

Introduction

Writing the History of the NAACP

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, known as the NAACP, is America's largest and oldest civil rights organization. Founded in 1909 by a small band of white social reformers and black intellectuals, by mid-century the association had grown into a large membership organization with roughly a half million dues-paying members and more than a thousand branches all over the United States. For millions of African-Americans, the five capital letters NAACP signified black America's determination not to be content with "second-class citizenship." For the guardians of white supremacy, particularly in the South, the association became synonymous with the "radicals" and "outside agitators" that disturbed the allegedly harmonious race relations based on black subordination. Although the NAACP at times seemed to fall back into the rearguard of the civil rights struggle, it remains one of the most important African-American organizations as it approaches its centennial anniversary.

As the late August Meier, one of the foremost scholars on the history of the association, once observed, it is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of the NAACP in the history of the black struggle for freedom and equality.¹ Nevertheless, for many years the NAACP has been the stepchild of civil rights historiography. In a recent review article, Charles Eagles noted with some astonishment that no historian had yet written a major work on the NAACP, while general histories of other black advancement groups, such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the National Urban League, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), were readily available.² Charles Kellogg's projected multivolume history of the association never proceeded beyond the first volume and the NAACP's first decade. And although August Meier and Elliott Rudwick made numerous valuable contributions to writing the history of the NAACP, they never published a book-length study.³ Until the early 1990s, we only had a small number of case studies on specific as-

pects of the NAACP's history, plus a few outdated overviews of little historiographical significance.⁴ In addition, several autobiographies of NAACP leaders were published over the years.⁵

No scholar who has worked in the NAACP Records held by the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., will be surprised by the want of a comprehensive history of the association. Their sheer volume of several million documents—the largest single archival holding of the LoC—make this a daunting task that perhaps goes beyond the power of an individual researcher.⁶ But there are other reasons as well why the NAACP has been neglected by civil rights scholars. To begin with, the history of the civil rights movement was long dominated by the political biography of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., undoubtedly the most charismatic black leader of the twentieth century.⁷ While there is no shortage of King biographies, the leaders of the NAACP were largely ignored. Its two most important executive secretaries, Walter Francis White and Roy Wilkins, were not even included in the standard biographical volume *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century*, published in the early 1980s.⁸

Perhaps the most important reason for the relative lack of interest in the NAACP has been the association's image as legalistic, bureaucratic, wedded to the liberal establishment, and out of touch with the true aspirations of the black masses, which was projected by historians who emphasized the grass-roots origins and mass-action character of the black struggle. Clayborne Carson's 1983 essay on the civil rights movement in the *Encyclopedia of American Political History*, for example, barely mentions the NAACP. Carson and other historians called for a paradigm shift away from what they saw as a "top-down" approach focusing on national leaders and organizations and toward the history of local activists and movements who represented the true backbone and essence of the black freedom struggle.⁹

Local history, to be sure, has opened up inspiring new perspectives and yielded a rich empirical harvest, especially when the focus of these studies was extended to entire states rather than confined to individual communities. Moreover, local history has demonstrated, among other things, the importance of the NAACP branches and state conferences.¹⁰ Unfortunately, though, the paradigm shift toward the local occurred before the national leadership and policies of the NAACP had been adequately researched. In this context, it is important to emphasize that the association's leaders and decision-making bodies were basically guided by the belief that the struggle for civil rights could only be victorious if it were placed on the national agenda of American politics. Although the local branches were "the lifeblood of the association," according to Ella Baker, who served as the director of branches from 1943 to 1946, the political perspective of the NAACP was a national

one.¹¹ Moreover, it would be misleading to separate the NAACP's leadership from the membership at large along the patterns of "bureaucrats versus activists" or "new crowd" versus "old guard."¹² As this book will demonstrate, the association's New York headquarters did not usually stand in the way of local activism but often initiated and supported activities at the local level, particularly in the field of voter registration.¹³ It is also noteworthy that, by and large, the membership backed the policies of the national secretariat and the board of directors, even though there never was a shortage of internal dissenters.

During the last ten years, however, the historiographical neglect of the NAACP has clearly come to an end and a reassessment of its role in the civil rights movement is clearly underway. British historian Adam Fairclough has given much attention to the association both in his book on the civil rights movement in Louisiana and in his recent synthesis of the black struggle for equality in the twentieth century.¹⁴ Mark R. Schneider's *The Civil Rights Movement in the Jazz Age* covers much of the NAACP's history in the 1920s and contests the "myth" that the association was a white-dominated middle-class group without a mass following.¹⁵ Kenneth R. Janken has published an admirable, full-scale biography of Walter White, a key figure in the NAACP from 1916 to his death in 1955, that is critical of its protagonist's penchant for self-promotion and personal vanity, but always empathetic and judicious.¹⁶ In her book on the black struggle during the early Cold War, Carol Anderson harshly criticizes the NAACP for allegedly succumbing to anticommunism and for abandoning the progressive vision of human rights in favor of a narrow civil rights agenda. But while Anderson finds much fault with the association, she does not question its historical significance. To the contrary, the decisions of the NAACP leaders in this crucial period were so fateful, she argues, precisely because the NAACP was the leading black political organization of the time.¹⁷

This book was researched in the mid-1990s and first published in German in 2000. Although some of its findings and arguments have already been published in English, I am grateful for the suggestion by John David Smith to make the whole book available to American readers.¹⁸ This involved more than just translation. It meant rewriting and rearranging for American scholars and general readers a book that was first conceived as a study addressed to a German academic audience. Despite the laudable and increasing efforts at international cooperation among historians, there are still distinct national differences in shaping arguments and narratives. I have tried to make the transition to what I see as a more narrative-oriented American style of writing historical monographs without trying to conceal my position and perspective as a non-American observer. In all candor, I also accepted the

challenge to spend several more years with the NAACP and write an English version of my earlier book because American scholars of U.S. history generally ignore all publications not written in English.¹⁹

I do not claim, however, to have written a comprehensive—let alone a definitive—history of the NAACP. As Adam Fairclough has aptly observed, “the history of the NAACP is so long, rich, and diverse that it is impossible to set down between two covers.”²⁰ My topic is the association’s struggle for the right to vote, from its founding in the early twentieth century to about 1970, when the right to cast a ballot and have it fairly counted was reasonably secure for all African-Americans.²¹ The suffrage, I argue, took center stage in the NAACP’s strategy to win freedom and equality for blacks, both as the symbol of first-class citizenship and as the crucial weapon for advancing collective interests. As a flyer issued by the Baltimore, Maryland, NAACP branch for a 1965 voter registration drive, from which I borrow the title of this book, put it confidently: “The Ballot is Our Ticket to Freedom!”²² This struggle for the ballot involved the five levels that I have tried to trace throughout the following chapters.

- The disfranchisement of African-Americans, as it was practiced almost everywhere in the southern states, constituted a flagrant violation of America’s egalitarian and democratic ideology. In order to challenge this fundamental flaw of American democracy, the NAACP needed to initiate national discourses about racial disfranchisement, discrimination, and violence. In following these efforts, I look at the historical contexts that favored or inhibited the association’s claims to black rights. It was no coincidence, for example, that the two World Wars and the Cold War, when the American creed was taken to task before world opinion, each had a profound impact on the NAACP’s work.
- The NAACP leaders firmly believed in the American system of representative government and worked hard for the passage of national civil rights laws. From the 1910s on, the association lobbied for a federal antilynching bill, and since 1942 it maintained a bureau in Washington, D.C., whose longtime head, Clarence Mitchell, was hailed as one of the most effective lobbyists in the nation’s capital. Although the segregationist southerners invariably succeeded in thwarting all national civil rights legislation until the late 1950s, including several bills to prohibit the use of the poll tax as a qualification for voting, the lobbying effort eventually paid off when Congress passed two historic civil rights laws in the mid-1960s that ended racial segregation and disfranchisement. Still, the NAACP paid a price for its alliance with liberal lawmak-

ers and administrations. Working the halls of Congress involved compromises that many civil rights activists found hard to stomach. Because of its close relationship with the liberal establishment, critics viewed the association more like a traditional lobbying group than as part of a social movement, especially when the civil rights struggle entered the phase of nonviolent mass protests.²³

- Because the NAACP won a good number of legendary court victories, most famously the 1954 desegregation ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, it has often been consigned to the role of the civil rights movement's legal branch. And indeed, the association attracted the elite of black lawyers in the United States. Most prominent among them was its longtime chief counsel, Thurgood Marshall, who later became the first African-American Supreme Court justice, and who was widely praised as an outstanding legal mind and a skillful litigator. However, as early as 1940, the NAACP's legal department began to assume an organizational life of its own, as the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, also known as the LDF or Ink Fund, eventually leading to a total separation between the two groups. The legal campaigns for civil rights thus are only one part of the association's history.²⁴ In this book I will not repeat the well-known story of *Brown*. Instead, I focus on litigation to secure the right to vote, most importantly the fight against the white primary.²⁵ My interest, moreover, is less in the details of litigation than in the broader and widely debated question of whether political and social movements should resort to legal options at all.²⁶

- The key task in regaining the vote was inducing eligible African-Americans to assert their citizenship rights by trying to register as voters. In the South, this meant challenging head-on the institutional and cultural barriers of white supremacy, often at considerable personal risk. In the North, blacks had to be convinced that their votes could actually make a difference, given that neither of the major parties was really interested in representing black constituencies. Organizing voter registration drives was a task that the local NAACP branches performed incessantly from the early days of the association's history. After the Second World War, the national secretariat became heavily involved and made registration into a major focus of NAACP work. During the nonviolent protests of the 1950s and 1960s, voter registration developed into an area of both cooperation and competition with other civil rights groups. In responding to nonviolent direct action and militant

protest, the NAACP leadership emphasized registration campaigns as the “unglamorous” but politically most effective strategy of mass mobilization.²⁷

- If racial discrimination was to be ended by the ballot, voter registration was but a first step. Black voters had to be educated to use their power “intelligently,” while white politicians needed to be taught to respect this power. For decades, the NAACP preached the theory that the black electorate, although relatively small in number, could hold the balance of power in local, state, and national elections, if only blacks realized the potential impact of their ballots. Its official commitment to nonpartisanship notwithstanding, the association tried to mobilize black voters in order to reward friends and punish enemies at the polls, albeit with limited success.

In chapter one, I describe the origins, program, and organizational growth of the NAACP and discuss the issue of internal race relations. The chapter then analyzes the association’s constitutional discourse and its attempts to enforce the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution. At the end of its first decade, the NAACP’s membership and prestige had reached a temporary peak, but it also painfully experienced the limits to interracial coalition building when its advances were coldly rejected by the woman suffrage movement. Still, the association did not waver in its integrationist outlook when challenged by Marcus Garvey’s competing vision of black separatism.

Chapter two tells the story of the NAACP’s efforts to establish black voters as a political factor in a two-party system that had virtually shut them out. In a political culture of racism, the association tried to enlighten both black voters and white politicians about the power of black votes. Campaigns to punish hostile politicians at the polls yielded at least some encouraging results. During the Great Depression, the NAACP was shattered by ideological debates over the wisdom of integrationism and the necessity to take a more class-based perspective on the race question. While the association retained its character as a civil rights organization, it also adopted a new economic program embracing the liberal welfare state and entered into alliances with the labor movement. As black voters shifted their allegiance from the GOP to the Roosevelt Democrats, the NAACP for all practical purposes became part of the New Deal coalition.

In chapter three, my account of the NAACP’s voting rights litigation takes up recent debates about the effectiveness of pursuing legal strategies to bring about social and political change. The chapter describes the external con-

straints of legal action to enforce civil rights during the first half of the twentieth century and offers an in-depth discussion of the white primary cases and a reinterpretation of their meaning and historical significance.

Chapter four deals with the NAACP's organizational, political, and ideological development during the Second World War. The war triggered far-reaching social and cultural changes that, on the whole, were conducive to the cause of black rights and advancement. In contrast to its patriotic quietism in World War I, the association struck a successful balance between loyalty and protest. The campaign against the poll tax broadened its political base and yielded some encouraging results in the struggle for reenfranchising southern blacks. Perhaps most important, the association benefited from the politicization of African-Americans during World War II by spectacularly expanding its membership and branches. In the aftermath of the war, it was undoubtedly the strongest black political organization in America.

Chapter five deals with the impact of the Cold War and its concomitant anticommunist hysteria on the civil rights movement. The exuberant mood among black activists during the immediate aftermath of World War II soon gave way to a repressive climate that put black rights on the defense. Some historians have harshly criticized the NAACP's embrace of liberal anticommunism for allegedly having retarded the black struggle for decades to come. In contrast, I argue that much of this criticism is exaggerated, inconsistent, and misleading. In particular, my research reveals that the NAACP did not conduct large-scale "purges" of leftists among its members, as several scholars have stated without providing empirical evidence.

In chapter six, I describe the NAACP's voter registration campaigns in the South from the Second World War to the early 1960s. This grassroots work played an important part in the considerable increase of black registration during these two decades. The chapter discusses the goals and methods of the association's registration drives and the obstacles and hazards its activists faced. In the late 1950s, the national office created the NAACP Voter Registration Committee, charged with organizing and coordinating campaigns throughout the entire South. The NAACP did not limit itself to legal action and adopting a defensive mind-set, as some historians have argued. My analysis of the association's southern registration work shows a vibrant, active, and highly political organization.

Chapter seven probes into the association's response to the wave of non-violent direct action that began to build a new momentum for the civil rights struggle at the end of the 1950s. The new approach, along with the founding of new civil rights organizations, posed a considerable strategic and organizational challenge to the NAACP. There was much bickering and rivalry with

Martin Luther King's SCLC and with SNCC and CORE, respectively, but the association also developed a constructive response to the new situation. In particular, it stepped up the voter registration campaigns that it offered as an alternative to nonviolent protest and as a constructive way to channel mass participation into the political process. In the joint Voter Education Projects of the 1960s, the NAACP vigorously asserted its leadership role as the largest and most efficient civil rights organization.

In chapter eight, I analyze the involvement and role of the NAACP in the national politics of civil rights during the 1950s and 1960s. The long and hard quest for civil rights legislation often involved painful compromises and almost infinite patience. However, it was not primarily patient and skillful lobbying that put civil rights on the congressional agenda, but the crises created by nonviolent protest provoking violent responses from white supremacists. When the crucial breakthrough came within reach, the NAACP made every effort to mobilize the necessary electoral support for the liberal coalition and to communicate the imperatives of a "responsible" civil rights strategy to the black community.

Chapter nine explores the association's reaction to the racial polarization in the second half of the 1960s, signified by the catchphrases "Black Power" and "white backlash." While the NAACP leaders were not altogether unhappy with the split of the civil rights movement, which freed them from the uneasy alliance with its radical rivals, they viewed the growing militancy among African-Americans as a dangerous threat to the Johnson administration's agenda of civil rights and social reforms. Viewing the "Great Society" as the grand prize for blacks, the NAACP's support for the president also included backing Johnson's Vietnam policy. In its response to the ideological challenges from the Black Power militants, the association reasserted its traditional goals, methods, and ideals and continued to rely on its organizational strength. As the liberal consensus unraveled in the late 1960s and the white backlash seemed to threaten the achievements of the Second Reconstruction, the NAACP remained a strong political force for civil rights.

In the conclusions, I restate my argument and ponder the historical achievements of the NAACP's struggle for black voting rights and political integration. I also sketch the development of the association in the post-civil rights era. Going beyond the history of the NAACP, I discuss the evolution of the American voting rights discourse from racial disfranchisement to minority vote dilution, arguably one of the most contentious racial issues in American politics today.

This book emphasizes the eminently political character of the NAACP. Throughout its history, the association pursued social and racial change pre-

dominantly by political means. It worked hard prodding the federal government to intervene against racial discrimination and sought the support of parties and candidates for black civil rights as well as for advancing the social and economic interests of African-Americans.²⁸ It entered into alliances and coalitions, opposed powerful political forces, and quarreled over strategic issues with other organizations dedicated to black rights. At times, the differences of opinion escalated into intense rivalries and outright conflict. In tracing the NAACP's political history, I wish to contribute to a richer and perhaps more nuanced picture of America's veteran civil rights group.

The historiographical debates over the NAACP's role in the black struggle have centered around the historical and political legitimacy of racial integration, the chief goal proclaimed by the association from its beginnings to the aftermath of the civil rights era. At all times, there were critics who ridiculed and condemned this goal as illusionary or even treacherous, and modern historians have echoed much of this criticism. In a fundamentally racist society, it is said, the concept of integration may easily become an ideological subterfuge for concealing white privilege and black exclusion behind a masquerade of tokenism. Desegregation and civil and political rights within the confines of liberal individualism are seen at best as a first step in a much broader and ongoing struggle for black liberation that would involve nothing less than a full-scale political, economic, and cultural transformation of American society.²⁹

I refrain from discussing the future prospects for such sweeping social change here. However, I wish to remind the readers of the fact that during most of the time span covered in this book the notion of racial integration was viewed as distinctly radical, even revolutionary, by most white Americans. Simultaneously, equality of justice, rights, and opportunity, freedom in the pursuit of happiness, personal respect, political representation, and full inclusion and participation as citizens of the American Republic were goals that most African-Americans considered as highly important and worth fighting for. In assessing the historical achievements and failures of the NAACP, I propose to take its agenda of civil and political integration seriously.