It can print a single edition containing as many as sixty-four pages.

The Call was the first newspaper in the country to sponsor an annual cooking school. Since the first school in 1931, many other newspapers have inaugurated this service to the housewives of their communities. More than 7,000 Kansas City area women attended the final session of the Call's cooking school, which was discontinued during World War II and has never been restored.⁷

⁷Mrs. Chester A. Franklin, publisher, the Call, personal interview, October 27, 1969.

According to Mrs. Chester A. Franklin, widow of the Call's founder and its present publisher,

Our pride in achievement doesn't stop at our many "firsts." Our outstanding asset, as far as I'm concerned, is our reputation for accurate and truthful reporting. Through the years our readers have learned to expect the truth in the Call. We have never subscribed to sensationalism, gossip or "yellow journalism." The Call has never traded in on nor has it resorted to ultra-conservatism. The Call believes in calling a spade a spade. We report the facts and let the chips fall where they may.⁸

The Call observed its Golden Anniversary on April 24, 1970, with a banquet in the Muehlbach Hotel in downtown Kansas City. Roy Wilkins was the principal speaker.

In re-living "the good, old days" when Wilkins headed the Call's news department, Mrs. Franklin remembered:

Roy proved to be an asset to our news staff from the very first week he was on our payroll. He came to us principally because he wanted to help our people. He realized that the printed word was the best means for not only attacking the wrongs of society, but for reaching the Negro masses quicker.⁹

In his debut as a Missouri journalist, Wilkins wrote about many of the shortcomings of the white society in its treatment of the Negro citizen--voting rights,

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

decent housing, better schools, better teachers, job improvements and civil rights in general. "Roy did not hesitate one moment in his probing for the hidden injustices to our people," Publisher Franklin said.¹⁰

Emory O. Jackson, veteran editor of the Birmingham (Alabama) World, said of Wilkins:

He stated issues with unmistakable clarity. And he used facts to support his ideas and arguments. He was a real tough foe of Jim Crow, He is, for my money, the best darned newspaper man in the entire United States today--black, white, brown or yellow. He's a genius journalist.¹¹

Carter W. Wesley, late publisher of the Informer Chain of Newspapers, called Wilkins one of the most talented, most unheralded Negroes in America. Wesley, whose newspapers included the Houston Informer, Dallas Express and the Informer and Texas Freedman, often told his news staff at weekly staff meetings, "I'm sorry as heck that Roy Wilkins is with the NAACP, because I sure could use a good newspaperman around here." Then Wesley, a celebrated journalist in his own right, would cite instances where Wilkins scooped white daily newspapers

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Emory O. Jackson, editor, the Birmingham (Alabama) World, personal correspondence, September 20, 1969.

of Kansas City with his ability to dig up stories of interest to Negroes. A large photograph of Wilkins adorned the walls of Wesley's office.

Mrs. Doris Wesley, widow of the Informer publisher, best remembers Wilkins as a writer "who always hammered away to beat down the racial barriers."¹²

To no surprise to Call readers and the nation's Negro newsmen, Wilkins quickly became nationally known as a hard-hitting editor.

Although this study deals with Wilkins as a journalist, it is significant to relate that while serving as editor of the Call he not only openly attacked Jim Crow with his editorials and his weekly columns, he became an active member of the Kansas City branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He was a delegate to the Association's first national convention in Kansas City in 1923.

After making many frontal attacks on Jim Crow and lashing the Negroes for their apathy, Wilkins joined the national staff of the NAACP as assistant secretary and, while filling that position, was named editor of Crisis, the official publication of the NAACP. He served as

¹² Mrs. Carter W. Wesley, publisher, the Houston Informer, personal interview, October 18, 1969.

editor from 1934 to 1949.

Wilkins reorganized Crisis so that there was a broad balance of news and opinions in it. His editorials and comments stimulated every black editor and editorial writer. He even upgraded the NAACP News Service, which provided reams of news releases about Negro affairs to every Negro newspaper in the country.¹³

But sitting in a plush New York office directing the publishing of the NAACP's monthly magazine was not exactly Wilkins' "cup of tea". He wanted to know what was going on out in the field . . . the cotton fields and the levee camps of the deep South.

Many, many times it is much easier to do things yourself. Sure it's easy to delegate someone on your staff to go out and perform a certain task, but there are chances that he will not do what you asked to be done in the manner you want it done, or, secondly, he may not do it at all.¹⁴

So shortly after assuming his editorial duties at the NAACP, Wilkins spent four weeks hitch-hiking in Mississippi and Louisiana as a laborer to investigate the treatment of Negroes in flood control projects supervised by the U. S. Army Corps of Engineers.

¹³Tommy Young, editor, the Norfolk (Virginia) Journal & Guide, personal correspondence, September 19, 1969.

¹⁴Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, October 18, 1969.

During that time, Wilkins' venture was like a trip behind enemy lines. If detected, he would expect at best to be chased out of the area, at worse to be mobbed and lynched.

Posing as indigents seeking work, Wilkins and George Streater, a companion, together or separately, visited the sub-standard tent camps where the Negro workers were quartered. He talked to scores of workers.

What they discovered was appalling: unskilled Negro laborers were being paid ten cents an hour, were working 12 hours a day, seven days a week; they slept in floorless tents, and had to pay inflated prices for groceries at the company commissary.¹⁵

Wilkins recalls this experience as a page from Harriett Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin.

The big difference was the fact that every white man in the camp was a Simon Legree.¹⁶

Before the month's investigation was over, one (Streater) of the pair was arrested in Vicksburg, Mississippi. But the other (Wilkins) escaped detection and returned to New York. The subsequent report, published by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Crisis entitled "Mississippi River Slavery--1932," touched off a Senate investigation which ultimately forced levee contractors to improve wages and working conditions.¹⁷

¹⁵Ross, op. cit.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid.

President Herbert Hoover instituted the reforms after reading Wilkins' story.

In 1932 Editor Wilkins conceived the idea of picketing a National Conference on Crime called by Attorney General of the United States, William D. Mitchell, who had refused to include lynching on the agenda. He was arrested by the District of Columbia police during his participation in this demonstration. Needless to say, Wilkins' journalistic fight to outlaw lynching marked one of his few glaring failures in his assault upon Jim Crow practices.

Southern legislators have been able to block Federal anti-lynching bills, but public sentiment against the practice has nearly eliminated lynching as a means of 'carrying out the law'.¹⁷

Wilkins' failure to get Congress to pass a Federal law against lynching discouraged him, but it did not stem his attack against mobs and mob violence. He personally wrote news articles, which were circulated to every Negro newspaper in the country, spotlighting this type of crime. Then, too, his editorials in Crisis Magazine decried the hideous practices of lynching in the Deep South.¹⁸

¹⁷ Thomas H. Johnson, The Oxford Companion to American History. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 491.

¹⁸ Cliff Richardson, publisher-editor, The Houston Defender, personal interview, December 28, 1969.

Wilkins is the author of many articles for periodicals; his evaluations of various aspects of racial discrimination have appeared in such magazines as McCall's, the New York Times Magazine, Reader's Digest, Life, Ebony and the Saturday Review, as well as in college journals. In addition to his weekly syndicated column for the Register and Tribune Syndicate, he also writes a bi-weekly column for the New York Amsterdam News.

Wilkins has lectured in every state in the United States to groups ranging from college assemblies to chambers of commerce and press associations. He has appeared on television and radio in the United States and in Berlin, London, Paris and Rome.

Wilkins has received numerous awards for his service as a journalist and for his service in the cause of human rights, including the Anti-Defamation League's American's Democratic Legacy Award, the Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity's Medal of Honor, the Omega Phi Psi Fraternity's Outstanding Citizen Award, the American Jewish Congress Civil Rights Award, and the Boy Scout of America's Scout of the Year Award. He has received the Outstanding Alumni Achievement Award of the University of Minnesota, and awards from the Japanese-American Citizen's League, the Unitarian Fellowship for Social

Justice, B'nai B'rith Lodges, the Jewish War Veterans, the National Alliance of Postal Employees, the National Medical Association, the Eastern Star Lodge and the Russwurm Award of the National Newspaper Publishers Association. He was the 1964 recipient of the Spingarn Medal for distinguished service to the American Negroes.

Wilkins, as Crisis editor, was a consultant to the United States Department of State at San Francisco during the organization of the United Nations in 1945.

He served as a member of the President's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 1967-1968. In April of 1968 he went to Tehran, Iran, as chairman of the United States delegation to the International Conference on Human Rights.

In 1967 Wilkins was awarded the Freedom Award by Freedom House. This award has previously gone to such persons as Walter Lippmann, Alan Paton, Willy Brandt, Harry S. Truman and Lyndon B. Johnson.

As one of the last actions of President Lyndon Johnson (January 20, 1969) it was announced that Wilkins was one of twenty awarded the Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civil honor. Others on the list were: Eugene R. Black, Clark M. Clifford, W. Averell Harriman, Cyrus R. Vance, Michael E. DeBakey, David Dubinsky, Henry

Ford II, Ralph Ellison, Bob Hope, Edgar Kaiser, Mary Lasker, Gregory Peck, Laurance S. Rockefeller, Walt W. Rostow, Merriman Smith, William S. White, Whitney M. Young, Jr., McGeorge Bundy, and John W. Macy, Jr.

Wilkins has seen the lot of the Negro transformed in his lifetime. But he is acutely aware of how many million of his brethren do not yet share in America's bounty. To further their cause, he works a 12-hour day and travels an estimated 100,000 miles annually. He writes all his own speeches, as well as produces a weekly syndicated column for the general press and a twice-a-month column for The Amsterdam News.¹⁹

I. PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

This study is primarily concerned with an observation of Wilkins' journalistic image as reflected in his newspaper, magazine and syndicated columns concerning the racial and economic problems of the Negro American. A detailed observation is made of his editorial endeavors in each of the areas. It shows the concern Wilkins holds for the practical application of racial/community service in journalism, and it shows how he has become a guide to America's black newsmen.

¹⁹E. K. Welsch, The Negro in the United States. (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1963), p. 211.

In a recent study devoted to determining a practical meaning of community service in journalism, Fred W. Troutman said community service is:

The planned effort of a newspaper to meet an economic, civic, political, social, cultural, spiritual, or moral need of its community. Action to meet such needs may be originated by the newspaper, or it may be newspaper support of action originating from other sources. Whatever the origin, action on the part of the newspaper must be sustained, and must be based upon true and unselfish evaluation by the editor and his staff of the real need and the best answer to that need. Action on the part of the newspaper in the name of public or community service can only be such if it is done in the interest of the community and not the newspaper or its staff.²⁰

The method of research involves collecting and abstracting pertinent material primarily from the files of the Kansas City Call, Crisis Magazine, the historical studies of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Wilkins' syndicated columns, and personal correspondence with Wilkins. Other sources include personal interviews and correspondence with men and women who have worked closely with Wilkins in the areas of this study, and an examination of book, magazines and newspaper articles concerning Wilkins.

²⁰Fred W. Troutman, *Criteria of Newspaper Community Service Evaluation*, (Unpublished Master's Thesis, The University of Missouri, Columbia, 1960), pp. 48-49.

There are certain limitations in a study of this nature. Chief of these is the problem of defining and measuring Wilkins' journalistic efforts without over-emphasis on racial conflict or NAACP projects, except as these activities are involved with his writings.

II. IMPORTANCE OF THIS STUDY

Few Negro journalists have attacked locally and nationally unpopular causes and have gained respect, recognition and sympathy outside their race for their efforts. Most black journalists have championed causes to feather their own nests. They have estranged themselves from the black community. Others have performed a disservice to their race because they have never accepted the principles of good journalism or never have accepted any journalistic code of ethics. They prey upon the misdoings or misfortunes of blacks to increase circulation or for other personal ends.

The principal part of this study is to illustrate how Wilkins recognized this practice, and how he recognized his need to be responsible, objective, and yet effective in his journalistic work. Wilkins never has made an effort to abandon his personal principles. However, he has never implied that his position is the

only one that should be accepted by his race, in particular, and his countrymen in general. Instead, he has offered his ideas while considering the ideas of others in hope that a common ground or compromise for finding a solution to racial problems might be found. It appears important and useful to the journalistic profession that a study involving this type of approach to this kind of racial/community service be made.

From a study of this nature, the following values may be derived:

1. It may give a better understanding of one of America's most widely-read Negro journalists.
2. It may reflect the deep concern that Roy Wilkins holds for the practical application of community/racial service in journalism.
3. It may provide deep reflections into the problems faced by the minority group journalist and how this service may be implemented in the face of surmounting problems.
4. It may show how the editorial campaign may be implemented with success in the economic life of a racial minority group by providing a guide to, and account of, a beneficial economic program.

5. It may contribute to the neglected collection of recorded material on the Negro press and Negro journalists.

Wilkins has made great use of the editorial campaign to overcome conflicts and injustices in the Negro community. He also has used it to foster new ideas and practices for the improvement of the Negro community. It is therefore to this approach that this study is devoted.

III. ORGANIZATION OF THIS STUDY

This study is divided into three parts, plus the introductory and summary chapters.

The first chapter provides a general introduction to the man being considered, defines the purpose and the importance of this study, and examines the definition and practical application of community/racial service journalism.

Chapter V, a summary chapter, reiterates Wilkins' achievements within the framework of this study and suggests areas for further study.

The other part of this study includes Chapters II, III and IV. It deals with the problems of racial discrimination and, in some instances, sheer abuse, and

how Wilkins, in a cool, rational manner, went about correcting them through the pages of the Kansas City Call, and through editorials and feature stories in Crisis, and his syndicated columns. This study graphically demonstrates that "the power of the press" also prevails for black newspapers as well as non-black publications. Also, it reflects that Wilkins, through rational action and objective use of the newspaper-magazine device, helped to calm explosive situations which could have unleashed violent actions. Chapter IV examines methods Wilkins uses in racial/community problem-solving while serving as the director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and, at the same time, writing for the Register & Tribune Syndicate.

These chapters are devoted to Wilkins' philosophy as it is reflected in his writings. It is important to the overall approach to this study in that it reflects his own social thinking over the years, social thinking that has had an influence on his methods of achieving solutions to problems in race relations.

No previous study has been done on Wilkins as a journalist, although many magazines and local and national newspapers have examined and reflected his efforts in civil rights leadership.

CHAPTER II

IN THE DRIVER'S SEAT

. . . It would be a little generous to give the title of prophet to every black militant and every student demonstrator. True prophecy is a rare and costly charisma. Ultimately it often requires the prophet to witness the evils of society by becoming a victim of them. Gandhi of India was such a prophet. So was Our own Martin Luther King. And both inspired thousands of their contemporaries to participate, to varying degrees, in this kind of prophetic witness they preached.

It does seem tragic that many of the self-styled prophets today are more prone to inflict suffering than to endure it. But God sends us the prophets we deserve. If we will not listen to a Martin Luther King, He abandons us to an H. Rap Brown. Middle-class Americans don't like the tone or content of the message that radicals are shouting at them. But do they have ears to hear a gentler voice?¹

This chapter will be primarily concerned with a study of Roy Wilkins' social philosophy and the journalistic approaches he has employed to combat the problems of black Americans for the last forty-seven years. It will show that he has sought, through his eloquence and persistence with both tongue and pen, to be a stabilizing

¹Rev. Arthur McNally, C. P., "Violence and Communication," Sign, October 1969, p. 35.

factor in the American Negroes' unsteady quest for racial and social equality. It will graphically note how Wilkins has always been bitterly opposed to "glaring and subtle racial abuse."² It will emphasize how reason and understanding have been the doctrines most often preached in his editorials and in his columns, and it will show the special emphasis he places on the need for respect and love.

I have always contended that if white people could sit off from themselves and see their antics in their relations with Negroes, they would be convulsed.³

The man who was to become the executive secretary of the largest civil rights organization in the United States--the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People--made the statement above while he was the managing editor of the Call.

Striking back. Constantly aroused by the maltreatment of Negroes in Missouri and in the nation, the twenty-nine year old news boss frequently exploded in

²Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, January 28, 1970.

³Wilkins, "Talking It Over," Call, January 9, 1931.

his editorials and his weekly column, "Talking It Over."

Today as a syndicated columnist for the Register-Tribune News Syndicate, he is still exploding, but in a tone less militant. He has been one of the foremost critics of "black power". He has bitterly condemned the use of violence to gain civil rights. He has told Negroes they cannot blame all their troubles on the fact that America has treated them unequally. He has absolutely no patience with Negroes who justify or condone violence on the ground that black youngsters are severely disadvantaged.

In his column in the New York Amsterdam News, a black weekly newspaper, Wilkins assailed the same old excuses to cover up for pure, unadulterated, vicious crime.

Rape and murder are not laughing matters. Terrorizing a subway train is not a boyish prank, nor is willfully destroying automobile windshields with baseball bats acts that teenagers should be permitted to do. If a black youth fights a policeman who attempts to arrest him, the black community that protects the youngster and joins in fighting the police is equally as guilty in the destruction of property. We can help matters along by recognizing that a punk is a punk, white or black, and by putting him in his proper place.⁴

⁴Roy Wilkins Column, Amsterdam News, April 15, 1967.

Wilkins has denounced all types of civil disorder with the same fervor.

During the debate over the 1957 Civil Rights Act, some Negro leaders accused Wilkins of "selling out" when he journalistically supported the legislation. He wrote that the bill was weak, but felt that even a modest bill was a breakthrough and would open the way for a stronger legislation later.

When serving as a Call staffer, Wilkins bumped head on into problems of racial discrimination. However, instead of retreating, he became one of the leading critics of the existing conditions. He referred to Kansas City, Missouri, as "a Northern town with a Southern exposure."⁵ Raised in a city where his family had experienced no antagonism from the white community, he found many conditions in Missouri intolerable. In one particularly bitter column in the Call, Wilkins wrote:

It is a great wonder, when one considers the experiences of Negroes with the law, that any one of them can be found who is law-abiding.⁶

⁵Wilkins, personal correspondence, October 28, 1969.

⁶Wilkins, "Talking It Over," Call, January 16, 1931.

Wilkins asserted the law was applied unfairly to Negroes, with all the "breaks going against the black man who is hindered by the law. The whole machinery of the law in Kansas City operates against the Negroes."⁷

Wilkins' column continued:

There can be only one result if this state of affairs is allowed to continue: Slowly but surely, Negroes as a mass will come to the decision that there is no refuge in the law, that it is better never to be arrested than to be beaten to a pulp and railroaded to the scaffold and to prison.

And if that time ever comes, these brave boys in blue will get a chance to show just how brave they can be.⁸

Facing up to reality. Wilkins could not turn his back on a problem and pretend it did not exist. He was not afraid to become involved. Long before "police brutality" became the popular rallying cry for some civil rights demonstrators, Wilkins was screaming it from the pages of the Call. He publicized an incident in which a Negro boy was arrested for sitting and talking to a white girl. In another case, a Negro boy and a light-skinned Negro girl were arrested because the police

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

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thought she was white.

Wilkins recalls that back in the 1930's the fashionable Hotel Muehlebach Hotel in downtown Kansas City would not permit a Negro in its main lobby, "not even to deliver a message."¹⁰ Negroes, Wilkins recalls, could not play on the city-owned golf courses.

"During those days there were no Negro reporters on the Kansas City daily newspapers and they did not, as a matter of policy, print pictures of Negroes," Wilkins remembers.¹¹

Continuing, he recalled there were no Negroes at the University of Missouri. He also said he remembers "a heated debate over the propriety of the University of Missouri football team playing the University of Southern California in the Rose Bowl (sic) because Southern California had a Negro player on the team."¹²

What bothered the young editor almost as much as those situations was the apathy of the Negro community.

⁹Mrs. Chester A. Franklin, Call publisher, personal interview, February 9, 1970.

¹⁰Wilkins, personal correspondence, October 28, 1969.

¹¹Ibid.

¹²Ibid.

On April 25, 1931, he wrote:

There must be something in the Kansas City air which makes Negroes here so timid when it comes to their relations with white people. In nearly any other city of the country, North or South, Negro citizens would be up and about the task of securing legal protection for themselves and their loved ones, but in Kansas City the dark people hang back like they are afraid of their own shadows. . . .

The white people here seem to have the Negroes hypnotized into believing that nothing can be done.¹³

Mrs. Herman Johnson, a Kansas City housewife, remembers Wilkins as a journalistic dynamo. She said, "I first knew of Mr. Wilkins when I was still in high school. I, like quite a number of others, thought he was radical."¹⁴ The Kansas City matron said some of the older Negro people in the community considered young Wilkins "way ahead of himself."¹⁵

The boy, the girl, the youth, the man, the woman, today Wilkins, as a columnist and the nation's foremost civil rights leader, is considered by many Negroes a conservative.

¹³Mrs. Chester A. Franklin, personal interview, February 9, 1931. Wilkins, "Talking It Over," Call, April 13, 1931.

¹⁴Mrs. Herman Johnson, personal interview, February 9, 1970.

¹⁵Id. May 29, 1930.

Comparing Wilkins to H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael, Mrs. Franklin said that her former employee "has been fiercely critical of many things in this country, but he is not willing to make statements which would be considered disloyal to the United States."¹⁶ She feels that Wilkins as a Kansas City editor "epitomized what a sharp, well-dressed young Negro should look and talk like."¹⁷

When Wilkins spoke to young Kansas City Negroes, he encouraged them to set high standards.

Addressing a graduation ceremony, he told the class and the audience, "Our graduates must be able to do something and do it well."¹⁸

Wilkins told that graduating class:

The boy, the girl, the youth, the man, the woman, who is satisfied to 'get by' will never do himself nor his race, nor his social organization any good in this world, no matter how many times he is graduated or how many degrees he has after his name.¹⁹

¹⁶Mrs. Chester A. Franklin, personal interview, February 9, 1970.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Call, May 29, 1930.

Wilkins instilled a spirit of fight and of standing up to one's rights, Miss Marie Ross, who was a Call reporter under his supervision, recalls.²⁰

Kansas City Councilman Earl D. Thomas felt that Wilkins was most admired for his penetrating diagnosis of the social situation, both local and national. He said Wilkins was militant for that time, but dedicated to non-violence. "He maintained a certain reserve, but he was friendly," Mr. Thomas recalls. He added that Wilkins was serious and intelligent, but possessed a quiet humor.²¹ The former Kansas City politician regarded Wilkins as aggressive but smooth. "He was persuasive in an argument, calm, logical, deep and ready with a quick response or clever phrasing of a well thought-out idea."²²

A talented speaker. The young editor soon gained the reputation of being an eloquent speaker and one who did not frequently indulge in frivolous chatter. In the 1920's and the 1930's he was intensely concerned with education for the Negro, the legal aspect of civil rights,

²⁰Miss Marie Ross, Call correspondent, personal interview, February 9, 1970.

²¹Mr. Earl Thomas, Kansas City councilman, personal interview, February 9, 1970.

²²Ibid.

and Negro business and labor.

In a front page editorial, marking the fourth anniversary of the Call, Wilkins said:

The Kansas City Call has finished its fourth year. It can look back upon the arduous labor of its climb thus far, with satisfaction. In circulation, in public favor, and in equipment, it is growing lustily. We are glad. However, like every climber, the higher we go, the farther we see and the more earnestly we wish to serve. The Call will live, but how well depends upon our ability to solve two problems.

One problem is the Negro businessman and craftsman. They must be developed, for upon them depends our race leadership. We cannot make headway except under guidance of men who have made personal successes. Bitter experience has proven to us that victory is not easily won. The Call must help, and to do that, we must encourage them to the point where they are willing to leave the nest and try their wings. We have been weak long enough. Black skin and crinkly hair do not make men incompetent.

Our ancestors, the Phoenicians, were daring merchants. They sailed every known sea and traded with the ends of the then known world. Yet we American Negroes cringe as soon as the banks refuse us their help, or a city will not license us to work.

The Call's job is to point out the successes won here and there until we get faith in ourselves, and are willing to fight until we win. We must teach the race to sail its ships further and further from the shore like master mariners. Success awaits strong hearts and able minds. To the solution of this problem we solemnly renew our pledge.

Our second problem is the white merchant who gets the Negroes' money. We are not taking issue with the thousands of white people who have no contact with us. But those who take a profit from us owe us just what they give other customers. We cannot be treated with

contempt and indifference, and yet bear our full part of community responsibility. We must be rewarded and encouraged the same as other men.

The Call is a spokesman for the race's complaints. Its duty is to enlighten its people.²³

When there was much debate about the nomination of Judge John J. Parker to the United States Supreme Court in 1930, Wilkins, in a by-lined, full-page editorial, commented:

Why are Negroes making all this racket about a judge appointed to the United States Supreme Court? Even if Judge Parker is a "cracker" what harm can he do if he did get on the bench? Are Negroes "too fresh" in opposing Parker? Why are they making a mountain out of a molehill?

A study of the history of the United States Supreme Court shows it has been the greatest single factor in shaping the destiny of the Negro race in America, from the Dred Scott decision in 1856 down to the Texas White Primary Case in 1927. It has the "last word" in every dispute. . . .²⁴

In an uniquely-written "We told you so" type of editorial in the Call's second edition of 1931, Wilkins stated:

The first two motorists arrested for driving too fast in the new year, when the new auto regulations went into effect, were Negroes. Our warning last

²³ Editorial, Call, May 4, 1923.

²⁴ Editorial, Call, July 18, 1930.

week went unheeded in their case. Since conviction of these two who were the first arrested will serve as a warning to all drivers, they face a serious situation.

The rest of us must bear in mind that life is a condition, not a theory. . . . Drive carefully. Take no chances. It is better to go slow and miss jail. . . .²⁵

Wilkins says community service, in writing and in social welfare, has been his goal as long as he can remember.²⁶ And people of Kansas City who remember the former Call managing editor agree that, despite his various approaches to situations, he served the community well.

I firmly believe that the duty of the newspaper is to give its readers a news coverage unbiased and uncolored, but also that editors should pass on opinions concerned with political, social and economic conditions and outlook as they relate to the people.

I do, however, believe that such opinions should emanate from a sincere interest in the advancement of civilization along a truly democratic way of life, and not from selfish motives on the part of the editors.²⁷

On January 23, 1931, he wrote:

²⁵Editorial, Call, January 9, 1931.

²⁶Wilkins, personal correspondence, October 28, 1969.

²⁷Wilkins, "Talking It Over", January 9, 1931.

In our efforts to help ourselves, we can build faster by doing for each other, rather than trying to hold someone else back.²⁸

Wilkins' approach is different from the writing of most Negro journalists in that it places much of the responsibility for economic discrepancies upon the Negroes themselves rather than upon the white people. He also said that the hope of the future lies in a change of attitude, a development of self-concept and the expansion of Negro enterprise which will compete with those operated by whites.

A paragraph from his column of August 1, 1930, will illustrate Wilkins' philosophy and his manner of presentation:

Skepticism and indifference on our part have done much if not more to hold back the Negro race than the rantings of Judge Parker and Senator Allen. Races are more easily held back and defeated by enemies within the ranks than from without.²⁹

Sometimes Wilkins stated things rather bluntly. In his November 7, 1930 column, he stepped to the defense of some local teachers when he said:

²⁸Wilkins, "Talking It Over", January 23, 1931.

²⁹Ibid., August 1, 1930.

. . . For the most part we think that teachers are human, want to give the best in them and would prefer having their private affairs kept out of by people who could spend their time attending to their own business. . . There will be better children in school when there are better parents in the home.³⁰

Reliable and optimistic editor. In describing the popularity and growth of the Call during the late 1920's, Wilkins said reliability and optimism were the two characteristics which stood out.³¹

On May 27, 1930, he told his readers:

In the handling of interracial difficulties, we will not cover up for our own people's shortcomings, nor hysterically condemn all whites for the unfairness of some.³²

Wilkins insisted that the platform of the Call be printed on the editorial page of each issue. It goes:

The Call believes that America can best lead the world away from racial and national antagonism when it accords to every man, regardless of race, color or creed, his human rights. Hating no man, fearing no man, the Call strives to help every man in the firm

³⁰ Ibid., August 22, 1930.

³¹ Wilkins, personal correspondence, November 12, 1969.

³² Wilkins, "Talking It Over, Call, May 27, 1930.

belief that all are hurt as long as anyone is held back.³³

As an editor, Wilkins always stressed the need for self-improvement and brotherly love. He said "the crying need is for knowledge and understanding in an area where, all too often, we have ignorance and emotion."³⁴

Wilkins said both races have been guilty in the quest for complete brotherhood. "Real progress will never be made as long as Aunt Jemima concepts are held by whites and Simon Legree concepts by Negroes."³⁵

Wilkins' earliest concern as Kansas City's dynamic young black editor had to do with the wave of lynchings throughout the land. Security of the person from violence was a paramount problem. Lynchings in the early part of the Twentieth Century averaged more than 100 a year. Wilkins remembers that in attacking lynching Negroes had first to grapple with the cloak of sex which the defenders of lynching used to justify the crime. Painstaking study showed that in less than 20 percent of lynchings was any sort of sex crime charged,

³³ Editorial page, Call, January 9, 1931.

³⁴ Wilkins, personal correspondence, November 12, 1969.

³⁵ Ibid.

and that in only 16 per cent of the cases was rape charged. Thus, 80 out of every 100 victims of mobs were done to death for something other than crimes against white women.³⁶

In his "Talking It Over" column on April 20, 1931, Wilkins said:

Fifteen thousand persons took part in a silent protest parade against lynching down New York's Fifth Avenue in 1917. Charles Evans Hughes addressed a mass meeting in Carnegie Hall in 1919. The Dyer federal anti-lynching bill, forerunner of numerous others, passed in the House in 1922 and was filibustered to death in the Senate shortly thereafter. Full and half-page display advertisements were inserted in daily newspapers in 1922, telling such a compelling story of the lynching evil that one California daily offered to carry the display without cost.

Pickets paraded before Albert Hall in London, decrying American lynchings. Feature articles appeared in far-away Sydney, Australia. Books, magazine articles, pamphlets, petitions, meetings and conference spread the story. Filibusters merely helped scatter the education farther afield.

The story was getting across to America and the world that the Negro was a human being, was an American citizen presumably possessing unalienable rights which were being grievously and bestially violated, so that proud and free America could hardly hold its head high enough to escape the stench. Did we have courts? And to what end? Did we have a Constitution? For whom? What of our vaunted slogan, "Equal

³⁶ Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, January 28, 1970.

Justice Under Law"?³⁷

As the years went by, Wilkins faced the same problems . . . the skill and the pressure of the pro-lynching element increased. He unhappily witnessed several anti-lynching bills in the nation's Capitol suffer the same fate as the Dyer bill: passage in the House of Representatives, death by filibuster in the Senate, under both Democratic and Republican majorities. The issue became so touchy hardly any man of prominence, or any man of promising career would speak out against lynching. Wilkins prayed that the times would change the apathetic attitudes.³⁸

Wilkins did not despair, nor did he lay down his editorial arms. He kept saying that soon, if the black and the white communities would calm down, public opinion would change, even to the point that people of the South as well as the North would deplore lynching and endorse federal legislation against it.

³⁷ Roy Wilkins, "Talking It Over", the Call
April 20, 1931.

³⁸ Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, January
28, 1970.

In the May 4, 1931 edition, Wilkins said:

The goal in this fight is equality: equality before the law, equality in the security of the person, equality in human dignity. The campaign is not ended, but the point has been made, more than a toehold has been won. There will be, undoubtedly, more lynchings and more riotous outbreaks, but instead of being in the stream of public opinion, they will be counter to it; they will be against an established principle. As such they can be handled, just as any other crime is handled.³⁹

Hand in hand with others in the continuous struggle against lynching, Wilkins fought the unhuman practice without let-up. His lead editorial on May 18, 1931, said:

The Supreme Court has decided the Constitutional rights of Negroes as citizens: equality in the body politic. Although the record is full of brilliant example of legal procedure involving many questions, the outstanding example would seem to be the famous Elaine, Arkansas, riot cases which began in 1919 and ended in 1923. In this one action, covering 79 defendants, were the items of mob violence, mob domination of court procedure, service of Negroes on juries, and the enforcement of contracts.⁴⁰

Wilkins called the Elaine, Phillips County,

³⁹ Editorial, the Call, May 4, 1931.

⁴⁰ Op. cit., May 18, 1931.

Arkansas, incident⁴¹ a major breakthrough in civil rights endeavors. The legal joust between the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the appellate courts was a complicated one of appeals, suits for various writs, changes of venue, transfer to federal courts, two unsuccessful attempts to get before the United

⁴¹Negro farmers of Phillips County, Arkansas, had received no accounting from plantation owners on their cotton from June, 1918, to July, 1919. Feeling that they had been more than patient, they organized themselves into the Progressive and Household Union of America, engaged a law firm in Little Rock either to get a settlement or to sue the landlords. At a meeting in a small Negro church at Hoot Spur in October, 1919, a shot was fired into the church from the outside. The farmers stopped planning and returned the fire. A white man was killed and rioting ensued. Troops were ordered into the county. All available local and state police, as well as hundreds of deputized citizens joined the soldiers in the county-wide man-killing spree. Newspapers blazoned the affair as an "insurrection," thus justifying the wanton and indiscriminate killing of Negroes.

Eight hundred Negroes were arrested. A "Committee of Seven" held a kangaroo court and directed that 12 prisoners should die and 67 others be imprisoned. The courts faithfully followed directions. Five of the men were tried at one time and given death sentences in a matter of six minutes. Counsel was provided by the court the day before the trial, but did not consult with defendants, put no witnesses on the stand, made no address to the jury.

The Arkansas Supreme Court heard the appeals of the twelve men and sentenced to death, granted new trials to six, affirmed the conviction of the others. On retrial the six were again convicted and again had their convictions reversed on the ground Negroes had been excluded from the jury panel.

Rayford W. Logan, ed. What the Negro Wants (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), p. 120.

States Supreme Court, one hairbreadth snatching of six doomed men from the death house, and finally, in 1922, a review by the highest court in the land.

Wilkins told his readers on May 18, 1931, that the objective of the Elaine Negro farmers was equality. Had it not been so, he wrote, the blacks would have accepted the status quo, would have agreed that as Negroes they had no right to demand, after the fashion of white men, an accounting for their crops.⁴² Wilkins said the blacks would not have shot back at the whites if the occupants of the fired-upon church were not imbued with the desire for equality. In the next edition, he said in his column:

Equality was the prize--equality of opportunity as farmers, equality in the courts of the land, the right to serve on juries, to avail themselves to writs, to have their motives, their provocations, their actions, judged as free men among free men.⁴³

A quest for democracy. Mindful that there cannot be no equality in a democracy where citizens are barred from the ballot box, Wilkins, following the lead of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, kept up his campaign to strike down the voting barriers which prevented thousands of blacks from voting.

⁴² Editorial, the Call, May 18, 1931.

⁴³ Roy Wilkins, "Talking It Over," the Call, May 25, 1931.

Striking in another direction, Wilkins fought for better educational opportunities for Negroes. On July 6, 1931, he stated editorially:

In the field of education the effort to achieve equality has gone steadily forward. Here, from the outset, America was receptive and responsive. Education is a fetish of our country; we have believed it somehow to be a magic cure-all. The chief inequality of education for Negroes lay (and still lies) in the system of separate, or segregated schools for the two races.

These inequalities in per capita expenditure, equipment, buildings, school term, teachers' salaries, and curricula, are too well known to be set forth in detail here. Most spectacular and easily-grasped illustration is the per capita expenditure for Mississippi, where money expended for white children is roughly nine times as great as that expended for Negroes, although Negroes form 40 per cent of the population.⁴⁴

Wilkins criticized the denial of graduate and professional training to Negroes in tax-supported institutions. He attacked the system of salary differential between colored and white teachers in the same school system, who have the same training and experience and perform essentially the same duties.⁴⁵

On the economic front, Wilkins wrote of "the

Editorial, the Call, July 27, 1931.

⁴⁴ Editorial, the Call, July 6, 1931.

⁴⁵ Ibid. Walter A. Franklin, personal interview,

February 11, 1970.

powerful obstacles to the attainment of equality have been encountered, but progress has been made."⁴⁶

Exhibiting empathy for the economically-disadvantaged white as well as his black brethren, Wilkins said:

Equal pay for the same work has been the underlying theme. The sharecropping system of Southern agriculture has held millions of Negroes--and poor whites--in virtual economic slavery, impoverishing the entire region as it has impoverished its victims.⁴⁷

While Wilkins kept hammering away for equality of opportunity for Negroes, he was active with the Kansas City chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. He spliced his editorial chores with those of his organizational duties of the Association.⁴⁸

In a brief period, Wilkins was known and acclaimed as one of the most articulate, most dynamic, and most diligent young members of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Throughout the nation, wherever officers of the organization met, Wilkins' name

⁴⁶ Editorial, the Call, July 27, 1931.

⁴⁷ Editorial, the Call, August 10, 1931.

⁴⁸ Mrs. Chester A. Franklin, personal interview, February 9, 1970.

was mentioned.⁴⁹ It was apparent that the young editor would soon occupy a berth in the Association's headquarters.

When Dr. W. E. B. DuBois was editor of Crisis, he offered Wilkins a position on the magazine staff. In his letter of refusal, the out-spoken Wilkins made an analysis of the publication which Dr. DuBois showed to Joel Spingarn, then president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

In 1931 when the Association was seeking an assistant for Editor DuBois, Mr. Spingarn asked, "What about the young man who wrote the letter?"⁵⁰

This time the young man accepted the offer, resigned his position at the Call, and moved to New York City to begin what is proving to be his life work. When DuBois resigned in 1934, the editorship of Crisis was given to Wilkins.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ "NAACP's New Leader", Ebony, July 1955, p. 11.

CHAPTER III

CRISIS IN A TIME OF CHALLENGE

Exit DuBois, Enter Wilkins. In a surprise move on June 26, 1934, W. E. B. DuBois, veteran editor of Crisis, the official publication of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, resigned. It was generally believed that he was disgruntled about the reactions of some of the Association's executives to his editorials. Wilkins succeeded him as editor.

DuBois had not fared well with some of the Association's policy-making officials. During the years 1913 to 1915, there were sharp struggles between DuBois and Association officers. The issue was clear cut--how responsible to the board was DuBois to be, and how much actual influence over Crisis was DuBois to have? The organization's leaders believed that they had a clearer comprehension of N.A.A.C.P. needs than the editor did. Oswald Garrison Villard, as chairman of the board, believed that he had the right to "control" DuBois and Crisis.¹

¹Elliott M. Rudwick, "W. E. B. DuBois in the Role of Crisis Editor." Journal of Negro History XLIII July, 1958, No. 3, p. 218.

Near the end of 1913, after months of discord, which Villard believed had been created by DuBois, the chairman resigned his office. He suggested that the board explore the nature of the relationship between the Association and Crisis.

Continuing to go his own way, DuBois suggested that white and Negro divisions be established in the N.A.A.C.P. Actually, DuBois preferred to see Negroes in complete control of the organization.

During World War I, DuBois continued his militant editorials and condemned President Woodrow Wilson and the United States Army. In the spring of 1918, the Justice Department cautioned him that his criticisms were harmful to the war effort. The N.A.A.C.P. board was so concerned about this warning that the head of the legal committee was assigned to the Crisis editorial board.²

Throughout the 1920's, DuBois continued to differ with the Association on many important issues. In Crisis editorials, he usually glossed over these disagreements, which were financial as well as ideological.³

Between 1930 and 1931, the magazine lost four

²Ibid., p. 226.

³Ibid.

thousand dollars, and the Association was paying part of DuBois' salary from the organization's general fund. DuBois requested that the arrangement continue for at least another year. At the end of 1932, the Crisis Publishing Company was organized as a legal maneuver to limit the liability of the N.A.A.C.P. for future debts of the publication.⁴ Walter White, a longtime foe of DuBois, became the director of the new company. In late 1933, there were rumors that DuBois was to be fired. A group of his admirers publicly charged that unnamed N.A.A.C.P. officials were trying to destroy DuBois.⁵

In 1931, Wilkins resigned as managing editor of the Call, to work as an assistant to Du Bois. There was a mixture of optimism and pessimism everywhere. Most Americans were hoping for and ready for better race relations, but the long arms of Jim Crow were trying to strangle the Negro Americans.

It was estimated that between 70 and 80 percent of the Negroes were receiving relief. The average annual income that year for the Negro tenant and wage laborers in the South was \$278; the average for whites was \$452.

⁴Ibid., p. 236.

⁵Ibid., p. 237.

The Federal Emergency Relief Administration inaugurated a program to help the rural poor grow their own food, but the money was doled out by the discriminatory Agricultural Adjustment Administration.⁶

Also at the time of Wilkins' shift from newspaper work to his new chores with the NAACP magazine, Negroes were unhappy by some of the procedures of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "New Deal." The National Recovery Act (NRA) proved unsatisfactory to most Negroes. They were rarely represented at hearings, and cost-of-living differentials were discriminated. Under the steel, laundry and tobacco codes, among others, Negro workers received lower wages than whites.⁷

One of the most disheartening things to the Negro was that an anti-lynching bill written by Senator Edward P. Costigan of Colorado and Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York, was not endorsed by President Roosevelt and it did not pass. The NAACP had sponsored the bill and placed large banners outside its New York office every day a Negro was lynched.⁸

⁶ Peter M. Bergman, The Chronological History of the Negro in America (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), pp. 464-65.

⁷ Ibid., p. 467.

⁸ Ibid., p. 471.

Fifteen Negroes were lynched in 1934.

After Wilkins, whom DuBois considered to be White's alter ego, was named to the Crisis board of directors, the old editor said White now completely controlled the magazine.

When DuBois resigned from the Association; publicly, he decided to depart on the censorship issue. He argued that suppression was symptomatic of the spiritual poverty of Association leaders. He hoped that his dramatic exit might cause Negroes to rally to his side and create a new organization or overthrow the old one.⁹

DuBois charged in his letter of resignation:

. . . No matter what the Board of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People says, its action towards segregation has got to approximate, in the future as in the past, the pattern which followed in the case of the separate camp for Negro officers during the World War and in the case of the Tuskegee Veterans' Hospital. In both instances, we protested vigorously and to the limit of our ability the segregation policy. Then, when we failed and knew we had failed we bent every effort toward making the colored camp at Des Moines the best officers' camp possible, and the Tuskegee Hospital, with its Negro personnel, one of the most efficient in the land. This is shown by the 8th and 14th Annual Reports of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

The only thing, therefore, that remains for us

⁹Ibid., p. 239.

is to decide whether we are openly to recognize this procedure as inevitable, or be silent about it and still pursue it. Under these circumstances, the argument must be more or less academic, but there is no essential reason that those who see different sides of this same shield should not be able to agree to live together in the same house.

The whole matter assumed, however, a serious aspect when the Board peremptorily forbade all criticism of the officers and policies in The Crisis. I had planned to continue constructive criticism of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in The Crisis because I firmly believe that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People faces the most gruelling of tests which come to an old organization: founded in a day when a negative program of protest was imperative and effective, it succeeded so well that the program seemed perfect and unlimited. Suddenly, by World War and chaos, we are called to formulate a positive program of construction and inspiration. We have been thus far unable to comply.¹⁰

Du Bois informed the Association's board of directors that he had no alternative other than leaving his editorial position in resignation.

Continuing, in his letter of resignation, he said:

I am, therefore, insisting upon my resignation, and on July 1st, whether the Board of Directors acts or does not act, I automatically cease to have any connection whatsoever in any shape or form with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. I do not, however, cease to wish it well, to follow it with personal and palpitating interest, and to applaud it when it is able to rescue itself

¹⁰ Crisis, August 1934, p. 243.

from its present impossible position and reorganize ¹¹ itself according to the demands of the present crisis.

As its meeting on July 9, 1934, the board of directors adopted the following resolution:

RESOLVED, That it is with deepest regret that we hereby accept the resignation of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois as editor of the Crisis, as a member of the Board of Directors, as Director of Publications and Research, as a member of the Board of Crisis Publications Company, and as a member of the Spingarn Medal Award Committee; and we desire at the same time to record our sense of the loss which his resignation will bring not only to the members of this Board but to every loyal member of the Association.¹²

Wilkins said Du Bois' resignation was not only a shock to the Association, but it was front-page news in almost every newspaper in America.¹³

The board of directors of the organization took no action upon the resignation of Du Bois, but named a committee to confer with the editor and see if some satisfactory settlement of differences could not be arranged.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibid., p. 246.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, November 12, 1969.

¹⁴ Crisis, August 1934, p. 243.

Under the date of June 26, 1934, Du Bois addressed a letter to the board and released copies of it to the press eight days before the board was to consider his resignation at its meeting on July 9, 1934.¹⁵

Du Bois said in his letter:

In deference to your desire to postpone action of my resignation of June 11, I have allowed my nominal connection with The Crisis to extend to July 1, and have meantime entered into my communication with the Chairman of the Board, and with your Committee on Reconciliation.

I appreciate the good will and genuine desire to bridge an awkward break which your action indicated, and yet it is clear to me, and I think to the majority of the Board that under the circumstances my resignation must stand. I owe it, however, to the Board and to the public to make clear at this time the deeper reasons for my action, lest the apparent causes of my resignation seem inadequate.¹⁶

Du Bois stated that many friends have asserted that an argument concerning segregation was not the main reason for his desire to quit the organization. He explained that it was an occasion and an important occasion, but it could have been adjusted.¹⁷

¹⁵Henry Lee Moon, editor, Crisis, personal correspondence, December 10, 1969.

¹⁶Crisis, August 1934, p. 243.

¹⁷Rudwick, op. cit.

There apparently was no formal notice in The Crisis indicating the change in editorship. The last editorials by W. E. B. Du Bois appeared in the June, 1934 issue. The masthead of that issue carried Dr. Du Bois as editor-in-chief and Mr. Wilkins and George W. Streater as managing editors. The August issue lists Streater and Wilkins as managing editors. The Du Bois name was dropped from the masthead. That issue also carried the text of Dr. Du Bois' resignation and the Board's resolution accepting it with the deepest regret.

The September issue carries the name of Roy Wilkins as managing editor. There was also listed a five-person advisory board consisting of J. E. Spingarn, Dr. Louis T. Wright, James Weldon Johnson, Lewis Gannett and Walter White. Mr. Streater, a protege of Dr. Du Bois, had resigned.¹⁸

A new editor faces old problems. The Missouri-born replacement for Du Bois had worked on the magazine as a staff writer for several months. "One of my first jobs for Crisis was to go South to investigate the conditions among Negroes who were working to build the levees on the Mississippi River."¹⁹ The levee workers were paid 10 cents an hour. Top salary on the jobs was two dollars and fifty cents a day for heavy equipment operators, but no Negroes occupied these machines. Recalling his experiences as a "common laborer," Wilkins said:

¹⁸Henry Lee Moon, editor, Crisis, personal correspondence, December 10, 1969.

¹⁹Martin Arnold, "There Is No Rest For Roy Wilkins," The New York Times Magazine, September 28, 1969, p. 8.

I lived in the camps and earned 10 cents an hour. We tried to sneak pictures of the work. You didn't say you were from the N.A.A.C.P. It would have meant being lynched.²⁰

The young veteran journalist noted the major difference in his New York job from that of the Call as:

Crisis was a national publication with a tremendous circulation, and it was a monthly organ. The Call is primarily a Kansas City area weekly with a token national readership.²¹

At Crisis, Roy (Wilkins) had to fight racial injustices on a national--even international--fronts, but he was very capable of doing these things in a magnificent manner. He has so many uncommon talents and virtues it's amazing.²²

On the domestic front, the American Federation of Labor (A.F.L.) and, in particular, the railroad brotherhoods discriminated against Negroes in the following ways: by constitutional, ritual and tacit agreement; through creation of segregated and auxiliary locals; by collusion with employers; by negotiating separate seniority and promotion agreements in contracts that kept Negroes in menial jobs; by controlling the craft licensing board; by negotiating for Negro representation or votes on final contracts; by excluding Negroes from union hiring halls

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, January 28, 1970.

²² Mrs. Chester A. Franklin, personal interview, February 9, 1970.

when the halls represented the only job source.²³

While lynching had decreased somewhat in the South, the lynching mobs were much bolder than ever. These mobs greatly disturbed Wilkins who noted that the decrease in lynchings clearly was not from any fear of law, but from a change in public sentiment "due to causes other than the courts."²⁴

Wilkins' first editorial in Crisis criticized American apathy regarding lynchings. Because of its importance as the first opinionated writings by Wilkins to a nation-wide readership, it is printed here in its entirety:

For Everything Except Lynching

A United States secret service army plus the state and local constabularies of Wisconsin, Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, and Minnesota finally succeeded, on July 22, in ending the career of John Dillinger, super-publicized bank robber and murderer. A newspaper report states that this tremendous manhunt, directed by the United States government, was hung on a single slender federal charge against Dillinger --transporting a stolen automobile across a state line.

Baby Bobby O'Connor, of fashionable Westchester County, New York, hardly had wandered out of the earshot of the Hartsdale Manor home of his parents

²³Bergman, op. cit., pp. 465-466.

²⁴J. B. Watson, "DuBois and Segregation," Crisis, October 1934, p. 243.

before U. S. Secret Service agents were scattered throughout the county. The cry of kidnaping (later disproved) was raised. With the 1932 Lindberg kidnaping laws its authority, the government was hard on Bobby's trail.

New federal laws against crime, proposed by Attorney General Homer S. Cummings, were passed by the last Congress and signed by President Roosevelt. One of them permits the government to presume that a state line has been crossed--in other words, to presume that a federal crime has been committed--if kidnap victims are not released in three days.

The government has been diligent in tracing statutes and parts of statutes under which it can proceed against gangsters and kidnapers. Where there has been no federal law, one has been passed. But the government can present a score of excuses for not acting against lynching. Attorney General Cummings announced last February when he proposed his crime bills that he was "not interested" in the crime of hanging and roasting human beings within the borders of the United States of America. The same Congress which passed the crime bills side-tracked the Costigan-Wagner anti-lynching bill. The same federal agents who beat the bushes of Westchester County for Bobby O'Connor or chased up and down the great mid-west after Dillinger would not walk around the corner to stop a lynching.

General Hugh S. Johnson broadcast that the Hitler massacre of June 30 made him "physically ill," but the twelve lynchings which have taken place since June 8 in the good old U.S.A. do not bring even a snort from the big chief of the N.R.A.

It is becoming plainer each day that the federal government is attempting to act in every situation affecting the health, welfare and life of the people except lynching. One might comment satirically and say that lynching is the only phenomenon which this nation can claim exclusively in a civilized world, we are jealously and purposely preserving it in our national life. But the question is too serious for satire, merely. How really and truly stable is a government which can muster troops, machine guns, airplanes, brains and money to hunt down a bank

robber, but which cannot muster a good yawn over the regular and increasingly bold and barbarous manifestations of mob thinking and mob action?

Is it possible, without too great a stretch of the imagination, to picture the people who fight against lynching as the people who will save America from itself.²⁵

In a follow-up editorial in the same issue of Crisis, Wilkins related the story of a Brooklyn, New York, woman who admitted to the district attorney of that city that she told a lie when she accused a Negro of attacking her on the night of June 20, 1934. She said her attacker was a white man, but that she had been reading in the newspaper of an unidentified Negro attacking several women and decided to accuse a Negro "so that no suspicion would be directed against a white man."²⁶

Wilkins noted that the woman's confession was a better editorial than Crisis would write on the subject. But, editorially, he asked:

What would have happened if this woman had told her lie in Mississippi? How many hapless, innocent colored men have been either "legally" convicted or lynched on such a lie?²⁷

²⁵ Editorial in Crisis, September, 1934, p. 268.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

Wilkins did not restrict his writing to critical editorials. He wrote feature articles about celebrities, straight news stories about various events, and made speeches on behalf of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. His initial journalistic spotlight on a celebrity featured Thomas "Fats" Waller, the organist-composer-vocalist. Titled "Radio's Roly-Poly Organist," the full-story feature in the September, 1934, issue cited "Fats'" success as a Columbia Broadcasting System star. The story tells of Waller's appearances at such places as Paris' famous Moulin Rouge, where he was co-billed with Sophie Tucker.

In the same issue, Wilkins, in an editorial comment, announced the removal of U. S. Marines from the Republic of Haiti. He wrote:

In keeping his promises to President Stenio Vincent of the island republic, President Roosevelt has ordered our soldiers out two months prior to the agreement made earlier this year.

It was just fourteen years, almost to the day, when the first sensational articles by James Weldon Johnson on the American occupation of Haiti appeared in The Nation. Those articles and the resultant protests by American liberals headed by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People finally reached the United States Senate and the long fight to end American imperialism in Haiti was begun.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid.

Wilkins pointed out, however, that with the Marines gone, the next step was to work for the end of the control of Haitian finances by American government officials for the "protection" of American investors, especially the National City Bank of New York City.²⁹

On September 6, 1934, the President of the Republic of Haiti wrote a letter to Wilkins, thanking him for Crisis' part in restoring freedom to the Haitian people. The entire text of the letter was printed in the October, 1934, issue of Crisis. (See Appendix).

Hacking at the hangman's rope. Despite Wilkins' thrusts into other areas of concern for the black American, his main attacks were on lynching and mob violence. He later called the ruthless murder of Negroes his "Number One hang-up."³⁰

In his August, 1935, issue, Wilkins reported, "The powers that be in the Roosevelt administration have nothing for Negroes."³¹ In the October, 1935, issue, Walter White, who was later to direct the operations of

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, January 28, 1970.

³¹ Editorial in Crisis, August, 1935, p. 304.

the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, said, "The Attorney General continues his offensive fight against crime except crime involving the deprivation of life and liberty of Negroes."³²

In 1935 eighteen Negroes were lynched.³³

Continuing his one-man editorial attack on lynchings, Wilkins wrote in January, 1935:

The defenders of the unalienable right to lynch are on the run. The ancient excuse for lynching was rape, but that was discredited when white women in the South revolted against the insult that declared that they could be kept pure only by mobs of blood-thirsty villains. Statistics, too, proved only 16 per cent of lynching victims were accused or rape.

A favorite refuge of opponents of federal action has been their belief that the states should be allowed to deal with this crime. They have overlooked, persistently, the rights which the Constitution declares the states must guarantee to every citizen. But in recent years, with increasingly glaring spotlights being turned upon the fantastic derelictions of state and local governments in dealing with lynching, the defenders of the states' rights have met with scoffing and scorn. Today the most advanced thinkers among them have deserted the argument and the liberals are wavering frightfully.³⁴

Wilkins said Negroes accused of crime are brought too quickly to swift conviction and heavy punishment.

³²Ibid., October, 1935, p. 412.

³³Bergman, op. cit., p. 471.

³⁴Editorial in Crisis, January, 1935, p. 202.

Wilkins ends his January, 1935, editorial, pleading:

So, for the blood of the victims, for the honor of our governmental traditions, for the safety of our fabric of society, and for the decency and humanity commonly thought to be resident in all, civilized being, we urge the speedy enactment of a federal anti-lynching law.³⁵

In the same issue of Crisis, James Weldon Johnson, a famous Negro writer-author-composer, said:

Congress is faced with the duty both of guaranteeing to every citizen accused of crime a fair trial by due process of law and blotting out the "Shame of America," the same of being the only civilized country in the world, the only spot anywhere in the world, where such a bestial orgy as the recent lynching at Marianna could take place.³⁶

Earlier, in January, 1934, President Franklin D. Roosevelt had told Congress:

In the other category, crimes of organized banditry, cold-blooded shooting, lynching and kidnaping have threatened our security.

These violations of ethics and these violations of law call on the strong arm of government for their immediate suppression; they call also on the country

³⁵ Editorial in Crisis, January, 1935, p. 202.

³⁶ James Weldon Johnson, "Number One!" Crisis, January, 1935, p. 213.

for an aroused public opinion.³⁷

Wilkins, like dozens of other black editors, wrote scores of bitter editorials criticizing the lawlessness of the mobs. Proofsheets and clippings of these fiery editorials were sent to hundreds of national and state officials and prominent Americans. Author Fannie Hurst, in a guest article in Crisis, January, 1935, edition, commented:

The tattoo mark of lynching which is ground deeply into the face of the United States is calamity.

It becomes grotesque to contemplate our country rising in righteous indignation against the atrocities tolerated by a Hitler, when hundreds of our own wayside trees are gibbets from which have dangled the broken necks of men who have been strung up there by the bestiality of unpunishable mobs.

The history of lynching, in these United States of America, even with the declining rate of men whose necks, without benefit of trial, are cracked by rope, does not entitle us, while we tolerate it, to the respect of others, or to self-respect.

Specific federal anti-lynching legislation is imperative to our national decency.³⁸

Wilkins was beginning to see marked evidence in

³⁷ President Franklin D. Roosevelt, speech to opening of 73rd Congress, January, 1934.

³⁸ Fannie Hurst, "Our Wayside Trees Are Gibbets," Crisis, January, 1935, p. 213.

an aroused public opinion about lynchings, where the mobs arrogate to themselves the powers of the state and the function of government. He used a comment from Senator Edward P. Costigan, co-author of the ill-fated anti-lynching bill, in the January, 1935 issue. Senator Costigan wrote:

Deep distress is being generally expressed by American citizens over recent revivals of lynch law barbarities in this country. It is once more shown that nothing short of national legislation can properly deal with these acts of recurring lawlessness. The present ability of the peace officers when spurred to vigilance to promote or prevent lynchings is clear as day. While the federal bill against lynching was pending in the last session of Congress, months passed without a single lynching in the United States but with the adjournment of Congress without action on the measure such attacks on law and order were promptly renewed at the rate of more than one lynching a week. It is therefore inevitable that the anti-lynching bill which was endorsed by representatives of some forty million Americans and was favorably reported to the Senate at the last session of Congress be again introduced and vigorously pressed for prompt enactment into law.³⁹

Primarily because of the "cold shoulder" treatment received from President Roosevelt and Congress and because no civil rights legislation had been proposed in Roosevelt's term the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People withdrew, in 1935, its support

³⁹ Senator Edward P. Costigan, Crisis, January, 1935, p. 217.

from President Roosevelt when he refused to give his practical support to the Association's anti-lynching bill.

At the 26th annual convention of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, held in St. Louis during the summer of 1935, Wilkins asked Harry L. Hopkins, Federal Emergency Relief administrator, to appoint a Negro as deputy administrator in every state with a large Negro population. This request was to no avail.

The editor serves as mediator. Wilkins inherited the role of peacemaker in the aftermath of racial flare-ups in Harlem on March 19, 1935. On that day a riot was set off in the predominantly-Negro section of Manhattan when a Negro boy was caught stealing a small knife from a 125th Street store. He escaped, but rumors spread that he had been beaten to death. Amid accusations of police brutality and merchant employment discrimination, Negroes smashed shop windows and looted. Three Negroes were killed, 200 store windows were smashed and more than \$200,000,000 in damage was done.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Associated Press dispatch, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 20, 1935.

Wilkins got a telephone call through to New York Mayor F. H. LaGuardia and suggested that an interracial committee be appointed immediately to "cool things down in Harlem." A committee headed by Dr. E. Franklin Frazier, a prominent Negro sociologist, was formed. It reported that the riot was caused by "resentments against racial discrimination and poverty in the midst of plenty." Just prior to the riot Harlem businessmen who had been forced through a boycott to hire Negro employees had secured an injunction on the basis of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act, and subsequently had fired the Negroes.⁴¹

The following month, after strong urging by Wilkins, Mayor LaGuardia appointed A. Philip Randolph a member of New York City's Commission on Race. Because of this act by LaGuardia, Harlem residents cooled down and went about their tasks of trying to make a living in a depression-pocked community. The median income of Negroes in New York City in 1935 was \$980, compared to whites' \$1,930, a difference of 49.2 per cent.⁴²

⁴¹Tom Brooks, "The Negro's Place at Labor's Table," Reporter, December 6, 1962, p. 39.

⁴²Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, January 28, 1970.

An interview with Louisiana's "Kingfish". In 1935, Wilkins learned that Senator Huey Long of Louisiana was in New York City. The dynamic editor requested an interview with the "Kingfish". To Wilkins' great surprise, he was invited to Long's hotel suite. He was greeted courteously by the Senator who did not hesitate to shake Wilkins' hand although a number of white men, some of them Southerners, were in the room. Long discussed various matters with these men, who had previous appointments, and then asked Wilkins to accompany him to his bedroom. There he launched into a long and frank exposition of his views on the racial question. "Let me tell you about the Nigras [sic]," Long began. Wilkins noted with interest that throughout the interview Long used the words "nigra", colored, "nigger", but mostly "nigger", which Long did not regard as being offensive.⁴³

Long described for Wilkins the benefits the Negroes were receiving from Long's programs in Louisiana. He said many whites in Louisiana wanted to keep the Negro ignorant. Planters, Long said, especially desired the conditions so they could cheat their black tenants. Long

⁴³T. Harry Williams, Huey Long (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 705-06.

said he started his night schools for adult illiterates. And, he said, the whites had not wanted the "niggers" to go to school and had protested his actions. Long was anxious to put over to Wilkins that it was difficult to achieve laws to help Negroes in a Southern state.⁴⁴

In the February 1935 Crisis, Wilkins told of the interview with Senator Long. In a boxed, bold-face editor's note, he explained:

No attempt has been made by the writer to polish up the language of Senator Long or to smooth over the offensive word, "Nigger." This is the interview just as the Kingfish gave it; any other would be what we thought our readers ought to have instead of the real thing. The Crisis believes this is the first interview secured directly from Senator Long by a Negro reporter for a Negro publication.⁴⁵

Wilkins explains in his story about Senator Long:

Two things I wanted to know, if the Kingfish would talk: what was he going to do about the lynching which had been staged the day before in Franklinton, La.; and what hope did his "share-the-wealth" program hold out for Negro Americans?⁴⁶

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Roy Wilkins, "Huey Long Says--," Crisis, February, 1935, p. 317.

⁴⁶Ibid.

The Senator dominated the conversation, denying the inquiring editor a chance to get a word in. This went on for some ten minutes. When Wilkins did get an opportunity to hurl a question at the "Dictator of the Delta," it proved to be a flaming bomb. In his account of the interview, Wilkins said:

He paused to read a telegram and answer the telephone (incidentally in very good English) and I managed to get in a question:

"How about lynching, Senator? About the Costigan-Wagner bill in congress and that lynching down there yesterday in _____."

He ducked the Costigan-Wagner bill, but of course, everyone knows he is against it. He cut me off on the Franklinton lynching and hastened in with his "pat" explanation:

"You mean down in Washington parish (county)? Oh, that? That one slipped up on us. Too bad, but those slips will happen. You know while I was governor there were no lynchings and since this man (Gov. Allen) has been in he hasn't had any. (There have been seven lynchings in Louisiana in the last two years.) This one slipped up. I can't do nothing about it. No sir. Can't do the dead nigra no good. Why, if I tried to go after those lynchers it might cause a hundred niggers to be killed. You wouldn't want that would you?"⁴⁷

Quickly and positively, Senator Long changed the subject. He explained the "share-the-wealth" plan. He told Wilkins that he was providing security for the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Louisiana Negroes. He said the state was in the process of building clinics and hospital for the black citizens. He ended by telling Wilkins:

In your article don't say I'm working for niggers. I'm not. I'm for the poor man--all poor men. Black and white, they all gotta have a chance. They gotta have a home, a job and a decent education for their children. 'Every Man a King'--that's my slogan. That means every man, niggers long with the rest, but not specially for niggers. . . ."48

Wilkins felt that Long was a hard, ambitious, practical politician. His article concluded:

My further guess is that he wouldn't hesitate to throw Negroes to the wolves if it became necessary; neither would he hesitate to carry them along if the good they did him was greater than harm. He will walk a tight rope and go along as far as he can. . . Anyway, menace or benefactor, he is the most colorful person I have interviewed in the twelve years I've been in the business.⁴⁹

After Long's assassination in 1935, Wilkins wrote:

If any Negro cherishes any illusions as to what kind of fate awaited his race in the nation which Long would have bossed had he attained his ambition (to become President of the United States), he needs only to look at Louisiana which the late senator held in the palm of his hand. No jobs and no advancement for Negroes. No effective use of the ballot. No protection in the courts or from police brutality. No

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Ibid.

escape from lynching mobs. No escape from the share-cropping slavery on cotton plantations and in the canebrakes. From a man who called the Chief Executive of the nation a liar, who cheered the beating of a helpless newspaper photographer by his armed guards, who did business with machine guns, who rode roughshod over all the white people in Louisiana, black-jacking their liberties from them without mercy--from such a man what could Negroes expect?

Obviously only the minimum--and that is what he told Heywood Broun several months ago the Negro would get under this plan--the minimum. It is regrettable that Long had to be stopped with an assassin's bullet, but violence, made habitual by constant use against the Negro, is tradition in the deep South and the tradition ended Long's career.⁵⁰

Making a pitch for Ethiopia. Before Benito Mussolini's "Black Shirt" army invaded Ethiopia on October 2, 1935, Wilkins began a series of editorial barrages on the Italians' imperialistic threats. On October 7 the League of Nations declared Italy the aggressor and, two weeks later, imposed sanctions against Italy. It was a period of deep concern for the American Negro, who felt that the dark-skinned Ethiopians were unquestionably the victims of abandonment by the League of Nations and also the victims of Il Duce's desire to expand Italy's colonies in Africa.

In the October Crisis (which was printed before the invasion), Wilkins wrote, "There does not seem

⁵⁰ Ibid.

anything more to be said about Ethiopia, Italy and the League of Nations. Practically every angle of the situation has been covered by writers in every corner of the world." But Wilkins did find more to say about the Italo-Ethiopian War as American Negroes became more and more vocal about the one-sided conflict. He continued his editorial, "Sad Spectacle," by saying:

The nations of the earth are being treated to a strange spectacle for the Twentieth Century: a strong, well-prepared nation boasting of its intentions to conquer a small, unprepared, virtually unarmed nation and sending armies and munitions thousands of miles from home over a period of nine months. With all the rumbling of a ruthless, imperialist war, the world remains impotent, its so-called peace machinery broken down, its public opinion helpless. Before its eyes (arrogantly laughing at its "condemnation"), a pompous imitation Caesar is hurling a vast war machine at a nation armed with spears, whose only crime is that it wishes to live unmolested under its own fig tree.⁵¹

While Mussolini lined up his elite troops along the Ethiopian border, Emperor Haile Selassie sent diplomats to the League of Nations in quest of assistance.

Angrily, Wilkins continued his editorial attack by saying:

In the grim chess game being played by the nations of Europe, is the Kingdom of Abyssinia to be sacrificed

⁵¹ Editorial in Crisis, October, 1935, p. 561.

as cold-bloodedly as is indicated in the news dispatches of the past weeks? Reports have it that France is willing to give Italy a free hand in Abyssinia in return for Italy keeping out of the Balkan and Central European mess. England is supposed to be satisfied with an agreement she has already has with Italy over water rights from Lake Tsana, which feeds the Nile. Abyssinia has carried her protests to the League of Nations and has shown no disposition to accept the assertions and demands of Italy as final. In fact, the black nation has matched Mussolini phrase for phrase, wavering not a bit in the face of blasts from Rome.

It is difficult, from this distance, to judge what will happen. No one can tell what the oily European diplomats really have up their sleeves. Can Abyssinia fight a war with Italy? Will the League of Nations be able to adjust the dispute? Is England content to allow Italy to go into the rich African kingdom? Is Japan, as has been hinted, hovering in the background, ready to lend aid to the King of Kings and the Conquering Lion of Judah? American Negroes are watching developments with deep interest.⁵²

A blow at the Communists. The Communist Party baited its trap for American Negroes shortly after the end of World War I. It was generally believed in the Kremlin that the black American was ripe for the Muscovite treatment. Parrying with the Socialist Party, the Negro was showered with literature and burdened with "street corner" speeches written in Moscow. The Socialist Party called for "the enforcement of Constitutional guarantees of economical, political and legal equality

⁵²Ibid.

for the Negro."⁵³ It also called for the enactment of the anti-lynching bills.

The Communist Party's proposition for the Negro was far more detailed and, obviously, more attractive:

The Communist Party is the political party of the oppressed masses of the people--the industrial workers, the persecuted Negro, the toiling farmers. The Communist Party enters this election campaign (1936) explicitly to rally the toilers of the city and country, Negro and white, in a united struggle for jobs and bread, for the fight against the imperialist was. . . . The Negro people, always hounded, persecuted, disfranchised, and discriminated against in capitalist America, are, during this period of crisis, oppressed as never before.⁵⁴

Many Negroes, mostly from the North, joined the Communist Party. But little did they realize that the Communists were talking out of both sides of their mouths. It took Roy Wilkins to pull the cover off the Communists, to show all, blacks and whites, that the Russian "lamb" was really a "wolf," after all.

Wilkins, on learning that the Russians were supplying war goods to Italians, who were at war with Ethiopia, informed his black brothers about it. In speeches and in his editorial comments, Wilkins put the light on the Soviet Union. He said close students of

⁵³ Bergman, op. cit., p. 457.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Soviet Russia discovered long time ago that the great idealism of the so-called Communist nation was in reality hard-boiled opportunism, an opportunism as shameless as that of any nation not professing the high idealism preached from the Kremlin.⁵⁵ Wilkins said that the Soviets were raking in good capitalist profits selling wheat and coal tar to Italy for use in the war against Ethiopia. He wrote:

We have little quarrel with the Soviet pursuit of profits--even imperialist war profits. Business men are business men, whether their offices are on Red Square in Moscow or West Street in New York. We do object to the pious flub-dub spouted by the Communists such as: "love for the downtrodden, exploited black people," "self-determination for small nations," "fight imperialist war," "take the profits out of war," etc. They are always ranting about capitalist exploitation and robbery and drawing themselves up in their pet holier-than-thou attitude, whenever opportunity presents itself they are in the midst of the arms and munitions races, military alliances and the garnering of profits.

All of which makes the Crisis continue to look with jaundiced eye upon that "Self-Determination for the Black Belt" proposal of the American Communists. They swear by all that's holy that such a pan of plain segregation is not segregation, but who can predict what they will say tomorrow or next week? Anyway, we maintain that the mere existence of the proposal proves that the idea of separateness is uppermost in the minds of the Red brain trust and not the idea of oneness. And in advancing this theory of separation; the Communists are hand in hand with the southern ruling class which they so delight to lambast.

⁵⁵ Editorial in Crisis, September, 1936, p. 761.

But since their Moscow masters are opportunists in the matter of war profits, who would dare criticize the American followers for opportunism in a little thing like race segregation? Who, indeed, except the segregated American Negro?⁵⁶

Wilkins never relented in his attack on American Communists. He pelted them monthly with his sharp editorial comments.

Communism never had much appeal to American blacks partially because of alert Negro journalists like Crisis' Roy Wilkins.

Leadership in war and peace. When war clouds began to hover over the United States in the late 1930's and early 1940's, the sound of the bugle attracted many Negroes into the armed services. The Selective Service System began to conscript young blacks, and thousands of others dashed to Army and Navy recruiting stations to volunteer. The Marine Corps did not accept Negroes until after the United States was deeply involved in World War II. The armed service, like civilian life, followed the Jim Crow policy which was prevalent throughout the land at that time. But many joined the service for the economic security it provided.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

Wilkins began a coordinated drive for desegregation of the Armed Forces in 1940. Walter White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, T. Arnold Hill of the National Urban League, A. Philip Randolph and other Negro leaders submitted a program to President Roosevelt, asking the Chief Executive to order the desegregation army and naval units. The Association also petitioned the senators for Selective Service reforms so that Negroes would be freely inducted. It also threatened lawsuits against local boards of education that provided vocational defense training for whites but not for Negroes.⁵⁷

In the military, some significant changes were made in the early 1940's. Colonel Benjamin O. Davis, Sr. was appointed a brigadier general, the first Negro general in American history. A month later, Judge William H. Hastie, a Negro, was made a civilian aide to the Secretary of War. Wilkins called these moves "steps in the right direction."⁵⁸

However, fewer than 5,000 of the 230,000 men in the Army were Negroes, and these black soldiers were

⁵⁷ Bergman, op. cit., pp. 489-90.

⁵⁸ Crisis, December, 1940, p. 179.

members of four Jim Crow regiments. There were only two Negro combat officers, and only 500 of the 100,000 Army Reserve officers were Negroes.

But things began to change for the better. The Selective Service Act of September, 1940, contained an amendment introduced by Representative Hamilton Fish of New York providing that, in the selection and training of men under the act, there should be no discrimination on account of race or color.⁵⁹ In October, 1940, President Roosevelt announced that Negro strength in the Army would be in proportion to the Negro percentage of the total United States population. The President added that Negro units would be organized in every major branch of the service, combatant as well as non-combatant. He ordered that Negroes be given the opportunity to attend Officer Training Schools and become officers; that Negroes would be trained as pilots, mechanics and technical aviation specialists. Of this, Wilkins wrote:

Negroes and whites will not be mingled in the same units because the War Department feels the mixing would produce situations destructive to morale and detrimental to the preparation for national defense.⁶⁰

⁵⁹Bergman, op. cit., p. 490.

⁶⁰Editorial in Crisis, January, 1941, p. 19.

The Department of War announced the formation of the first Army Air Corps squadron for Negroes on January 16, 1941, one day after a Howard University student, Yancey Williams, filed suit against the Secretary of War to force consideration of his application to be a flying cadet in the Army Air Corps.⁶¹

In the February, 1941, issue of Crisis, Wilkins' editorial said:

The War Department has announced that an Army Air Corps squadron with an all-Negro personnel will be formed and trained at Tuskegee Institute. It is to have 27 pursuit planes, 33 pilots, and a ground force of about 400.

This is a step in the right direction in the sense that it does open up to Negro Americans a branch of the armed service from which they heretofore have been barred. But it is by no means the answer to the demand of colored people for full integration into all branches of the arms and services of the nation. It adheres to the old Army pattern of segregation. This pattern is the cause of most of the trouble experienced by Negroes in civilian as well as military life. Until segregation as a procedure is overthrown, the race will be hobbled in all its endeavors in every field.

Crisis says here what it said about the announcement from The White House last October that segregation would be the policy of the Army; this procedure gives the green light to a complete segregated pattern for Negroes throughout American life. We may be forced to accept it, but we can never agree with

⁶¹Bergman, op. cit., p. 495.

it.⁶²

Wilkins, still convinced that the Army Air Corps' plan to train 33 Negro pilots in a Jim Crow setting was un-American, wrote in the April, 1941, Crisis:

The official announcement of the War Department calling for Negro pilots, as detailed in the daily press, looks suspiciously like a smoke screen to confuse and quiet Negro public opinion while doing very little about actual training of Negroes for the Air Corps.

As this is being written, the Army announces that its pilot training program has been stepped up to 30,000 men a year. But it plans to train only 33 Negro pilots. This tiny number constitutes one-tenth of one per cent of the total actual training program. This is in the face of Army officers stating that a "serious shortage" in pilots exists.

Even so, the 33 Negro pilots will have to wait until October 1, 1941, to begin training because their Jim Crow training center Tuskegee Institute will not be ready until then--manned with an all-Jim Crow ground personnel. Although the Army is begging the young men of the nation by radio and press to enroll for pilot training in the great centers now open, no Negroes are being sent to these centers.

Moreover, the Negroes are to be trained off in a corner by themselves for a squadron of only 27 pursuit planes. How can they be effective without training with the larger units?

Once again the Army's pattern of segregation is doing the Negroes and America an injustice. There does not appear to be any good reason why Negro boys cannot be enlisted and trained in the established

⁶² Editorial, Crisis, February, 1941.

centers along with whites.⁶³

Without initial opposition, Japanese naval and aircraft units swept down on Pearl Harbor and its surrounding Hawaiian bases on December 7, 1941, and the United States was at war. Successful and destructive though the Pearl Harbor attack was, it will probably be ranked in history as one of the worst blunders ever committed by a major power. No other act could have pulled the American people more quickly together behind a declaration of war.⁶⁴

Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Wilkins called on all Negroes to give wholehearted support to the war effort. The January, 1942, Crisis said:

The Negro must and will be loyal to his country in the present crisis. The reasons can be simply and briefly states:

1. It is the nature of the Negro to be loyal to the United States. His record is clean. Whether in slavery or in freedom, the Negro has served his country as nobly as any American could. From the days of Crispus Attucks who was among the first to die for the independence of America up to World War I and on through the present conflict, the Negro has lived, fought, bled and died for his country. . . .

⁶³ Editorial, Crisis, April, 1941, p. 103.

⁶⁴ A. Russell Buchanan, The United States and World War II (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), pp. 75-76.

2. The Constitution of the United States gives the Negro hope. It is one of the finest documents ever conceived by the human mind. Despite undemocratic practices and techniques so prevalent in American life, the Negro knows he has an advocate in the Constitution. So, as long as the Constitution is democratic in principle and ideals, the American people are obligated in the name of democracy and in the name of national honor to implement them into every area of American life. . . .

3. Closely associated with the democratic ideals set forth in the Constitution, the United States claims to be a Christian nation. We accept the Holy Bible as our rule of conduct and Jesus the Christ as Our Lord and Savior. The ministers and churches of America insist that only in the precepts and examples of Jesus can mankind find deliverance. We cling in theory to a belief in the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man.

4. Japan has no particular love or interest in the darker peoples of the earth. Japan is for Japan. And she will seek to suppress and does suppress her darker brother in the same way as imperialistic white nations. The American Negro therefore need have no sympathy for Japan. His destiny is in the United States of America and his salvation must be worked out here where the ideals are democratic and the religion is Christian. . . .

5. The Negro must and will be loyal to America because a Hitler-dominated world will be the worst that the human mind can conceive.⁶⁵

Throughout this war, Wilkins informed Negroes that as bad as conditions were in America for them, it would be worst if Hitler won the conflict. He admonished the Negroes to maintain their faith in the American

⁶⁵Editorial, Crisis, January, 1942, pp. 160-165.

people, the Constitution of the United States, and in the Christian religion. Wilkins said these are some of the reasons why the Negro must and always should stand one hundred per cent for the United States.

The black serviceman did not find a haven in the military installations. He was still the victim of segregation. Negro soldiers training in the South were subjected to Jim Crow treatment throughout the entire World War II period. In Alexandria, Louisiana, 28 Negroes were shot down by white civilians and policemen; race riots broke out in the Mobile (Alabama) Naval Yard, Fort Bragg, North Carolina; Camp Davis, North Carolina; and other bases. More than 100 Negro officers were locked in the stockade at Freeman Field, Indiana, for entering a "white only" officers' club. Negroes were accepted for general service in the Navy, but only for service ashore.⁶⁶

Because Crisis and Negro newspapers continually headlined stories of racial injustice in the Armed Forces, the Justice Department considered bringing charges of sedition against them. It also made it difficult for them to buy newsprint and paper. Wilkins called a conference of the editors of 24 Negro newspapers to set

⁶⁶Bergman, op. cit., pp. 495-499.

guidelines for criticism that would not lead to government suppression. Wilkins, through the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, also secured the needed quotas of newsprint for these black publications.⁶⁷

Wilkins and other black journalists kept up their criticism of segregation in the Armed Forces. On March 4, 1946, President Harry S. Truman announced that all segregation practices in the United States military was to end. This was a just victory for all Americans . . . in and out of uniform.

Just before Wilkins "retired" from the editor's desk at Crisis in December, 1949, he made some changes in the style and format of the publication. He explained it in the November, 1949, issue:

In this issue of The Crisis we have tried to round out the contents of the magazine so that there will be something of interest for everyone in the family. . . . In the future you can expect more pictures, art illustrations, and an all around, more interesting magazine.⁶⁸

Wilkins' second editorial in the last issue he served as the editor lamented the death of Oswald Garrison

⁶⁷Mrs. Chester A. Franklin, personal interview, February 9, 1970.

⁶⁸Editorial, Crisis, November, 1949, p. 336.

Villard, whom Wilkins called a "great soldier in the freedom-war of humanity and a friend of the Negro." The editorial cited Villard for his lifelong fight against segregation, Jim Crow, disenfranchisement and all barriers to full citizenship.

From Villard's praise, Wilkins focused attention on the fact that William E. Hastie, former governor of the Virgin Islands, was appointed to the bench of the Third United States Circuit Court of Appeals. The editorial said President Truman "deserves applause for this recognition of a great legal mind." Wilkins said:

. . . In 1937 President Roosevelt appointed him a federal judge in the Virgin Islands; President Truman sent him back in 1946 as governor. While dean of the Howard University Law School, he was called by Secretary of the Interior Harold L. Ickes to become assistant solicitor in the Department of the Interior. In 1940 he was appointed civilian aide to the Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson, a post from which he later resigned. In all these 69 positions Mr. Hastie acquitted himself brilliantly.

In his final editorial, also in the November, 1949, issue, Wilkins criticized the 81st Congress for its failure to act on civil rights measures. He wrote that throughout the session, the representatives and senators made all kinds of promises to "push a bill through." None

⁶⁹Ibid., p. 337.

of the promises came true, Wilkins said.⁷⁰

He warned:

From now on Negro voters are going to keep a sharp eye on their Congressmen. They are not going to take the side-tracking of the civil rights program lying down. They want civil rights to be the first order of business in the second session of the 81st Congress when it meets in January. Negroes are restless, tired of empty promises and broken pledges. And they know that the most effective place to register their disapproval of Congressional inaction is at the ballot box next November. . . .⁷¹

When Wilkins wrote "30" to that editorial, he also wrote "30" to his career as editor of Crisis. The following month he became assistant director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

WILKINS: SYNDICATED COLUMNIST

Employing a new approach. When Roy Wilkins retired from his editor's role at Crisis, he did not permanently surrender his pen. After a 15-year "lay-off" he resumed his journalistic endeavors as a syndicated columnist. Today he writes a weekly column--Roy Wilkins Column--for the Register and Tribune Syndicate of Des Moines, Iowa. The column, which appears in 52 daily and weekly newspapers (see Appendix), began on November 29, 1964.

In announcing his columns, Wilkins explained his goals.

This column will always attempt to 'balance' the scales, it will be, always I hope, frankly for equal opportunity for the Negro Americans. It will try to state their case firmly, but not stridently and not with unrelieved rancor directed toward white Americans.

The development of knowledge and understanding through fact and history and through interpretation will be an aim. The development of responsibility and of mature functioning in a complex and increasingly non-segregated society will be stressed.

Always will appear the underlying theme that the Western concept of free individuals in a free society of their own making has a vital stake in the success of a multi-racial democratic nation on this continent. If the Declaration of Independence has meaning for

homogenous white peoples, then the emerging world of separate colored nations in Asia, Africa and the islands of the seas can find no hope in Washington and must devise their own--inevitably competitive--ways of life.

Without being pontifical, either here on in the column, it might well be that the survival of the American Dream may depend on how wisely and forthrightly the United States meets the so-called Negro problem.¹

Wilkins witnesses fifteen years of progress and problems. In the 15-year lapse between Wilkins' last Crisis editorial, in 1949, and his first syndicated column, the American Negro became more audible in his demands for equality; he became more evident in all phases of American life.

In 1950 there were 15,042,286 Negroes in the United States, representing 10 percent of the nation's population. Of the Negro population, 13.4 percent lived in the Northeast, 14.8 percent in the North Central states, 68 percent in the South, and 3.8 percent in the West.²

Wilkins and his civil rights allies were successful in their push for the admittance of Negroes to

¹Publicity brochure, Register and Tribune Syndicate, no date.

²U. S. Bureau of Census, "Historical Statistics of the United States--Colonial Times to 1957" (Washington, D. C.: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1960), p. 88.

state-supported universities and colleges, particularly the professional schools. The Supreme Court responded with several decisions that increasingly broadened the definition of 'equality' and increasingly found 'separation' incompatible with it. Two cases cracked the wall of segregation in higher education. In Sweatt v. Painter, a Texas case, the Court ruled, in 1949, that a hastily established law school for Negroes did not meet the standard of equality. The following year, in McLaurin v. Oklahoma, the Supreme Court ruled that even though a graduate student was admitted to the University of Oklahoma for instruction, he did not enjoy the equality guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment as long as he was segregated in the classroom, the cafeteria, and the library.

In public schools the rule of Jim Crow remained complete and unbroken throughout the South and several mid-western states. Wilkins focused his attention and his attack on the segregation policy which was required by law in the schools of seventeen states and the District of Columbia.

By pointing out the discrepancies in the segregated public schools, which were disgracefully inferior to white schools, Wilkins sought legal correction. Hurrily, politicians and educators of the South attempted

to correct the inferior Jim Crow school situation. Wilkins said the injustice of half a century or more could not be repaired in a matter of a month. He asked the federal government, through the judiciary, to close forever the separate-but-equal loophole for segregation. Several states began desperate attempts at equalizing Negro schools, but the chances of doing so were slight, at best.

In the summer of 1950 a conference of lawyers associated with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People was held in New York, New York. It decided to mount a full-scale attack on educational segregation. Research was begun and a number of legal attacks initiated. In June, 1953, the Supreme Court ordered five school desegregation cases to be argued before it. This culminated in the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* decision on May 17, 1954. In that historic ruling, the Supreme Court, by a 9-0 decision, ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional since "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."³ Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote the opinion.

The first nationally significant direct action on the part of a Negro community took place on December 1,

³Bergman, op. cit., p. 535.

1955. Mrs. Rosa Parks, a Negro seamstress, boarded a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama, and took a vacant seat in the front. After she refused to give up her seat to a white man, she was arrested. Other Negro women organized and called for a boycott of the city buses. The next day a meeting of local Negro leaders, chaired by the Reverend L. Roy Bennett, decided to call a bus boycott the following Monday, December 5. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, accepted the job of seeing that the Negro community of more than 50,000 was informed of the proposed action. The boycott was carried out with startling unanimity.⁴

The bus boycott went on into 1956, when a federal court declared the city's bus segregation ordinance unconstitutional.

As of October 5, 1956, some 799 school districts had been desegregated since the May, 1954, Supreme Court ruling. However, Negro students were kept from enrolling in the white schools by mobs in several states.

In 1956, Senator Harry Byrd of Virginia called for "massive resistance" to school desegregation, and 101

⁴Ibid., p. 540.

Southern congressmen signed the Southern Manifesto against school integration.⁵

Miss Autherine Lucy, a Negro, was admitted to the University of Alabama in 1956 under court order. However, mob violence made it necessary for her to abandon temporarily her plans to attend that institution. She recalls:

When rioting flared, I was removed from the university. When I sued for reinstatement, I was permanently expelled for making "outrageous" charges in my suit. My appeals to the federal government for help were to no avail, and I eventually dropped the case.⁶

Miss Lucy left the state of Alabama and enrolled at Texas Southern University, where she earned her baccalaureate degree in education.

The Civil Rights Act of 1957 was first proposed in 1956 by President Dwight D. Eisenhower, but without the provision that the Justice Department could bring suit on behalf of Negroes denied the right to vote. Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr. had failed to convince President Eisenhower to accept the provision. Not until

⁵Ibid., p. 545.

⁶Mrs. Autherine Lucy Foster, personal interview, February 20, 1970.

the presidential campaign of 1956 did the President come out in support of Brownell's enforcement provision.⁷

In September, 1957, President Eisenhower sent 1,000 troopers of the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock, Arkansas, to protect nine Negro students who were attempting to enroll at that city's Central High School.

In 1958, an estimated 400,000 Negro students attended desegregated schools.

Wilkins, in May of 1959, suspended Robert Williams as president of the Monroe, North Carolina, branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People when Williams advocated meeting "violence with violence" and "lynching with lynching."⁸

The Civil Rights Act was signed by President Eisenhower on May 6, 1960. That same year the Houston, Texas, schools were desegregated. Houston had had the largest segregated school system in the nation.

On the lighter side, Chubby Checker, a Negro singer-entertainer, set America off on a new dance craze in 1960 when he introduced "The Twist."

Thurgood Marshall was appointed to the United States Circuit Court of Appeals by President John F.

⁷Bergman, op. cit., p. 547.

⁸Ibid., p. 579.

Kennedy in 1961.

The Navy announced the assignment of the first Negro to command a U. S. warship--Lieutenant Commander Samuel L. Gravely to the destroyer U.S.S. Falgout. He took command of the ship in 1962.

In 1963 there were more than 10,000 racial demonstrations, such as sit-ins and pray-ins, and more than 5,000 Negroes were arrested for their part in them.⁹

Wilkins writes again. In his first syndicated column which appeared on November 29, 1964, Wilkins wrote about the future of the Negro movement. Lyndon B. Johnson had been re-elected President a few weeks earlier, and Wilkins predicted that the Negroes would continue to press toward their goals of first-class, non-discriminatory citizenship in all phases of American life. He added:

There will be no let-up although there will probably be a trend to greater flexibility in tactics. Most of the leaders on various levels recognize that the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 dictates some variations in approach.

Some civil rights workers, imprisoned by their slogans and their dogma (even as are the segregationists), will bluster that the new law cannot change things, that only their brand of "action" treatment will do.

⁹Ibid., p. 580.

. . . The crusaders, as in the past, will be dedicated believers of both races, from the South as well as the North, augmented by a wave of young white and Negro college students. Exciting and fulfilling times are ahead for Negro and white Americans and for our country.¹⁰

On May 1, 1967, Wilkins criticized the opponents of Negro civil rights or "those who, in the first place, never wanted the Negro to have more than a teaspoon of freedom at any one time."¹¹ He wrote:

. . . Dirty work is afoot. Already the civil rights aspects of the Department of Agriculture has been cut. Sections of the program of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare have been mangled, though not eliminated. The slaughter of the entire school aid program under the guise of substituting a Republican "block grant" proposal for the Administration's ear-marked funds is scheduled for the killing floor momentarily.

The sponsor, Representative Albert Quie (Rep., Minn.), would have the money school districts with children from low-income families go to the states in a lump sum, not directly to the districts as at present.¹²

Wilkins accused the Republican Party of proposing to nullify the 1964 Civil Rights Act. He called the freedom of choice plan the "sorriest of all fakes on the

¹⁰Roy Wilkins Column, November 29, 1964.

¹¹Roy Wilkins Column, May 1, 1967.

¹²Ibid.

school desegregation front."¹³ Wilkins angrily chastised two Negro leaders--Adam Clayton Powell and Martin Luther King--and their followers for "floor-showing" or "grand-standing" when a vital issue was at stake. He said that the real tragedy in the destruction of federal aid to the poor and to civil rights was that voters have been diverted by other events concerning the Negroes' plight. He commented, in the same May 1, 1967, column:

For the entire first quarter of 1967, while congressional lines were forming, the division was Adam Clayton Powell.

Here in the second quarter, Negroes interested in civil rights are having their single-purpose activity diluted by insistent cries that the halting of a war 10,000 miles away is the first order of business

The need is for voter concern and pressure to prevent the wiping out of part gains and to campaign for the 1967 goals. Battles are won by fighting, not by chanting, and the battleground is the District of Columbia, not Saigon.¹⁴

The Nixon administration's civil rights policies were openly questioned by Wilkins in his column of April 21, 1969. He said:

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid.

Before President's Nixon's inauguration ceremonies were held on January 20, 1969, the one question asked both opponents and friends of the Nixon administration concerned his intentions or performance on the explosive race issue. Would he cut back on the Johnson program?¹⁵

Wilkins ended that week's column with the following admonition:

The Nixon administration's best counter would seem to be the enforcement of a policy so plain and so fair that neither executive vice-president or black street corner haranguers can misunderstand the intent.¹⁶

Changing the tempo. Wilkins has a keen interest in most affairs which concern Americans, black and white. From time to time, he dabbles into international events and non-black subjects in his weekly journalistic presentations. On February 9, 1970, he devoted his entire column to the economic woes of Africa, in general, and Biafra, in particular. Titled "More Aid for Africa a Must," the column said:

The United States, which has just announced a 200-billion dollar budget, ought to be able to find additions to the present allotment (a few million

¹⁵Roy Wilkins Column, April 21, 1969.

¹⁶Ibid.

dollars) to help build Africa into a strong and valued friend.¹⁷

Wilkins took a poke at black militant students in his May 19, 1969, column. He said the black students lose most in campus turmoil. He wrote:

. . . Colleges are for learning. If students spend their time in boycotts, in occupying administrative offices, in chaining gates and barricading buildings, in scrounging weapons, and campus pitched battles, they are frittering away learning time that may determine the status of their race in years to come.¹⁸

Although the Voting Rights Act, signed by President Johnson on August 6, 1965, rounded out a year of unparalleled legislative achievement for civil rights, Wilkins, in 1969, still felt that the measure was yet needed for the American Negro. He denounced a proposal by Senator Sam J. Ervin, Jr., a North Carolina Democrat who advocated the end of the Voting Rights bill, scheduled to expire in 1970. The voting measure was passed by the Congress shortly after President Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" speech on March 15, 1965. The bill eliminated all qualifying tests for registration which abridged the

¹⁷Roy Wilkins Column, February 9, 1970.

¹⁸Roy Wilkins Column, May 19, 1969.

rights to vote on the basis of race and color. The attorney general was given the power to determine the purpose of such tests and to take legal action against local election officers who enforced illegal requirements for eligible voters.

On July 21, 1969, Wilkins' column called Ervin's proposal a "usual performance."¹⁹ He said Ervin has voted against every such measure since he has been in the Senate. Wilkins wrote:

His standard procedure has been to first try to kill off or weaken to a point of uselessness any civil rights bill that comes before his constitutional rights sub-committee. Failing in that, the senator then tries to defeat or water down the bill on the floor.²⁰

Wilkins wrote that Ervin is a former justice of the North Carolina supreme court. "He is also one of the best storytellers in the Senate, Wilkins related. The columnist cited Ervin's skill as a raconteur and the "sweet-tasting poison on Negro civil rights."²¹

Wilkins said Ervin doesn't want a federal law to

¹⁹Roy Wilkins Column, July 21, 1969.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid.

held three million unregistered Negroes to get on the poll books. Wilkins wrote:

If one has a toothache one does not take a remedy for a pain in the toe or in the elbow. One directs the pill or the poultice or the forceps to the hurting tooth.

Until the other three million black people are started on their way to elementary voting democracy, to "government by consent of the governed," in the language of the U. S. Constitution, Ervin, it is to be hoped, will have to grin and bear the really superficial pain of his region's derelection.

He might be telling a joke or two to pass off the situation.²²

Wilkins asserted that with the powerful new laws on the books, with public sentiment behind them, and an administration thoroughly committed to the cause, a new era of progress is highly possible. He said Negro Americans should put behind them their old frustrations, bitterness, and despair and face the future with new hope and confidence. He explained the issue thus:

The basic struggle in this country since 1865 has been to persuade the central government to protect the constitutional rights of black citizens against the subtle and overt onslaught of the states. The racial practices imposed by whites upon blacks, while cruel and other spectacular and revolting, have been secondary.²³

²²Ibid.

²³Roy Wilkins Column, September 8, 1969.

Wilkins not only decries the threat to strip the black American of his political rights, he feels "there is room for improvement in ever facet of the Negroes' plight for first-class citizenship."²⁴ He said as long as hateful racial policies are permitted to exist, there will be those among the Negro population who will counsel direct action even if it means violence.

Wilkins cited the Black Panther Party as an example. He said blacks as well as whites have shown anger at some of the charges and acts against the Panthers. Although the black militants live and preach their doctrine because they are protected by the laws of freedom of speech and assembly, anyone who differs with them may not meet tolerance but violence. He said a Negro church in the Queens borough of New York had been damaged, apparently because the minister had condemned black militants of the New York City area and had been on the "wrong side" in a local anti-poverty dispute.²⁵

But Wilkins says "unless Negroes can find training in areas like the building trades and, subsequently, better jobs, and non-militant black becomes frustrated and

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵Roy Wilkins Column, November 23, 1969.

uneasy."²⁶ He said the building trades unions have to come out of their 1939 stance. He warned:

Their attitude is helping to maintain the explosive climate in which black extremist groups can rally support.

More importantly, in such an atmosphere, the voice of the non-violent Negro majority is stilled. It cannot defend alleged violence and racial hatred by a black minority. But neither can it defend the blatant trickery that breeds distrust, hatred and violence.

. . . As long as hateful racial policies are permitted to exist, there will be those among the Negro population who will counsel direct action even if it means violence.²⁷

Wilkins has been accused of being an agitator by many Americans on different plateaus of our society. He has been criticized for "inciting the Negro to push for his share of freedom."²⁸ But most of these critics would, almost have to agree that Wilkins is a true American, a black American who fights Communism with a passion. He says the Communists are seeking the use of American Negroes to help bring about a revolution here in the United States. He states that the Reds made a lot of

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

noise in the 1930's and 1940's, and through their intellectual-student-cocktail party-entertainment wing they made a slight penetration into the world of arts, letters and politics. But, Wilkins exclaims, "they flopped on the labor movement and among the Negroes."²⁹

In the 1930's the Communists were obsessed with the idea that the "black proletariat" would arise and revolt if only it had their leadership. Accordingly, they slashed at the existing Negro leadership everywhere, and at "reformism," including laws, courts and executive action.

All corrective efforts were sneered at as devices to perpetuate "tyranny." Today's new Communist group's first declaration used "tyranny." It included the Negro by the phrase, "ghetto streets and tenements."

Campaigners for civil rights under the American form of government oppose the attempt to link international Communism to their movement because history shows that Communism always comes first and the Negro second.³⁰

Wilkins remembers that when Hitler attacked Russia the Communist line changed abruptly.

One day they were telling Negroes not to fight in the "imperialist war," that is, against Hitler, The next day they were screaming for Negroes to get into the "war against Fascism," that is, on Russia's side.³¹

²⁹Roy Wilkins Column, May 2, 1965.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

In 1941, Wilkins recalls the United States Communist party officially urged Negroes to cease their agitation against all Jim Crow, especially that in the armed forces, until the Soviet Union was saved. "The Negro cause was dumped," Wilkins said.³²

Today, Wilkins says, the Negro movement, in the minds of the great majority of its participants and supporters of both races, is not a political revolution in the real sense of that term. It is, he says, a revolution against racial injustice. It is, according to Wilkins, not seeking to overthrow the basic structure of the government of the United States, but the removal of the racial inequalities which have attacked themselves upon that government.

It is doubtful that this legitimate movement, representing the aspirations of millions of Negroes who are Americans, first and always, can be perverted and made a tool to serve Communism.³³

Wilkins states that today's Negroes are as smart as they were in the 1930's, and they will move toward their goals, leaving the Communists to their name-calling and their dialectical debates.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid.

Wilkins has no regular schedule of events to comment on. He feels that "each and every man and woman in this land of ours have a role to play in our search for a true democratic society."³⁴ Wilkins used a Shakespearean quotation to explain his ideas of full participation of all of the people in all of the phases of national activity. He quoted lines from William Shakespeare's drama, "As You Like It" (Act II, scene VII):

. . . All the world's a stage, and all the men and women are merely players; they have their exits and their entrances; and one man in his time plays many parts.³⁵

When asked how long he feels he can continue his dual role as a journalist and a civil rights leader, Wilkins answered, "That I really don't know. I enjoy both." He said only "Father Time" can decide when he will have to surrender his pen and cease his activities as an executive with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.³⁶ Despite the long, dutiful years Wilkins has spent in his role as journalist-civic leader, he insists that he has a multiplicity of chores to perform

³⁴Roy Wilkins, personal correspondence, January 20, 1970.

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid.

before he can be assured that our nation is just what he thinks it can and should be.

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this thesis, an attempt has been made to present a compelling picture of Roy Wilkins, the man and the journalist, with which more of the general public should be made familiar. Wilkins has played one of the most important roles in race relations during the Twentieth Century. He has been, according to Emory S. Jackson, editor of the Birmingham (Alabama) World, the "vital link in the chain of inter-group relations."¹

In his 69th year, when a man should be resting, Wilkins is still enduring what Frederick Douglass, the 19th Century black abolitionist called "the awful roar"² of struggle. Only now the "awful roar" is often sounded by his own people, black Americans who are young and militant--and he is often the target. So, he takes what he considers the long view of history. He writes biting editorial comments against those blacks who would exchange

¹Emory S. Jackson, personal correspondence, September 20, 1969.

²Lerone Bennett, Jr., The Negro Mood, (Chicago: Johnson Publishing Company, 1964), p. 232.

his concepts of integration for separatism. By the same token, Wilkins maintains his fight against bigots who would deny the black American his birthright.

Wilkins is a journalist-politician in the cause of civil rights and, like all successful politicians, he has mastered the mechanics of power. "The Negro has to be a diplomat and a great strategist," Wilkins says.³ In September, 1969, Wilkins explained what he meant.

The Negro has to parlay what actual power he has along with the goodwill of the white majority. He has to devise and pursue those philosophies and activities which will least alienate the white majority opinion. And that doesn't mean that the Negro has to indulge in bootlicking. But he must gain the sympathy of the large majority of the American public. He must also seek to make an identification with the American tradition.⁴

Wilkins believes this, he writes it, he preaches it. He has used the press as a source of information and advice to the black American. He is a journalist bound by the precepts of the "Journalist's Creed."

Wilkins explained:

³Wilkins, personal correspondence, November 12, 1969.

⁴Martin Arnold, New York Times Magazine, September 28, 1969, p. 27.

A society can be one that is faltering, lagging behind, a people whose life is dull and living is listless and where negation prevails and people are uninspired with the things about them. Or a society can be moved by the growth of education, politics, industry, commerce and religion, and share these things, and be a part of life and progress. A Negro journalist must contribute to the existence of a community which is faltering.⁵

This is Wilkins' editorial philosophy in all facets of Negro life. He realizes that he has in his hands an important tool that can provide the impetus for a peaceful, progressive society, if used properly.

Wilkins analyzed his situation early in his career and had the vision to understand the need for long-range analysis as well as immediate application of recognized services. Although Wilkins realized that education is no panacea, he recognizes its merit and believes that it provides the best means to an enlightening program for racial betterment.

As a journalist, Wilkins tries to seek out new means and ideas for the racial, social and economic improvement of the nation and at least provide the Negro with the means or ideas insofar as they will be discussed as to their potentialities.

⁵Wilkins, personal correspondence, February 13, 1970.

The same approach was used during the critical times immediately before and after World War II. When those racial crises has passed, Wilkins wondered if he had been as effective an editor as he should because of the violence that was not prevented. He wonders today of his effectiveness during recent racial flareups. But others commenting on his efforts felt he had done an excellent job.

Wilkins' efforts in the vital areas of Negro life portray him as a responsible and effective journalist. He has achieved many of his goals and has helped to achieve a considerable degree of racial harmony. Although doubt lingers as to the best approach to the many racial problems, Wilkins' journalistic approach is one of co-operation and racial harmony based on mutual agreement. While he does not exclusively belabor the racial problem in his present day writing, he does take an active role in them in the hope of finding a harmonious pattern for practical adjustment. He has written that the pattern can, and must, be found within the framework of the Constitution.

Wilkins could have produced editorial copy that delighted his critics. He could make his columns and comments anything but the wholesome type that it is. But

that is not Wilkins, and it can never be. Wilkins' editorial leadership is reflected in his efforts to integrate progressive ideas into the mesh of community life-- and it was he who was able to fit rationality and foresight into the puzzle of racial, political, economic and cultural change.

But whether the problem and whatever the need of black Americans, Wilkins has worked for the solutions, hopefully avoiding the loss of rationality.

It is hoped this study spotlights two things:

- 1) Roy Wilkins as a diligent journalist and molder of opinions for his predominantly Negro readers, and
- 2) The problems and the possibility of the Negro press in America.

II. SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

One of the most interesting aspects of Wilkins' editorials is the style in which they are written. He has a natural eloquence, based on simplicity, that makes his prose distinctive. An analytic study of this style might be of value for studying editorial effectiveness.

Another aspect that lends itself to further study would be a comparison of Wilkins' methodological approach to racial problems compared with approaches to the same

type of problems by white editorial writers, or by other Negro editors.

A third area that could provide study material would be a history of the Negro press, which has sorely been neglected by historians and researchers. Few books about Negro journals and journalists are available.

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- Sumner, William G. Letter dated January 20, 1970.
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- Wilkins, Roy. Letter dated October 18, 1969.
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A P P E N D I X

PORT-AU-PRINCE, LE 6 *Septembre* 1934

Le Président
de la
République d'Haiti

DEAR SIR:—

I have just hoisted before a large and excited crowd the Haitian flag, in the same place where for 19 long years the flag of the United States of America has floated.

This gesture of the First Executive of the Republic, surrounded by Members of the Three Departments of the Government, symbolizes in an unequivocal manner the reintegration of our native country in all the attributes of her political sovereignty. My joy is profound. So is that of the People whose destiny I have the great honor of directing. I am entirely convinced that this joy will soon be perfect. For, if events follow the normal course which, in complete accord with the ideas of President Roosevelt, I have set in motion, they will soon lead to our financial freedom.

But right now I must express in a formal way, and through your valiant magazine my personal gratitude, that of the Government and of the People of Haiti, to all those American friends, colored or white, who, so willingly and so courageously have taken part, on our side, in the long and hard struggle of which the day of last August 21st marked the crowning victory, and who, by their prayers, by their efforts, and by their great publicity campaign have in such a large measure contributed to the freedom of my country. The feeling of great sympathy that they have created about Haiti has made my hard task easier and helped towards the positive triumph of the Haitian Cause.

Tell them that we will never forget it, and that their names are written in the hearts of true Haitians among those of the philanthropic President Roosevelt and of his influential and sympathetic representative at Port-au-Prince, Monsieur Norman Armour.

(Signed) STÉNIO VINCENT

Monsieur Roy Wilkins
Acting Editor DU CRISIS
c/o Monsieur Walter White
69, Fifth Ave.
New-York (U. S. A.)

The Evening and Sunday Bulletin

30TH AND MARKET STREETS

PHILADELPHIA, PA. 19101

WILLIAM B. DICKINSON
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

February 5, 1970

Mr. George McElroy
School of Journalism
University of Missouri
Columbia, Mo. 65201

Dear Mr. McElroy:

Replying to your letter of January 12:

I believe The Bulletin was one of the first major newspapers to contract for Mr. Wilkins' column. We have used it regularly since, with almost no exceptions.

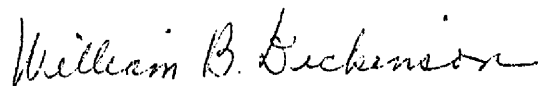
He is the moderate Negro voice in the cause of civil rights, sometimes irritating to prejudiced whites, and sometimes an 'Uncle Tom' to black activists.

His views often reflect the policies of NAACP, which policies he has of course helped to shape.

He has and has had good contacts in government.

Mail response to his column is not great, but it is steady. It is divided between criticism from the more extreme of both races, and praise for his voice of moderation for those more inclined to the middle road.

Cordially,



William B. Dickinson

WBD:ed



St. Paul Dispatch and Pioneer Press

55 EAST FOURTH STREET

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA 55101

TELEPHONE (AREA 612) 222-5011

January 20, 1970

Mr. George McElroy
Urban Journalism Program
School of Journalism
University of Missouri
Columbia, Missouri
65201

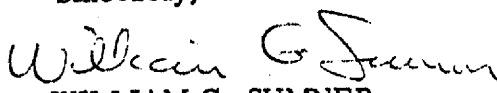
Dear Mr. McElroy:

We publish the Roy Wilkins column because it expresses a viewpoint important for our readers--that of the militant, intelligent, productive, wise and dedicated man. You may question use of the word "militant", but I think these days we are too often regarding destructive and publicity-minded hell raisers as the true militants and all others as Uncle Toms.

Wilkins also fits the other demands of our editorial page. He is a good writer and expresses a strong viewpoint well.

I wish you luck with your M. A.

Sincerely,


WILLIAM G. SUMNER
Editor

WGS:rb

January 16, 1970

Mr. George McElroy
Urban Journalism Program
School of Journalism
Columbia, Missouri 65201

Dear Mr. McElroy:

In reply to your January 12 letter concerning our use of the Roy Wilkins column, I will try to give you some background and some reaction.

Since The Post-Tribune is published in a city whose population is now more than half Negro and since a large percentage--though not a majority--of our readership (including a sizeable suburban circulation) is made up of blacks, we decided more than a year ago that we needed a Negro columnist.

We looked over the field, and on the basis of Mr. Wilkins' past record and also of the strength of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in our area decided that his offerings probably would be best.

We have been gratified with the decision.

That reaction is based on three major points.

First, Mr. Wilkins writes on subjects of primary interest to blacks, but subjects still of general interest to people of all races in urban areas.

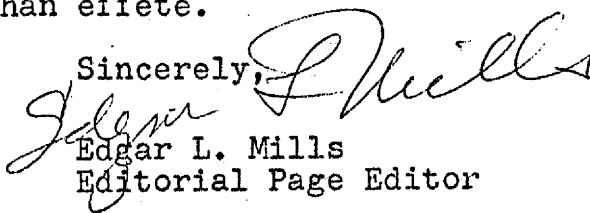
Second, his is a voice of moderation. While he writes from the vantage point of his background as leader of a major Negro organization, he, nevertheless, finds it appropriate at times to chastise black extremists just as at other times he raps the white extremist view.

Third, Mr. Wilkins has proved both succinct and articulate. In other words, while his background is not journalistic, he has two virtues of value to any newspaperman. He says what he means. He says it with an economy of words.

As far as any records at hand show, our outside reaction has been verbal, not written. In general it has been favorable. I have heard some disagreement with his views on particular issues--and advantage since controversial views make for readership. Even in those cases, however, the dissents provoked have been in language as reasonable as that used by Mr. Wilkins himself.

As an aside, thanks for including us among "the few elite American newspapers." Better that than effete.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Edgar L. Mills". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name and title.

Edgar L. Mills
Editorial Page Editor

ELM:mb

HENRY LEE MOON
Editor

Official Organ of the
National Association
for the Advancement
of Colored People.



THE CRISIS

Founded 1910



1790 BROADWAY • NEW YORK, N. Y. 10019

TELEPHONE 245-2100

October 15, 1969

Mr. George McElroy
School of Journalism
University of Missouri
Columbia, Missouri 65201

Dear Mr. McElroy:

Allow me to acknowledge receipt of your letter of October 8 requesting certain issues of The Crisis as an aid in your study of the journalistic activities of Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

I am sorry but we do not have available unbound copies covering the period, 1934 - 1949, that you requested. Bound volumes may be found in many university and public libraries. If they are not available in the library of the University of Missouri, there's a possibility that they are in the library of Lincoln University in Jefferson City.

Incidentally, Arno Press, a publishing and library service of The New York Times, has just issued an authorized reprint edition of The Crisis, 1910 through 1960. Perhaps your university library would be interested in securing these volumes if it does not already have them.

There apparently was no formal notice in The Crisis indicating the change in editorship. The last editorials by W.E.B. Du Bois appeared in the June, 1934 issue. The masthead of that issue and of the July issue carried Dr. Du Bois as editor-in-chief and Mr. Wilkins and George W. Streater as managing editors. The August issue lists Streater and Wilkins as managing editors. The Du Bois name was dropped from the masthead. That issue also carries the text of Dr. Du Bois' resignation and the Board's resolution accepting it "with the deepest regret."

The September issue carries the name of Roy Wilkins.

October 15, 1969

as managing editor. There was also listed a five-person advisory board consisting of J.E. Spingarn, Dr. Louis T. Wright, James Weldon Johnson, Lewis Gannett and Walter White. Mr. Streater, a protege of Dr. Du Bois, had resigned. The issue's unsigned editorials are undoubtedly Mr. Wilkins'.

The NAACP Annual Report for 1934 carries the following item -- "Election of Acting Editor of The Crisis: In July, 1934, Mr. Wilkins, assistant secretary of the N.A.A.C.P., was made managing editor of The Crisis, and on January 7, 1935, he was elected acting editor. He is continuing his duties as assistant secretary."

I hope this information will be helpful to you in your research. Sorry, I'm unable to supply the complete information you requested.

Sincerely,



Henry Lee Moon
Editor

HLM:cg

The undersigned, appointed by the Dean of the Graduate Faculty, have
examined a thesis entitled

ROY WILKINS AS A JOURNALIST

presented by George A. McElroy

a candidate for the degree of Master of Arts in Journalism

and hereby certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

William H. Pelt
Emerit C. Morgan
Robert W. Fawcett
A. E. Strickland

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JUL 23 1977	JUL 19 1977
JUL 2 1976	APR 28 1976
FEB 11 1977	NOV 1 1976
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