

# Black Civil Rights and Liberal Anticommunism: The NAACP in the Early Cold War

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In recent years historians have produced an impressive body of scholarship on the linkage between international relations and the African American freedom struggle. Not surprisingly, much of this work has focused on the Cold War, especially on its early years. That crucial period was shaped by an obvious paradox. On the one hand, the global ideological confrontation between Communism and liberal democracy and the claim by the United States to leadership of the "free world" made domestic racial discrimination an international embarrassment, providing the civil rights movement with a potent discursive weapon. Indeed, beginning in the late 1940s, the federal government filed *amicus curiae* briefs to support the lawsuits others were bringing against educational segregation. The federal briefs pointed to the immense damage racism did to America's international prestige, particularly in the emerging Third World. Cold War liberals embraced racial reform as a national security imperative.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the anticommunist hysteria of the early Cold War—customarily, if inappropriately, labeled McCarthyism after its most salient protagonist, Sen. Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin—infested all corners of public life in America and grotesquely blurred the distinction between dissent and treason. Southern racists were among the most ardent anticommunists and tried their best to discredit the civil rights struggle as a Communist conspiracy.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For general studies of race, civil rights, and international relations, see Michael L. Krenn, ed., *Race and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Colonial Period to the Present: A Collection of Essays* (5 vols., New York, 1998); Brenda Gayle Plummer, *Rising Wind: Black Americans and U.S. Foreign Affairs, 1935–1960* (Chapel Hill, 1996); and Penny Von Eschen, *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism* (Ithaca, 1996). On the linkage between race, civil rights, and the Cold War, see Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001); Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton, 2000); Brenda Gayle Plummer, ed., *Window on Freedom: Race, Civil Rights, and Foreign Affairs, 1945–1988* (Chapel Hill, 2002); and Carol Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize: African Americans, the United Nations, and the Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1955* (New York, 2003). A pioneering exploration of the domestic repercussions of Cold War constraints is Mary L. Dudziak, "Desegregation as a Cold War Imperative," *Stanford Law Review*, 41 (Nov. 1988), 61–120. See also the symposium "African Americans and U.S. Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History*, 20 (Fall 1996), 531–650.

<sup>2</sup> The most important general works on the McCarthy era and American anticommunism include David Caute, *The Great Fear: The Anti-Communist Purge under Truman and Eisenhower* (New York, 1978); Richard M. Fried, *Nightmare in Red: The McCarthy Era in Perspective* (New York, 1990); Ellen Schrecker, *The Age of McCarthyism: A Brief History with Documents* (Boston, 1994); Albert Fried, ed., *McCarthyism: The Great American Red Scare; A Documentary History* (New York, 1997); and Ellen Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Boston, 1998). On southern anticommunism, see Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge, 2004). For a long-term perspective on American anticommunism,

The anticommunist hysteria of the early Cold War put tremendous pressure on the civil rights movement. As a consequence, unity was destroyed and its radical left wing fell victim to the witch-hunts of the red scare, while most black leaders and organizations of the civil rights mainstream joined the camp of Cold War liberalism. In these momentous developments, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), America's oldest and largest black civil rights organization, played a key role. The association followed a pattern of accommodation to the anticommunist *Zeitgeist* that was typical for the American public at large. It fervently denied all charges that it was dominated by Communists and distanced itself from all groups and individuals suspected of Communist affiliations. At the same time, it defended racial reform as an integral part of the liberal agenda. The NAACP's embrace of liberal anticommunism provoked criticism at the time and has continued to do so among historians of the black civil rights struggle. Indeed, the controversy over the attitude of the NAACP in the early Cold War mirrors the debate over the historical legitimacy of liberal anticommunism and its consequences for American society.

In the aftermath of the McCarthy era, leaders of the NAACP and authors with close ties to the association justified their anticommunism by emphasizing both the sharp ideological antagonism between civil rights liberalism and the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA) and the latter's alleged attempts to infiltrate the NAACP.<sup>3</sup> Recent historiography, however, has been predominantly critical of the association's embrace of anticommunism. Some historians have viewed the NAACP's anticommunism as timid and opportunistic but conceded that it preserved the organization and its program throughout the McCarthy years. But the price for survival, they argued, was the detachment of black civil rights from more radical concepts of domestic social reform and anticolonialist internationalism in favor of the narrow goals of desegregation and voting rights. The anticommunist hysteria of the Cold War, Carol Anderson wrote, "compelled the NAACP leadership to retreat to the haven of civil rights, wrap itself in the flag, and distance the Association from the now-tainted struggle for human rights." Penny Von Eschen referred to a "stark and ultimately tragic choice."<sup>4</sup>

Marxist historians have been even less indulgent to the NAACP. They have castigated the alleged opportunism of its leadership, which in their view tragically squandered a unique opportunity for a progressive civil rights alliance. "In refusing to work with Marxists," Manning Marable has argued, "the NAACP lost the most principled anti-racist organizers and activists. . . . By serving as the 'left wing of McCarthyism' [the leaders of the NAACP]

see Michael J. Heale, *American Anticommunism: Combating the Enemy Within, 1830-1970* (Baltimore, 1990); and Richard G. Powers, *Not without Honor: The History of American Anticommunism* (New York, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> See Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (1948; Athens, Ga., 1995), 314-16, 334-35, 344-47; Roy Wilkins, *Standing Fast: The Autobiography of Roy Wilkins* (New York, 1994), 201-11; Wilson Record, *The Negro and the Communist Party* (Chapel Hill, 1951), esp. 260-68; Wilson Record, *Race and Radicalism: The NAACP and the Communist Party in Conflict* (Ithaca, 1964); William A. Nolan, *Communism versus the Negro* (Chicago, 1951); Langston Hughes, *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* (New York, 1962), 149-51; and Christopher Reed, *The NAACP and the Rise of Black Professional Leadership, 1910-1966* (Bloomington, 1997), 83-85. For an account that curiously ignores the controversy about the anticommunist position of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), see Jonathan Rosenberg, *How Far the Promised Land? World Affairs and the American Civil Rights Movement from the First World War to Vietnam* (Princeton, 2005), 195-99.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson, *Eyes off the Prize*, 273. See also Carol Anderson, "Bleached Souls and Red Negroes: The NAACP and Black Communists in the Early Cold War," in *Window on Freedom*, ed. Plummer, 93-113; and Penny Von Eschen, "Commentary: Challenging Cold War Habits; African Americans, Race, and Foreign Policy," *Diplomatic History*, 20 (Fall 1996), 634. For criticism of the organization's leadership that emphasizes Walter White's personal opportunism, see Kenneth Robert Janken, *White: The Biography of Walter White, Mr. NAACP* (New York, 2003), 297-323.

retarded the black movement for a decade or more." Gerald Horne has written of a "fateful historical decision" that burdened the association with indirect responsibility for the deterioration of the living conditions of African Americans in later years.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, several authors have claimed that the NAACP conducted large-scale "purges" of leftists from its ranks that weakened the organization and left it "rudderless and disoriented," to quote Horne. Curiously enough, they do not offer any empirical evidence for the purges beyond citing the anticommunist rhetoric of the association's leaders and the resolutions of its convention. The extent to which Communists and their sympathizers were expelled from the organization remains unexplored.<sup>6</sup>

The critics of the NAACP's liberal anticommunism build their argument on the proposition that the American labor movement and the Left had emerged from World War II stronger than ever and that the prospects for a far-reaching transformation of American capitalism had never been better. "For a few short years in the late 1940s," Ellen Schrecker wrote, "the American people had more political options than they would ever have again. McCarthyism destroyed those options. . . . From race relations to the mass media, almost every area of American life felt the chill." From that perspective, it is largely the fault of shortsighted and opportunistic liberals that the grand opportunities of the postwar era were missed and the forces of reaction prevailed. "The disintegration of the black movement in the late 1940s," Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein surmised, "ensured that when the civil rights struggle of the 1960s emerged it would have a different social character and an alternative political agenda, which eventually proved inadequate to the immense social problems that lay before it."<sup>7</sup>

Did the NAACP really—and fatefully—miss a great opportunity for civil rights and social reform in postwar America? The following essay will demonstrate that much of the criticism is misleading and inconsistent. For one thing, the critics grossly exaggerate the association's participation in the anticommunist crusade, particularly its alleged purges; for another, they play down the ideological cleavages between the NAACP and the Communists. Rather than becoming "the left wing of McCarthyism," the NAACP desperately struggled to keep the cause of black civil rights on the agenda, operating under constraints that defy all political and moral certainties.

## The NAACP and the Radical Left before the Cold War

The NAACP, founded in 1909 by white social reformers and black intellectuals, was conceived in the spirit of Progressive reform, which did not aim at the overthrow of the American social and political order, but at curing the social ills that came with industrialization, urbanization, and mass migration. The association pledged itself to active opposition to the evil of racial hatred and prejudice, waging propaganda campaigns, mobilizing African American voters, and offering legal assistance to victims of racial injustice. The discursive strategy that the NAACP adopted early and maintained throughout

<sup>5</sup> Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction in Black America, 1945–1990* (Jackson, 1991), 26–32, esp. 26 and 32; Gerald Horne, "Who Lost the Cold War? Africans and African Americans," *Diplomatic History*, 20 (Fall 1996), 613–26, esp. 614.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald Horne, *Black Liberation/Red Scare: Ben Davis and the Communist Party* (Newark, 1994), 228; Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 393, 543–44n89; Plummer, *Rising Wind*, 188, 190; Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 369–70; Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (Dec. 1988), 786–811, esp. 811.

the coming decades can perhaps be best characterized as a democratic nationalism that combined the universalist American creed of freedom, equality, and democracy with traditional patriotism. The black struggle was depicted as a service to the entire nation. "As much as anybody in the country the Negro wants to be a good American," wrote the NAACP executive secretary, James Weldon Johnson, in 1929, "he is also determined to wear the rights as well as bear the burden of American citizenship. . . . He must win not only for himself. . . . He must win for the nation, because if he fails, democracy in America fails with him."<sup>8</sup>

The NAACP expected racial change to result from political reforms, not from revolutionary class struggle. Given the notorious racism of the American labor movement, an alliance between black and white workers appeared utterly unrealistic. As W. E. B. Du Bois, cofounder of the association, editor of its magazine, the *Crisis*, and the leading African American intellectual of his time, explained to his black readers in 1921: "Theoretically we are part of the world proletariat in the sense that we are mainly an exploited class of cheap laborers; but practically we are not a part of the white proletariat and are not recognized by that proletariat to any great extent. We are the victims of their physical oppression, social ostracism, economic exclusion and personal hatred; and when in self defense we seek sheer subsistence we are howled down as 'scabs.'"<sup>9</sup>

The Great Depression, however, which hit African Americans harder than any other group in American society, confronted the NAACP with new challenges to its agenda and inspired heated internal debates. In an "Address to the Country" approved by the 1932 NAACP annual conference, the delegates acknowledged that "the American Negro is going to find freedom and adjustment mainly through an improvement in his economic status." Two years later, a group of young socialists, headed by the Howard University sociologist Abram Harris, tried to shift the association's focus away from civil rights toward radical economic reform. In their view, the economic plight and discriminatory treatment of black Americans were a matter less of race than of class. Hence the NAACP needed to change its methods and objectives: "Instead of continuing to oppose racial discrimination on the job and in pay and various manifestations of anti-Negro feeling among white workers, the Association would attempt to get Negroes to view their special grievances as a natural part of the larger issues of American labor as a whole." In other words, the report advocated that the NAACP transform itself from a civil rights organization into an integral part of an interracial labor movement.<sup>10</sup>

The proponents of the civil rights approach, however, denied that most blacks viewed themselves as part of an exploited working class rather than as an oppressed racial mi-

<sup>8</sup> NAACP, press release, Aug. 23, 1929, box 390, series C, part I, NAACP Records (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.). Until recently, the NAACP was the stepchild of civil rights historiography. For the first study to cover the NAACP's political history, see Manfred Berg, *The Ticket to Freedom: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville, 2005). For an account by a former NAACP worker, see Gilbert Jonas, *Freedom's Sword: The NAACP and the Struggle against Racism in America, 1909–1969* (New York, 2004). On the organization's first ten years, see Charles Flint Kellogg, *NAACP: A History of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, 1909–1920* (Baltimore, 1967). On the Progressive origins of the NAACP, see August Meier and John H. Bracey, "The NAACP as a Reform Movement, 1909–1965: 'To Reach the Conscience of America,'" *Journal of Southern History*, 59 (Feb. 1993), 3–30.

<sup>9</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Class Struggle," *Crisis*, 22 (Aug. 1921), 151. On W. E. B. Du Bois's life, see David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868–1919* (New York, 1993); and David Levering Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York, 2000).

<sup>10</sup> "Resolutions of the 23rd annual conference of the NAACP," May 17–22, 1932, box 26, Arthur B. Spingarn Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress); [Abram Harris], "Future Plan and Program of the NAACP," Sept. 1934, box 29, series A, part I, NAACP Records.

nority. Even Mary Ovington, one of the association's white founders and herself a socialist, opposed Harris's program because the message of class struggle could be successfully preached only by the socialists or the Communists, not by the NAACP, which would lose its identity, credibility, and following.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, although the association refused to merge into an interracial labor movement, it began forging alliances with labor unions, especially with the industrial unions that joined to form the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the midthirties. The CIO embraced racial egalitarianism and civil rights issues such as the NAACP's antilynching campaign, and the NAACP supported the cause of labor, and its local branches, particularly in industrial cities such as Chicago, Detroit, and Baltimore, began to reach out to black workers. As African Americans joined the New Deal coalition in the midthirties, the NAACP consistently supported liberal social policies that would benefit not only blacks, but all poor Americans. It did so, however, without sacrificing its identity on the altar of working-class unity, and it retained its character as an integrationist African American civil rights group.<sup>12</sup>

In particular, the association's opening toward the labor movement and the Left did not include the CPUSA. Founded in 1919, the party had quickly identified African Americans as the most oppressed and exploited part of the American proletariat. However, its ideological twists and turns on the race question were extremely erratic. Early attempts to organize black workers in the American Negro Labor Congress were to no avail. After the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International in 1928, the CPUSA adopted the position that blacks constituted a national minority within the United States and were entitled to a separate state in the black belt of the Deep South. To demonstrate its antiracism, the party waged campaigns against "white chauvinism" in its own ranks and nominated a black candidate for vice president in the 1932 elections. During the Great Depression, the CPUSA succeeded in winning some popularity among the black working class of the big industrial cities. Even in Birmingham, Alabama, a clandestine but active cell of black Communists formed.<sup>13</sup>

In the early 1930s the NAACP and the International Labor Defense (ILD), an affiliate of the Communist party, clashed over the defense of the so-called Scottsboro boys, defendants in the most spectacular case of southern-style racist criminal justice of the era. In March 1931 nine black youths had been arrested in Scottsboro, Alabama, for allegedly raping two white girls. Only three weeks later, eight of them were sentenced to death. Although there was no evidence of rape, the defendants had no chance for a fair trial before

<sup>11</sup> Mary White Ovington to Joel Spingarn, Sept. 23, 1934, box 29, series A, part I, NAACP Records; Roy Wilkins to Walter White, Sept. 19, 1934, *ibid.* On the programmatic debates in the early 1930s, see also B. Joyce Ross, *J. E. Spingarn and the Rise of the NAACP, 1911-1939* (New York, 1972), 217-41; and Beth Tompkins Bates, "A New Crowd Challenges the Agenda of the Old Guard in the NAACP, 1933-1941," *American Historical Review*, 102 (April 1997), 340-77.

<sup>12</sup> On the gradual convergence between civil rights and New Deal liberalism, see Harvard Sitkoff, *A New Deal for Blacks: The Emergence of Civil Rights as a National Issue* (New York, 1978), 164-68; Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill, 1996), 41-69; and Dona C. Hamilton and Charles V. Hamilton, *The Dual Agenda: Race and Social Welfare Policies of Civil Rights Organizations* (New York, 1997), 8-42. Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO, 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> On the attitude of American Communists toward the race question, see Earl Ofari Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds: Race and Class Conflict, 1919-1990* (East Lansing, 1995), 29-136. On the influence of Communists on the black community, see Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990); and Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (Urbana, 1983). For introductions to the history and historiography of American Communism, see Albert Fried, ed., *Communism in America: A History in Documents* (New York, 1997); and Michael Kazin, "The Agony and Romance of the American Left," *American Historical Review*, 100 (Dec. 1995), 1488-1512.

an all-white jury imbued with the sexual obsessions of white supremacist ideology. While the NAACP at first underestimated the potential of the case, the ILD arranged to represent the defendants in court and skillfully made the case into an international *cause célèbre* of the Left. According to the ILD, black proletarians could not expect justice from a court created by the white ruling class but had to be freed by the revolutionary pressure of the masses. Pursuant to their ideological struggle against "social fascism" and "petty-bourgeois reformism," the Communists hurled a barrage of attacks against the NAACP leadership, accusing it of "joining the lynching mob" and of betraying the "Negro masses and . . . the Negro liberation struggle." The CPUSA made no secret of its intention to drive a wedge between the "masses of the NAACP followers" and their reformist "misleaders." The ILD's legal team prevented the execution of the young men, and after the CPUSA had embraced the new Popular Front tactics in the midthirties, a coalition of civil rights groups, including the ILD and the NAACP, continued to pursue the case. In 1937 four of the defendants were acquitted, while the remaining five were eventually pardoned. No love was lost, however, between the CPUSA and the NAACP, and NAACP representatives continued to look on American Communists with distrust.<sup>14</sup>

Once the Communist International proclaimed the new Popular Front against fascism in 1935, the CPUSA was able to increase its membership from roughly 35,000 to almost 100,000 at the end of the decade and to gain influence over several CIO unions. Communists also worked in the National Negro Congress (NNC), which was founded in 1936 as an umbrella organization to coordinate black protest activities and headed by A. Philip Randolph, the prominent leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Since the NNC at first enjoyed considerable prestige in the black community, the NAACP leaders decided to join, despite the growing presence of the Communists.<sup>15</sup> The infamous Hitler-Stalin Pact of August 1939 brought the Popular Front to an abrupt end and plunged American and international Communism into a deep crisis. The CPUSA faithfully followed Moscow's new line and argued that American workers, and blacks in particular, had no stake in the "imperialist war" in Europe. As soon as the Nazis attacked the Soviet Union, however, the American Communists declared that victory over fascism had to take precedence over all other objectives, including the civil rights struggle. Protests against racial discrimination in the military or the defense industries now became anathema, even though the party's rank and file did not completely abandon them. At the end of the war, the party again became embroiled in power struggles and ideological strife that resulted in the ouster, on orders from Moscow, of party leader Earl Browder, who had pushed the Popular Front too far.<sup>16</sup>

In contrast, the NAACP and other African American organizations made every effort to exploit World War II to improve the material condition and civil rights of the black com-

<sup>14</sup> See Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge, 1979), 51–103. On the attacks on the NAACP, see "NAACP Joins Lynching Mob," *Southern Worker*, June 13, 1931, in *American Communism and Black Americans: A Documentary History*, ed. Philip S. Foner and Herbert Shapiro (Philadelphia, 1990), 125–46; Harry Haywood, "The Road to Negro Liberation: Report to the Eighth Convention of the Communist Party of the USA, Cleveland, April 2–8, 1932," *ibid.*, 262–64; and Fried, ed., *Communism in America*, 150–54.

<sup>15</sup> Fried, ed., *Communism in America*, 232–40. On the National Negro Congress (NNC), see Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds*, 157–74. See Paula F. Pfeffer, *A. Philip Randolph: Pioneer of the Civil Rights Movement* (Baton Rouge, 1990).

<sup>16</sup> On changes in the Communist line and their consequences, see Fried, ed., *Communism in America*, 227–47, 315–16, 330–36, 344–45. On Earl Browder, see Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds*, 185; and James G. Ryan, *Earl Browder: The Failure of American Communism* (Tuscaloosa, 1997).

munity. In the spring of 1941, the association supported A. Philip Randolph's call for a "march on Washington" to protest segregation and exclusion in the armed forces and defense industries. The threatened march led President Franklin D. Roosevelt to issue an executive order banning discrimination on account of race, creed, color, or national origin in government agencies and defense contracting. The new militancy of black protest and of the NAACP in particular did not subside after Pearl Harbor. "Now is the time not to be silent!" the *Crisis* proclaimed in January 1942, and the NAACP annual convention that July stated unequivocally, "We will not abandon our fight for racial justice during the war." As a consequence, membership in the association skyrocketed from about 50,000 in 1940 to more than 400,000, perhaps even half a million, in 1946. There were roughly 1,100 chapters nationwide; the Detroit NAACP, the largest branch in the country, alone claimed 20,000 members. At the end of World War II, the association had emerged as a mass organization and the leading voice for African American civil rights.<sup>17</sup>

### Petitioning the United Nations

Black leaders and ordinary African Americans alike greeted peace in an assertive mood and with a new understanding of the international dimension of the race question. When the NAACP's executive secretary, Walter White, returned from his travels throughout Europe in 1945, he emphatically proclaimed: "A wind is rising—a wind of determination by the have-nots of the world to share in the benefits of freedom and prosperity which the haves of the earth have tried to keep exclusively for themselves. That wind blows all over the world." The time had come, it seemed, to do away with segregation and discrimination at home and to eliminate colonialism from the new world order. In fall 1944 the NAACP's board of directors had already urged FDR "to make clear now that the United States government will not be a party to the perpetuation of colonial exploitation of any nation" and to appoint "qualified Negroes" as representatives in the upcoming peace conferences. Indeed, in May 1945 the U.S. Department of State appointed Walter White, W. E. B. Du Bois (the NAACP's director of special research), and Mary McLeod Bethune of the National Council of Negro Women to be official consultants at the United Nations (UN) conference in San Francisco. To their disappointment, the civil rights leaders soon realized that the U.S. government had no intention of quarreling with its European allies over colonial issues. The American delegation proposed an amendment to the UN charter that prohibited discrimination "on account of race, language, religion, or sex," but the proposal specified that the clause would not authorize intervention in matters "within the domestic jurisdiction of the state concerned." On the colonial question, the United States did not call for independence for all colonies but merely supported a UN trusteeship for those colonies already under international mandate. In response, black spokespersons of all political persuasions castigated American hypocrisy, while the anti-

<sup>17</sup> John H. Bracey and August Meier, "Allies or Adversaries? The NAACP, A. Philip Randolph, and the 1941 March on Washington," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 75 (Spring 1991), 1–17; "Now Is the Time Not to Be Silent," *Crisis*, 49 (Jan. 1942), 7. For the resolutions of the annual conference, July 18, 1942, see National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Annual Report 1942* (New York, 1942), 8. For the NAACP membership figures, see R. Williams to Gloster Current, June 15, 1954, box 202, series A, part II, NAACP Records; and Detroit NAACP branch, press release, April 3, 1947, box 201, *ibid.* Lucille Black, the NAACP's longtime membership secretary, later estimated that the association's numerical strength peaked in 1946 at approximately 540,000. See Lucille Black interview by John Britton, Nov. 1, 1967, transcript, interview number 70, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection (Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, D.C.).

colonial pronouncements of the Soviets were widely applauded. "In the Soviet Union," the historian Rayford W. Logan observed, "there is an almost complete absence of race prejudice. . . . it is to be expected that a similar policy will be followed in areas controlled by the Soviet Union."<sup>18</sup>

Nevertheless, the founding of the United Nations and the formal ban on racial discrimination offered political opportunities to expose American racism on the international stage, opportunities that the civil rights movement was determined to exploit. In June 1946 the National Negro Congress presented the United Nations with a brief petition that called on the world organization to address the oppression of black people in America. Not surprisingly, UN officials balked. Undaunted, Du Bois, who believed that the NNC petition was "too short and not sufficiently documented," boldly claimed an NAACP mandate not only to speak for black Americans but also "to represent the peoples of Africa before the UNO." In September 1946 the board of directors approved Du Bois's proposal for a UN petition but limited its scope to the condition of blacks in the United States. By the end of the year, Du Bois and several coauthors had put together a draft, but it took until October 1947 to persuade the United Nations Committee on Human Rights to accept a document that pilloried the world organization's most powerful member.<sup>19</sup>

Titled *An Appeal to the World: A Statement on the Denial of Human Rights to Minorities in the Case of Citizens of Negro Descent in the United States of America and an Appeal to the United Nations for Redress*, the petition had more than 150 pages and provided a detailed account of racial discrimination in the United States. The NAACP urged the United Nations "to step to the very edge of its authority" in protecting African Americans who found no protection from their own government. "Peoples of the World," the petition concluded, "we American Negroes appeal to you; our treatment in America is not merely an internal question of the United States. It is a basic problem of humanity." Yet for all its moral grandeur, the notion that the UN could assume jurisdiction over American race relations was patently fantastical. As the UN representative immediately cautioned, the world organization had no power to take any action and considered the petition confidential.<sup>20</sup>

The NAACP, of course, made every effort to get as much publicity as possible for *An Appeal to the World*. The document was immediately released to the press and in early 1948 published as a booklet. All major U.S. newspapers and magazines reported on the petition, and most of the commentary conceded that it addressed a painful weakness in America's international credibility. Inevitably, there were also charges, particularly from

<sup>18</sup> Walter White, *A Rising Wind* (Westport, 1945), 155; resolutions of the NAACP board of directors, Sept. 11, 1944, box 513, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Robert L. Harris Jr., "Racial Equality and the United Nations Charter," in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*, ed. Armstead L. Robinson and Patricia Sullivan (Charlottesville, 1991), 126–48, esp. 142; Rayford W. Logan, *The Negro and the Post-War World: A Primer* (Washington, 1945), 77. On the efforts of black civil rights leaders to influence U.S. policy toward the United Nations (UN), see Harris, "Racial Equality and the United Nations Charter"; and Carol Anderson, "From Hope to Disillusion: African Americans, the United Nations, and the Struggle for Human Rights, 1944–1947," *Diplomatic History*, 20 (Fall 1996), 531–63.

<sup>19</sup> Documents on the origins of the NAACP petition to the UN are in box 637, series A, part II, NAACP Records. See especially W. E. B. Du Bois to White, memoranda, March 26, Aug. 1, Nov. 14, 1946, and Oct. 17, 1947. See also Herbert Aptheker, ed., *The Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, vol. III (Amherst, 1978), 149–52, 160–67, 180–84.

<sup>20</sup> See W. E. B. Du Bois, "A Summary of this Petition," box 637, series A, part II, NAACP Records; and statements by Walter White, Du Bois, and UN representative John Humphrey at the presentation of the NAACP petition, Oct. 23, 1947, *ibid.*



southern commentators, that the NAACP had embarrassed the United States and furnished "Soviet Russia with new ammunition to use against us." The NAACP, Du Bois wrote in countering one attack, was not going to be intimidated by red-baiting. "We are not spineless appeasers. When we see wrong . . . we protest. We have done this for forty years and we shall continue this program."<sup>21</sup>

*An Appeal to the World* also claimed that "it is not Russia that threatens the United States but Mississippi, not Stalin and Molotov but [the racist senators from Mississippi] Bilbo and Rankin." Yet there was little chance the NAACP petition would escape entanglement in the ideological battles of the Cold War. It was the Soviet delegate to the UN Committee on Human Rights who in December 1947 officially proposed to put the NNC and NAACP petitions on the committee's agenda. Predictably, his American counterpart ensured that the move was soundly defeated. Another attempt failed in the summer of 1948, leading to a controversy between Du Bois and Eleanor Roosevelt, who was a member of both the U.S. delegation to the UN and the NAACP board of directors. The former first lady refused to introduce the NAACP petition into the UN General Assembly, stating that the Soviets would seize upon the issue as an excuse for attacking the United States. Politely but firmly, Du Bois replied that since its founding the association had never shied away from speaking the truth regardless of the embarrassment to America's international prestige.<sup>22</sup>

By then the NAACP leadership had already decided that the UN petition had served its propaganda purpose. Walter White fully agreed with Eleanor Roosevelt that it was not in the association's best interest to team up with the Soviets in embarrassing the U.S. government before world opinion.<sup>23</sup> Du Bois, however, sharply disagreed. His relationship with the NAACP leadership had been full of tension virtually from the day he was appointed as the director of special research in September 1944, when the grand old man of African American protest had returned to the association following his retirement from Atlanta University. The deep personal and political rivalry with Walter White and assistant secretary Roy Wilkins that had led Du Bois to quit the editorship of the *Crisis* in 1934 had never subsided.<sup>24</sup> As the Cold War unfolded, serious disagreement over the NAACP's "foreign policy" rekindled the rivalry. Du Bois had never been willing to surrender his political independence to his obligations as an NAACP official, and his political leanings were increasingly toward the radical Left. Since 1945 he had repeatedly angered NAACP leaders by his enthusiastic praise for the Soviet Union, as when he called Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov "the one statesman at San Francisco who stood up for human rights and the emancipation of colonies" and labeled the Soviet Union as "the most hopeful country on earth."<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> NAACP, press release, Nov. 7, 1947, *ibid.*; Julia Baxter to White, memorandum, Dec. 18, 1947, *ibid.*; White to Bruce Bliven, Dec. 12, 1947, *ibid.*; NAACP, circular letter to editors, civic leaders, and mailing list subscribers, Feb. 18, 1948, *ibid.*; White, *Man Called White*, 358–59; Du Bois to Editor, *Morgantown [West Virginia] Post*, Oct. 27, 1947, in *Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, III, ed. Aptheker, 185–86.

<sup>22</sup> "UN Turns Down Petition," *Philadelphia Tribune*, Dec. 13, 1947, clipping, box 637, series A, part II, NAACP Records; "UN Group Kills Probe of Bias on U.S. Negro," *New York Daily News*, Dec. 4, 1947, clipping, *ibid.*; Du Bois to White, July 1, 1948, box 241, *ibid.*; Aptheker, ed., *Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, III, 188–89.

<sup>23</sup> White, *Man Called White*, 359.

<sup>24</sup> The 1934 break occurred over Du Bois's advocacy of "voluntary segregation" as a strategy to strengthen the black community, which the NAACP leadership sharply repudiated. However, the controversy reflected, most of all, a power struggle between Du Bois and Walter White. See Berg, "Ticket to Freedom," 56–61.

<sup>25</sup> See Aptheker, ed., *Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, III, 95–101; W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Relations with the NAACP," Oct. 1948, box 241, series A, part II, NAACP Records; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Common Objectives," Aug.

The final dustup came in September 1948, when Walter White asked the director of special research to prepare a memorandum for the imminent meeting of the United Nations in Paris where White was going to serve as an official consultant to the U.S. delegation. Instead of complying with the secretary's request, Du Bois sent the board of directors a long memorandum that amounted to a scathing indictment of what he saw as the disastrous opportunism of the NAACP leadership:

The United States Delegation to the United Nations has expressed clearly its attitude towards matters in which the NAACP is interested; it has refused to bring the curtailment of our civil rights to the attention of the General Assembly of the United Nations; it has refused willingly to allow any other nation to bring this matter up. . . . If we accept a consultancy in this delegation without a clear, open, public declaration by the Board of our position on the Truman foreign policy, our very acceptance ties us in with the reactionary, war-mongering colonial imperialism of the present administration. It is certain that no influence applied in Paris is going to have the slightest influence on our delegation. . . . If, on the contrary, we are to be loaded on the Truman bandwagon, with no chance for opinion or consultation, we are headed for a tragic mistake.

Walter White indignantly denied that his acceptance of the consultancy committed the association to support the Truman administration's foreign policy, and he insinuated that Du Bois was simply jealous that he had not been selected to represent the NAACP at the Paris meeting. A few days later, the NAACP board of directors sharply reproached Du Bois for his "written refusal to cooperate with the NAACP executive staff" and for leaking his memorandum to the press, a charge that Du Bois vehemently denied. Nonetheless, the board terminated his employment, effective by the end of 1948.<sup>26</sup>

Du Bois was perfectly right in his assessment that the NAACP leadership was not willing to confront Harry S. Truman in the field of foreign policy, even if that meant turning a blind eye to the administration's less than principled stand on decolonization. In contrast to Du Bois, who had an internationalist outlook, the NAACP leadership did not expect any effective help from the United Nations or world opinion but continued to look to the federal government of the United States as the institution with the authority and power to enforce the rights of black Americans. One important reason why the NAACP did not wish to alienate the Truman administration was that the president's civil rights policy had begun to show encouraging signs of progress.

### The NAACP and the Truman Administration

The conflict between Du Bois and the leadership of the association must be seen in the context of the split in the New Deal coalition in the early Cold War. On the left were the Progressives who rallied behind former vice president Henry Wallace in the 1948

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1946, in *Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois in Periodicals Edited by Others*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, vol. IV (Millwood, 1982), 14–16; W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Winds of Time," in *Newspaper Columns by W. E. B. Du Bois*, ed. Herbert Aptheker, vol. II (White Plains, 1986), 644–45; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century*, 508, 525.

<sup>26</sup> Du Bois to NAACP Board of Directors, memorandum, Sept. 1948, in *Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, III, ed. Aptheker, 243–45; White to Du Bois, Sept. 13, 1948, box 637, series A, part II, NAACP Records; White to the Committee on Administration, July 13, 1948, box 241, *ibid.*; Louis Wright to Du Bois, Sept. 13, 1948, in *Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, III, ed. Aptheker, 246. For more on the board meeting, see Roy Wilkins, memorandum for Walter White, Sept. 14, 1948, box 241, series A, part II, NAACP Records.

presidential elections, refused to accept the imperatives of the Cold War, continued their cooperation with American Communists, and demanded that the United States maintain its wartime alliance with the Soviet Union. In sharp contrast, the Cold War liberals of the Truman administration insisted on a break with the radical Left as the domestic equivalent to their foreign policy of containing Soviet expansionism. At the same time, however, the Truman administration had come to realize that racism was a major blot on America's international reputation and that the federal government must actively combat it. Conveniently, the national interest dovetailed with Truman's electoral strategy for 1948, in which northern blacks played a key role. Determined to reach out to African Americans, Harry Truman agreed to address the NAACP annual conference—the first president to do so. His speech on that occasion in June 1947, at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., was broadcast nationwide by all major radio networks. In clear-cut words, the president acknowledged that the United States could not prevail in the ideological contest with Communism unless it addressed its racial problems. "Our case for democracy should be as strong as we can make it," Truman explained. "It should rest on practical evidence that we have been able to put our own house in order. . . . But we cannot, any longer, await the growth of a will to action in the slowest state or the most backward community. Our National Government must show the way."<sup>27</sup>

In December 1946 Truman had appointed the President's Committee on Civil Rights, responding to the wave of racist violence that swept the South after the end of the war. The association strove to influence the work of the committee by submitting demands and information. The NAACP board member Channing Tobias was appointed a member of the committee, and Walter White and Thurgood Marshall, both association officials, appeared as witnesses. The committee report, entitled *To Secure These Rights*, was released in late October 1947, shortly after the NAACP presented its petition to the United Nations. It proposed comprehensive institutional and legal measures to strengthen the protection of civil rights, including the establishment of a permanent commission on civil rights, a federal antilynching law, and the repeal of the poll tax. Most important, it called racial segregation "inconsistent with the fundamental equalitarianism of the American way of life." Segregation in the armed forces was to be abolished right away, and a permanent fair employment practices act would combat discrimination by private businesses.<sup>28</sup>

The propositions made in *To Secure These Rights* corresponded closely to the NAACP's own program. Although the report represented only the recommendations of a blue-ribbon commission, Walter White praised it as "the most forthright governmental pronouncement of a practical program for assurance of civil rights not only to minorities but to all Americans which has yet been drafted." Truman himself hailed it as "an American charter of human freedom." Yet the president made no specific commitment as to how and when his administration would attempt to implement that charter. Nevertheless, the

<sup>27</sup> *The Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1947* (Washington, 1963), 311–13, esp. 312; White, *Man Called White*, 347–48. On the growing international criticism of racial discrimination and violence in the United States, see Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights*, 18–46.

<sup>28</sup> See the correspondence between the NAACP and the committee in *President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights*, ed. William E. Juhake (microfilm, 10 reels, University Publications of America, Bethesda, 1984), reel 4, frames 186–247, esp. Robert Carter to White, March 12, 1947; White to Harry S. Truman, April 21, 1947; Robert Carr to White, April 10, 22, 1947. See also the documentation in box 481, series A, part II, NAACP Records. Charles E. Wilson et al., *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights* (Washington, 1947), 151–73, esp. 166 and 173.

release of *To Secure These Rights* and Truman's favorable reaction put civil rights squarely on the American agenda. According to his biographer David L. Lewis, Du Bois was "heart sick" that the report had stolen the thunder from his own *An Appeal to the World*. With Truman explicitly acknowledging that American national interest required an end to racial discrimination, it is easy to understand why the NAACP had no intention of confronting the administration over foreign policy issues.<sup>29</sup>

Although the NAACP leaders had long distrusted Truman and championed former vice president Henry Wallace as the most principled antiracist among the Democrats, they strongly supported the incumbent in the 1948 presidential elections, even as they reaffirmed the NAACP's traditional nonpartisanship. After Wallace declared his candidacy in late 1947, White, Wilkins, and Gloster Current, the director of branches, made every effort to silence whatever support Wallace might enjoy among NAACP staffers and members. To discredit the candidate's antiracist credentials, White actively solicited information that Wallace had tolerated racial discrimination while serving in the federal government. In February 1948 an editorial in the *Crisis* reminded its readers that Wallace had not always been the "shining knight doing battle against prejudice and inequality." At the association's annual convention in June, White attacked Wallace for not having done enough against segregation, whereas Truman received praise for his civil rights policy. White also shunned the Progressive convention and merely sent his assistant, who declared that the party had not yet demonstrated "the sincerity of its pronouncements."<sup>30</sup>

Du Bois, however, made no secret of his support for the Progressive candidate. In a January 1948 column in the *Chicago Defender*, he had called Wallace "the one man alone, who is worthy of leadership and of support." Although he had no chance of winning, blacks should vote for him to express their protest, "even if our protests put a reactionary Republican in the White House or a Southern-supported Democrat."<sup>31</sup> To his credit, Du Bois's endorsement of Wallace was not different from Walter White's support for Truman, and he tried his best to draw a clear line between his views as an individual and his position as an NAACP official. All the same, his old nemesis was determined to exploit the issue to settle their rivalry for good. In the spring and summer of 1948, White repeatedly prevailed on the board of directors to reproach Du Bois for violating the NAACP rule that prohibited employed officers from endorsing candidates or party programs and from speaking at party meetings. Understandably, Du Bois was "bewildered" by what he saw as an attempt to silence him. If he had known that his "usual freedom of expression was to be curtailed," Du Bois complained to NAACP president Arthur Spingarn, he would not have returned to the NAACP. Undaunted, he ignored the board and continued his support for Wallace. The clash over the preparations for the United Nations meeting in September 1948 was merely the final episode in this controversy. By refusing to cooperate with Walter White and by maintaining a defiant demeanor in front of the board of

<sup>29</sup> White to Truman, Oct. 28, 1947, box 481, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Harry S. Truman, statement, Oct. 29, 1947, in *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Harry S. Truman, 1947*, 479–80; Lewis, *W. E. B. Du Bois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century*, 529.

<sup>30</sup> Current to White, Feb. 24, 1948, box 665, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Wilkins to Lewis Booth, April 23, 1948, *ibid.*; Miles Williamson to Wilkins, May 12, 1948, *ibid.*; Leslie Perry to White, March 2, 1948, *ibid.*; Clarence Mitchell to White, March 2, 1948, *ibid.*; Will Alexander to White, May 27, 1948, *ibid.*; Joseph Lohman to White, June 18, 1948, *ibid.*; "Candidate Wallace," *Crisis*, 55 (Feb. 1948), 40; NAACP, press release, July 22, 1948, box 665, series A, part II, NAACP Records.

<sup>31</sup> Du Bois, "Winds of Time," 753–54; Du Bois to NAACP Board of Directors, March 8, 1948, box 241, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Aptheker, ed., *Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, III, 238–39.

directors, where he still enjoyed considerable support, Du Bois helped make the break inevitable.<sup>32</sup>

Despite lame assertions "that no political questions whatsoever entered into the action of the Board on Dr. Du Bois," it was patently clear that an unbridgeable political gap had led to Du Bois's dismissal. Given Du Bois's great prestige, it is not surprising that his dismissal evoked sharp protests from both the association's members and the public at large. The Left, in particular, reacted with angry protests. In dramatic hyperbole, Henry Wallace called the firing of Du Bois "a tragic example of how American fascism is creeping into all facets of our life."<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, there was also harsh criticism from the Right. In the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the black journalist George Schuyler, a convert from socialism to conservatism and a former member of the NAACP public relations department, wrote a caustic comment on Walter White's subservience to the Truman administration. NAACP members with Republican affiliations protested against the continued support by the secretary and other staff members for Truman and demanded an investigation by the board of directors. In response, the NAACP committee on administration came up with a weak defense of White, arguing that his recent pro-Truman articles "were his own evaluations and did not represent the views of the Association"—exactly the position Du Bois had claimed for himself.<sup>34</sup>

The NAACP leadership was undeniably applying a double standard that could hardly conceal an alliance with the Truman administration. It was *Realpolitik* pure and simple. Truman was the first president to run on a strong civil rights platform. If he lost, it would be a disastrous setback for the black cause. Voting for Wallace, wrote the NAACP's director of public relations, Henry Lee Moon, "would only be a gesture of protest and despair." On election day, it seemed that most black voters agreed. According to Moon's estimates, about 70 percent of black voters had voted for Truman and not more than 10 percent for Wallace. Solid backing from black voters allowed Truman to carry California, Illinois, and Ohio; without them, he very likely would have lost the election. Cheerfully, Walter White congratulated the president on his "mandate" to carry out his civil rights program. But with the hardening of the Cold War and especially with the beginning of the Korean War in June 1950, civil rights again took a backseat.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> See White to Committee on Administration, Jan. 24, 1948, box 241, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Du Bois to NAACP Board of Directors, March 8, 1948, *ibid.*; White to Arthur Spingarn, March 12, 1948, *ibid.*; White to Du Bois, March 29, 1948, *ibid.*; Du Bois to Arthur Spingarn, April 2, 1948, *ibid.*; Wright to Du Bois, May 28, 1948, *ibid.*; excerpts from Du Bois's speech at a meeting of the Philadelphia NAACP branch, June 16, 1948, *ibid.*; White to Du Bois, July 9, 1948, *ibid.*; Du Bois to White, July 9, 1948, *ibid.*; White to Committee on Administration, July 12, 1948, *ibid.*; and White to Arthur Spingarn, July 28, 1948, *ibid.* On Du Bois's appearance before the board, see Wilkins to White, Sept. 14, 1948, *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> NAACP, press release, Sept. 16, 1948, *ibid.*; Wilkins to branch officers, Sept. 15, 1948, *ibid.*; "The Du Bois Incident: A Chronology," *NAACP Bulletin*, 7 (Oct. 1948), box 240, *ibid.*; Wilkins to president of the Pasadena, California, NAACP branch, Oct. 19, 1948, *ibid.* See also the numerous letters and resolutions by branches and individuals, *ibid.* "Henry Wallace, Paul Robeson Condemn Dismissal of Dr. W. E. B. Du Bois by NAACP," *Shreveport News*, Oct. 2, 1948, clipping, *ibid.*; "Wallaceites Claim Dr. Du Bois Crucified," *Los Angeles Tribune*, Sept. 25, 1948, clipping, *ibid.*; "As We See It," *Daily Worker*, Sept. 13, 1948, clipping, *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> George Schuyler, "Views and Reviews," *Pittsburgh Courier*, Oct. 9, 1948, clipping, box 240, *ibid.*; Val. J. Washington, Republican National Committee, to Louis Wright, Sept. 27, 1948, box 241, *ibid.*; Louis Wright to Committee on Administration, Oct. 1, 1948, *ibid.*; Resolutions of the Committee on Administration, Oct. 5, 1948, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Henry Lee Moon, *Balance of Power: The Negro Vote* (1948; Westport, 1977), 205; "Survey of the Negro Vote in the 1948 Presidential Elections," box 452, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Henry Lee Moon, "What Chance for Civil Rights," *Crisis*, 56 (Feb. 1949), 42–45; Henry Lee Moon, memorandum for Walter White, Nov. 19, 1948, box 633, series A, part II, NAACP Records; White to Truman, Nov. 3, 1948, *ibid.*; NAACP, press release, Nov. 4, 1948, *ibid.*; NAACP, press release, Jan. 6, 1949, *ibid.*

## The Anticommunist Hysteria

The NAACP sided with Cold War liberalism not only because it hoped for gains on the civil rights front but also because it sought cover from the mounting pressures of the red scare that threatened to wreck both civil liberties and civil rights in America. From 1946 on, the association was haunted by allegations of Communist infiltration. In a feature on the American Communist party published by *Life* magazine in July 1946, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. spoke of attempts by the CPUSA to "sink its tentacles into the NAACP." Walter White immediately demanded a clarification from Schlesinger, who explained that he had only tried to pinpoint impending dangers and did not question the association's opposition to Communism. Still, NAACP leaders became increasingly nervous. In a letter of April 1947 to the chairman of the American Newspaper Guild, assistant secretary Roy Wilkins freely admitted, "Like many another organization on the liberal front we are being sniped at in the current hysteria over the Communists. . . . Perhaps we are more jittery than we ought to be, but it is natural that we would become alarmed lest many projects we have underway should be endangered by the old cry of 'Communism.'"<sup>36</sup>

Wilkins's worries were hardly unfounded. Government publications had begun to express suspicions of Communist infiltration in the NAACP, and the question of membership in the association was raised by "loyalty boards" scrutinizing civilian and military personnel.<sup>37</sup> The NAACP sharply protested, but during the heyday of the red scare in the late forties and early fifties, the association's leaders felt compelled constantly to show off its anticommunist credentials. Even NAACP activists who had been murdered by racists were eulogized as fighters against Communism. The national office carefully watched over all contacts that members might entertain with Communists. In one case Walter White personally intervened with the U.S. attorney general to clarify that a branch president who had signed the 1951 Stockholm Peace Appeal for nuclear disarmament had not known of the petition's Communist background.<sup>38</sup>

At the same time, the association insisted that the Communist peril was first and foremost the result of the wrongs and grievances in American society. Conservatives who blocked the necessary reforms did more damage to American democracy than "all communists and their fellow-travelers in the world." The NAACP demanded that racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan should also be classified as subversive and that government employees associated with them should be subjected to loyalty hearings. Its most important goal, however, was to prevent the struggle for black civil rights from becoming publicly identified with Communism. During the infamous Hollywood hearings of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) in 1947, the NAACP warned against the red-baiting of film artists who had portrayed black characters with fairness and empathy.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "The U.S. Communist Party," *Life*, July 29, 1946, pp. 84–96; White to Henry Luce, July 29, 1946, box 201, series A, part II, NAACP Records; John Billings to White, Aug. 7, 1946, *ibid.*; White to Billings, Aug. 16, 1946, *ibid.*; White to Editor, *Life*, Sept. 2, 1946, p. 7; Arthur Schlesinger Jr., reply, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Milton Murray, April 2, 1947, box 201, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Murray to Wilkins, April 13, 1947, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Murray, April 30, 1947, *ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> See White's protest against a red-baiting statement by Gov. Kim Sigler of Michigan, NAACP, press release, April 4, 1947, box 201, series A, part II, NAACP Records; White to Secretary of the Navy James V. Forrestal, July 1, 1947, *ibid.*; Commodore Glass to White, Aug. 13, 1947, *ibid.*; White to Forrestal, Aug. 20, 1947, *ibid.*; Mitchell to White, Jan. 12, 1948, *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> See White's statement on the martyred Florida NAACP leader Harry T. Moore, Oct. 2, 1952, box 202, *ibid.*; White to Attorney General Howard McGrath, May 9, 1951, *ibid.*; and McGrath to White, May 15, 1951, *ibid.*

In 1950 the NAACP Washington lobbyist Clarence Mitchell firmly declared before HUAC: "We cannot overcome a real or imagined threat of foreign ideologies by the enactment of harsh legislation which will silence the voice of reform in our own country." When the HUAC in 1954 issued its report "The American Negro and the Communist Party," which attested to the loyalty and anticommunism of African Americans in general and the NAACP in particular, Channing Tobias, the chairman of the association's board of directors, was relieved that at last "the facts" had been acknowledged.<sup>39</sup>

In June 1950 the NAACP annual convention, held in Boston, resolved that the board of directors appoint a committee to investigate the extent of Communist infiltration in the local branches and, if necessary, to suspend the charter of branches that had come under Communist control. However, the resolution, passed by an overwhelming majority, did not give the go-ahead for a witch-hunt. On the contrary, in a detailed memorandum Walter White admonished the local chapters:

The resolution adopted at Boston does not give branches the right to call anybody and everybody a Communist. The resolution does not give branches the right to eliminate members just because those members disagree with the branch or its officers. . . . Because a man or a woman is a critic of the National Office or of the NAACP is not in itself reason under the Boston resolution for elimination. That criticism must be in line with Communist party philosophy, and must be consistent. It must be emphasized that under the Boston resolution, the branches themselves do not have the power to eliminate anyone. . . . DO NOT BECOME HYSTERICAL AND MAKE WILD ACCUSATIONS. We do not want a witch hunt in the NAACP, but we want to be sure that we, and not the communists are running it.<sup>40</sup>

Pursuant to the Boston resolutions, the local branches were obliged to report all attempts at Communist infiltration to the national office. Those reports were referred to a newly formed "committee on political domination." In addition, the board of directors established a formal procedure for the exclusion or rejection of members. Only NAACP members or officers could bring charges, and all cases were to be heard by the executive committee of the branch, with the "accused parties" having a right to present any testimony they desired. Expulsions or rejections had to be ratified by the branch as a whole, and all persons who were denied membership could appeal to the board of directors. As of late 1952, the committee on political domination had considered only a single case, while several denials of membership were pending.<sup>41</sup>

Indeed, the NAACP records do not produce evidence of either massive Communist infiltration or anticommunist purges. Although the national office had complained about attempts by the Communists "to capture control of NAACP branches and youth councils" since 1946 and had insisted that the branches seek the advice of the New York office be-

<sup>39</sup> See the column: Walter White, "A Real Program to Combat Communism," Jan. 2, 1947, box 201, *ibid.*; White to U.S. Attorney General Tom Clark, April 14, 1947, *ibid.*; NAACP, press release, Oct. 16, 1947, *ibid.*; Clarence Mitchell, statement, May 3, 1950, quoted in "Information from the Files of the U.S. Committee on Un-American Activities," box 202, *ibid.*; House Committee on Un-American Activities, "The Negro and the Communist Party," Dec. 22, 1954, *ibid.*; and Channing Tobias to Mitchell, Jan. 11, 1955, *ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Resolutions of the NAACP annual conference, June 23, 1950, box 26, Spingarn Papers; NAACP, press release, June 23, 1950, box 201, series A, part II, NAACP Papers; Walter White, memorandum, Aug. 29, 1950, box 369, *ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> White to the NAACP branches, Jan. 15, 1951, box 68, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Resolutions of the NAACP Annual Convention, June 30, 1951, *ibid.*; minutes of the meetings of the NAACP Board of Directors, Jan. 2 and Sept. 12, 1951, box 135, *ibid.* See also "Procedure for Rejection or Expulsion of Membership NAACP" [1952], box 26, Spingarn Papers; Current to Thurgood Marshall, Nov. 7, 1952, box 128, series A, part II, NAACP Records.

fore cooperating with any other national or local group, the NAACP leadership considered Communist influence among its membership a minor problem. Of roughly 1,500 local units nationwide, there were no more than 10 to 12 cases that the national secretariat treated as serious. All those cases involved branches and student groups in the North or on the West Coast, while the all-black branches in the South remained completely unaffected.<sup>42</sup>

There was considerable confusion among both NAACP leaders and members over what constituted infiltration. In late 1947, board member Alfred Baker Lewis noted that it made little sense to crack down on branches for adopting resolutions along the Communist party line, often critical of U.S. foreign policy, unless the national office and the board of directors first launched an educational campaign. The most important objective was to avoid political embarrassment by independent action of local units. No branch could take a position on national or foreign affairs, Gloster Current reminded the branch officers in late 1948, unless the matter had been decided by the NAACP's annual conference. No branch could send money or delegates to any organization or meeting without the approval of the national office.<sup>43</sup> Nonetheless, the association's leadership did not establish tight supervision over its chapters. Even branches that were suspected of having been infiltrated by Communists were treated with remarkable indulgence and regard for due process, as those cases bear out for which a substantial archival record is available.

The Richmond, California, NAACP had been under Communist influence since 1945, according to the association's regional secretary for the West Coast. After the promulgation of the Truman Doctrine in March 1947, the branch passed a fiery resolution against U.S. support for the British intervention in Greece. At the end of the same year, the group was shaken by clashes over alleged attempts by Communists to manipulate the election of branch officers. The national office, however, did not see any violation of the association's standard electoral procedures and dismissed the protests by the defeated anticommunists. When in early 1949 local black businessmen and church representatives complained about the Communist domination of the group and demanded the suspension of its charter, the national office refused to go along. "Individual political beliefs," Roy Wilkins stated, were no reason for exclusion.<sup>44</sup>

The San Francisco branch was also considered a Communist stronghold. In 1946 it endorsed the Communist candidate for governor of California in clear violation of the NAACP policy of nonpartisanship, but the national office merely insisted that the endorsement be withdrawn immediately. Although the group kept on ignoring the association's guidelines on political pronouncements and serious financial irregularities occurred, no action was taken. Even the distribution of a Communist newspaper at a branch meeting was grudgingly tolerated, because no formal ban existed. However, with complaints from

<sup>42</sup> See "Draft of Letter on Branch Policy" [1946], box 201, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Ruby Hurley to White, memorandum, Jan. 7, 1947, *ibid.*; NAACP, press release, March 3, 1949, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Wilson Record, Dec. 21, 1949, box 202, *ibid.*; White to Morris Ernst, Jan. 3, 1947, box 28, Spingarn Papers; and White, *Man Called White*, 346.

<sup>43</sup> See Minutes of the Committee on Administration, Feb. 24, 1947, box 127, series A, part II, NAACP Records; minutes of the meeting of the Board of Directors, June 9, 1947, box 135, *ibid.*; Alfred Baker Lewis to White, Nov. 19, 1947, box 201, *ibid.*; and Current to NAACP branch officers, Dec. 10, 1948, box 369, *ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> On the Richmond, California, branch, see box 18, series C, *ibid.*, esp. resolution on Greece, April 1947; Noah Griffin to Wilkins, Aug. 7, 1947, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Current, Nov. 19, Dec. 9, 1947, *ibid.*; Bernard Evans et al. to Current, Dec. 18, 1947, *ibid.*; Current to Noah Griffin, Dec. 19, 1947, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Current, Dec. 22, 1947, *ibid.*; "The People of Richmond, California," to the Board of Directors, Feb. 28, 1949, *ibid.*; and Wilkins to I. C. Mickins, July 16, 1949, *ibid.*



branch members mounting and a precipitous decline in membership from 3,000 in 1947 to 400 in 1949, the national office finally felt compelled to act. In the branch elections of late 1949, the regional secretary successfully mobilized the members to elect a new anti-communist branch leadership. Charges of fraud from the defeated faction were dismissed by the board of directors. When an active member of the CPUSA was elected to a leadership position a year later, the board, citing the Boston resolutions, simply nullified the vote and ordered a new one. At last, the San Francisco group had been brought in line with the NAACP's anticommunist stand.<sup>45</sup>

In the Great Neck, Long Island, NAACP branch a new leadership was voted into office in late 1949, after the group had been allegedly dominated by Communists for the previous two years. Charges of manipulation were raised by the ousted president and his followers, but they were rejected after a careful examination by the board. This did not end factional strife in the branch, but it was impossible to distinguish political from personal motives. The national secretariat tried to mediate between the rival groups and even persuaded the new president to withdraw a lawsuit she had brought against her antagonists for allegedly threatening her life. Two years later, when she again tried to have her opponents excluded for repeatedly disrupting branch meetings, the board invalidated her action, although the dissidents belonged the pro-Communist American Labor Party.<sup>46</sup>

In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, there were rumors in early 1949 that the local NAACP branch had been placed on the official list of "subversive" organizations due to its Communist leanings. However, Walter White refused to inquire with the Department of Justice, lest that arouse the government's suspicion. Apparently, the rumors were not entirely unfounded; the following year a special committee appointed by the branch president conceded that the local labor unions refused to cooperate with the branch because of its reputation as being under Communist party domination. Moreover, the committee complained about a lack of "organizational democracy" and gave a long list of administrative shortcomings and financial troubles in the branch. The national office eagerly seized the opportunity for a reorganization of the group and proposed to appoint an administrator who would run the branch affairs for up to six months. Eventually, the executive committee of the Philadelphia branch itself agreed to this drastic step, which, however, was prompted by the group's bleak financial situation rather than by Communist infiltration.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>45</sup> On the San Francisco branch, see box 20, *ibid.*, esp. Ella Baker to Elizabeth Williams, June 21, 1946; Noah Griffin to White, Sept. 20, 1946, *ibid.*; White to Noah Griffin, Sept. 20, 1946, *ibid.*; Madison Jones to White, Sept. 21, 1946, *ibid.*; Margery Pogue to Joseph James, Oct. 2, 1946, *ibid.*; James to White, Oct. 19, 1946, *ibid.*; Current to White, Nov. 26, 1946, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Lucille Black, Feb. 18, 1947, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Noah Griffin, April 14, 1947, *ibid.*; Anthony Hart and Ethel Nance to Wilkins, May 14, 1947, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Nance, May 28, 1947, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Wilkins, July 14, 1947, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Noah Griffin, July 21, 1947, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Carlton Goodlet, July 25, 1947, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Wilkins, July 28, 1947, *ibid.*; Current to White, Feb. 18, 1948, *ibid.*; Teresa Griffin to Wilkins, Jan. 21, 1949, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Wilkins, April 21, Nov. 21, Nov. 23, 1949, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Current, Dec. 23, 1949, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Cecil Poole, Dec. 30, 1949, March 22, 1950, *ibid.*; White to Poole, Dec. 12, 1950, *ibid.*; and Frank Williams to Current, Feb. 19, 1951, *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> On the Great Neck branch, see box 120, *ibid.*, esp. Wilkins to Anne Aldrich, Nov. 29, 1949; Aldrich to Wilkins, Dec. 6, 1949, *ibid.*; Current to Aldrich, Dec. 13, 1949, *ibid.*; Constance Baker Motley to Current, Dec. 22, 1949, *ibid.*; Current to Aldrich, Feb. 24, 1950, *ibid.*; Current to William Cotter, April 14, 1950, *ibid.*; "Condensation of Great Neck Dispute" (1950), *ibid.*; resolutions of the Great Neck branch, Nov. 2, 1952, *ibid.*; and "Agenda for the Committee on Branches," Dec. 19, 1952, Feb. 4, March 26, 1953, *ibid.* See also the minutes of the board meetings, Dec. 8, 1952, Jan. 5, 1953, box 136, series A, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> On the Philadelphia branch, see box 169, series C, *ibid.*, esp. White to Wilkins et al., Feb. 4, 1949; report of the Special Committee, Philadelphia Branch, n.d., *ibid.*; Current to White et al., Oct. 5, 1950, *ibid.*; Special Committee, Philadelphia Branch, to the NAACP Board of Directors, Nov. 6, 1950, *ibid.*; minutes of the meeting of

The issue of Communist leanings also led to strife and disruption in several student chapters. The national office had reservations about granting a charter to the chapter that formed at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1949, and the group split into rival factions shortly after its founding. Yet it is difficult to separate ideological differences and personal animosity. Since the faction identified with the radical Left was soon voted out of office, the national secretariat was never forced to take action.<sup>48</sup> At Cornell University, the NAACP student chapter was also divided into a leftist wing and a group that supported the anticommunist line of the national office. Because the latter usually prevailed, there was no need for disciplinary measures against the chapter.<sup>49</sup> The NAACP branch at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, was torn by the same factionalism for several years until it came to the verge of disintegration. When an attempt at revival was made in late 1953, a member of the Labor Youth League, which the government classified as a "Communist front organization," was elected chairman of the group's program committee, prompting the national secretariat to press for his resignation.<sup>50</sup>

There is no question that the NAACP leadership kept a close eye on the activities of Communists or alleged Communists in the local branches and tried to check them with as little publicity as possible. Such action, however, did not even come close to a purge. Rather, the national officers tried to inject themselves as a moderating force into internal quarrels of local units that were often in dismal shape due to disorganization, financial troubles, and personal feuds. First and foremost, the national secretariat was concerned that the branches abide by NAACP resolutions, guidelines, and procedural rules. Those included the requirement that members who were accused of Communist affiliations receive a fair hearing, and in several cases the board of directors decided in their favor. NAACP leaders were not only trying to avoid unwelcome public attention. The fact that many of the alleged Communists in the NAACP were white also helps explain why the association's leadership proceeded cautiously. After many white delegates opposed the anti-communist resolutions at the 1950 Boston annual conference, white members came under a general suspicion of being Communists. Not eager to play up racial conflicts among its members, the NAACP conspicuously avoided the topic of race in connection with the issue of Communist infiltration.<sup>51</sup>

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the Committee on Branches, Nov. 10, 1950, *ibid.*; Current to Rev. E. T. Lewis, Nov. 15, 1950, *ibid.*; Current to Daniel E. Byrd, Nov. 16, 1950, *ibid.*; Current to Theodore Spaulding, Nov. 24, 1950, *ibid.*; and Current to Rev. E. T. Lewis, Jan. 3, 1951, box 170, *ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> On the Berkeley chapter, see box 69, series E, *ibid.*, esp. Noah Griffin to Black, April 1, 1949; Black to Noah Griffin, April 26, 1949, *ibid.*; Hurley to Caroline Southard, June 16, 1949, *ibid.*; "Berkeley California Chapter Situation," memorandum, n.d., *ibid.*; Robert I. Weil to James V. Clark, Oct. 17, 1949, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Hurley, Oct. 18, 27, 1949, *ibid.*; and James V. Clark to Hurley, Nov. 28, 1949, *ibid.* See also Wilkins to Noah Griffin, Jan. 5, 1950, box 70, *ibid.*; Noah Griffin to Current, March 28, 1950, *ibid.*; and minutes of the meeting of the Board of Directors, April 10, 1950, *ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> On the Cornell University chapter, see box 85, *ibid.*, esp. Hurley to James Gibbs, Sept. 21, 1950; Gibbs to Hurley, Sept. 24, 1950, March 14, 1951, *ibid.*; Hurley to Gibbs, March 21, 1951, *ibid.*; Gibbs to Hurley, April 8, 1951, *ibid.*; Current to Gibbs, April 9, 1951, *ibid.*; Janet Morand to Hurley, Nov. 5, 1951, *ibid.*; and Herbert Wright to Morand, Nov. 28, 1951, *ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> On the University of Wisconsin, Madison, chapter, see box 100, *ibid.*, esp. "Are Communists Harming the NAACP?," *NAACP Newsletter*, University of Wisconsin, Oct. 19, 1950; *NAACP Newsletter*, Dec. 4, 1950, *ibid.*; Hurley to Dick Weiner, Jan. 11, 1951, *ibid.*; Weiner to Hurley, Feb. 9, 1951, *ibid.*; Edith Davis to NAACP, Sept. 22, 1953, *ibid.*; Herbert Wright to Davis, Oct. 13, 1953, *ibid.*; Herbert Wright to Wilbur Halyard, Oct. 13, 1953, *ibid.*; Jacquelyn Johnson to Herbert Wright, Oct. 14, 1953, *ibid.*; and Herbert Wright to Johnson, Oct. 29, 1953, *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> See the newspaper clipping "Are Communists Taking Over the Galveston NAACP?," Aug. 2, 1947, box 201, series A, *ibid.*; Mitchell to White, June 28, 1950, box 329, series C, *ibid.*; and Nolan, *Communism versus the Negro*, 178-81.

The internal quarrels over Communism occurred when the association was rapidly losing members. Its numerical strength had reached its peak in 1946. The decline to roughly 350,000 members in 1948 could be considered a return to normalcy since the same development had taken place in the aftermath of World War I. By 1950, though, membership hit bottom at roughly 150,000 dues-paying members. There is no evidence, however, that the dramatic loss of members was in any way connected to the association's anti-communist policies. Rather, it can be attributed to the doubling of the annual fee from \$1 to \$2 in 1948, which cut NAACP membership in half within a year—a clear indication of the shaky economic basis of the civil rights struggle. Fortunately for the association, membership began to climb again and increased to 240,000 in 1953 before it reached more than half a million in the early 1960s. Nevertheless, in the late 1940s the NAACP had every reason not to jeopardize its organizational strength further by allowing itself to be publicly associated with Communism.<sup>52</sup>

While the NAACP treated the issue of Communists in its own ranks with discretion, it publicly distanced itself from all civil rights groups in which Communists participated either overtly or covertly. In particular, this policy applied to the Civil Rights Congress (CRC), a successor organization of the National Negro Congress and the International Labor Defense that both the Justice Department and HUAC had branded as a "Communist front."<sup>53</sup> To be sure, during the heyday of McCarthyism there were few organizations to the left of the American Legion and the Daughters of the American Revolution that were not denounced as Communist fronts at one time or another, but it cannot be overlooked that black and white Communists played a leading role in the CRC. The association refused to send any official representatives to the CRC's founding conference in Detroit in April 1946, although several NAACP branches sent delegates. The unofficial observer from the national office came away with the impression that the CRC was "dominated by the extreme left." Subsequently, the NAACP leadership concluded that the new group posed a political and organizational threat to the association and rejected all advances by the CRC. When in late 1949 the NAACP issued a call for a "Civil Rights Mobilization" in Washington, D.C., Roy Wilkins bluntly turned down the CRC's offer of "support" and "cooperation." In an open letter to William L. Patterson, the CRC's black executive secretary, Wilkins recalled the acrimonious attacks by the ILD on the association during the Scottsboro campaign and proclaimed that the NAACP had "no desire for that kind of cooperation, or that kind of 'unity.'"<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> On the membership development, see R. Williams to Current, memorandum, June 15, 1954, box 202, series A, part II, NAACP Records. The NAACP staff had expected to lose one-third of the members because of the fee hike. See Wilkins to Hubert Delaney, Nov. 17, 1949, box 26, Spingarn Papers. When the NAACP again doubled its dues in 1969, it experienced a similar loss of members. On the membership figures, see Gerald Rosenberg, *The Hollow Hope: Can Courts Bring about Social Change?* (Chicago, 1991), 154, table 4.4; and Martin N. Marger, "Social Movement Organizations and the Response to Environmental Change: The NAACP, 1960–1973," *Social Problems*, 32 (Oct. 1984), 16–31, 23, table 1.

<sup>53</sup> House Un-American Activities Committee, "The Negro and the Communist Party," Dec. 22, 1954, box 202, series A, part II, NAACP Records. See Gerald Horne, *Communist Front? The Civil Rights Congress, 1946–1956* (Rutherford, 1988). Horne's book, though well documented, is extremely biased in favor of the Civil Rights Congress and American Communists. The latter are invariably presented as heroic fighters for social justice, while anti-communism is dismissed as "one of the major scourges of modern times and a major impediment to social progress." *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>54</sup> Milton Kaufman to Hurley, March 29, 1946, box 369, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Marshall to Kaufman, April 23, 1946, *ibid.*; Wilkins to White, May 7, 1946, *ibid.*; Wilkins to Byrd, May 25, 1946, *ibid.*; NAACP, press release (Wilkins's letter), Nov. 23, 1949, *ibid.*; Marshall to William Patterson, June 9, Nov. 22, 1950, *ibid.*; White to Patterson, Nov. 9, 1951, *ibid.*; Patterson to White, Nov. 10, 1951, *ibid.* On the Civil Rights Mobilization, see

Whether an alliance between the NAACP and the CRC would have been a viable political option is more than questionable. The historian Gerald Horne has retrospectively advocated the idea of a "center-left unity" between the "two civil rights giants," but he has little to sustain the proposition. For one thing, the CRC, by Horne's own account, had a peak membership of 10,000, which made it a rather little giant compared to the NAACP, with its several hundred thousand members. The CPUSA itself was torn by ideological strife and shaken by governmental repression, both of which sent the party into rapid decline after the end of World War II. According to Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director J. Edgar Hoover, hardly prone to belittle the dangers of Communism, party membership dropped from about 55,000 to roughly 43,000 in the years 1950–1951 alone. Communists were certainly not a grave threat to American national security but also not exactly attractive allies.<sup>55</sup>

In refusing to cooperate with Communists, NAACP representatives insisted that the Communists did not honestly care about the plight of African Americans but merely sought to exploit the race issue. The party was denounced as depending completely on political and ideological directives from Moscow and of sacrificing the interests of black people to the foreign policy concerns of the Soviet Union. To dismiss the antiracism of the CPUSA as mere tactics was less than fair, however. The party practiced racial egalitarianism more fully than any other majority-white group in American society. Yet there was a somber side to that as well. The campaigns against so-called white chauvinism that the CPUSA leadership waged in the late twenties and again in the late forties showed all of the unpleasant traits of sectarian rituals of self-purification and, indeed, aggravated race relations within the party. Moreover, the focus on black rights and the party's deliberate violation of interracial sexual taboos seem to have contributed to alienating white ethnic workers, its base. Even where Communists enjoyed some influence, interracial class solidarity clearly had its limits. Vice versa, the dogma that the class interests of black proletarians must enjoy precedence over their identity as members of an oppressed racial minority put narrow limits on the party's attractiveness to African Americans. According to a former activist, there were no more than 2,000 black party members after World War II.<sup>56</sup> While some historians have played down the CPUSA's subservience to the Soviet Union and tried to reconstruct it as a progressive grass-roots movement for social justice, the fact that the American Communists loyally followed the Kremlin's directives had crucial political consequences and cannot be dismissed as a figment of Cold War ideology. As the labor historian Robert Zieger has aptly put it: "Being a Communist in the 1930s and 1940s was not just being a liberal in a hurry. . . . To be a Communist or even to be a consistent ally or defender of Communists, was to link yourself to Stalinism."<sup>57</sup>

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articles that stress the anticommunist character of the gathering: Henry Lee Moon, "Mobilizing for Civil Rights," box 186, *ibid.*; and Roy Wilkins, untitled, *ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> See Horne, *Communist Front?*, 137–45, 204–5, 216–17, 223–24, and esp. 29 and 138. For J. Edgar Hoover's estimate, see *U.S. News and World Report*, June 23, 1950 and March 30, 1951, cited in Nolan, *Communism versus the Negro*, 206.

<sup>56</sup> See Roy Wilkins, "Stalin's Greatest Defeat," *American Magazine*, 152 (Dec. 1951), 21, 107–10; and Herbert Hill, "Communist Party: Enemy of Negro Equality," *Crisis*, 58 (June/July 1951), 365–71, 421–24. On the "white chauvinism" campaigns, see Hutchinson, *Blacks and Reds*, 60–68, 195, 223–33. See also Gerald Zahavi, "Passionate Commitments: Race, Sex, and Communism at Schenectady General Electric, 1932–1954," *Journal of American History*, 83 (Sept. 1996), 514–48.

<sup>57</sup> Zieger, *CIO*, 375–76. On the historiography of the Communist Party of the United States (CPUSA), see Kazin, "Agony and Romance of the American Left," esp. 1491–94, 1503–9. The dependency of the CPUSA on the Soviet Union is now broadly documented in Harvey Klehr, John Earl Haynes, and Kyrill M. Anderson, eds., *The Soviet*

Even if the postwar anticommunist hysteria had never occurred, there would have been sufficient reason for the NAACP to think twice before entering into political alliances with the Communist party. After all, the association had grown into the largest and strongest black civil rights organization with a solid base among the black working class. Why then should it align itself with a political force with which it had often clashed in the past, whose key ideological commitments it did not share, and that was widely viewed with suspicion? Finally, there is no evidence that the NAACP membership ever pressed for an alliance with the radical Left or even seriously questioned the leadership's liberal anticommunism.

Still, the early Cold War hardly represents a glorious chapter in the association's history. There is no question that the NAACP showed opportunism in steering its course through the red scare. Its rhetoric was replete with devout declarations of loyalty and patriotism.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the association kept a roaring silence on the violations of the civil rights and liberties of Communists. When the leaders of the CPUSA, including two African Americans, were sent to jail solely because of their adherence to the Communist ideology, Roy Wilkins barred all NAACP units from actions of solidarity, even though the association's legal experts considered the sentence unconstitutional.<sup>59</sup> As long as the anticommunist crusade did not specifically target black civil rights, the NAACP preferred not to go on record. In 1952 it declined to join the Americans for Democratic Action, a spearhead of liberal anticommunism, in a public condemnation of Joe McCarthy, because the senator's attitude toward blacks was not openly negative. Only after McCarthy's influence had begun to dwindle did the NAACP speak out against McCarthyism, while anticommunist proclamations remained standard features of its rhetoric long after the demagogue's fall.<sup>60</sup>

Nonetheless, the association never became "the left wing of McCarthyism." It did not conduct witch-hunts or purges within its own ranks nor did it deliberately fan the anti-communist hysteria. Although the confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union offered some opportunity to take the U.S. government to task on protecting democracy at home, the NAACP considered the Cold War and its domestic repercussions a calamity that potentially threatened its very existence. As the historian Adam Fairclough has put it succinctly: "During the McCarthy years survival became the name of the game; the NAACP survived."<sup>61</sup> Among other things, survival required that the association unequivocally distance itself from America's global antagonist, which implied a partial retreat from its anticolonial internationalism, a position that had become closely associated with support for the Soviet Union.

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*World of American Communism* (New Haven, 1998).

<sup>58</sup> See Wilkins, "Stalin's Greatest Defeat"; Roy Wilkins, "Communists and Negroes," *ADA World*, 5 (Dec. 1951), 5. These articles and other sources of the same kind can be found in box 68, series A, part II, NAACP Records.

<sup>59</sup> See Wilkins to the NAACP branches, circular letter, Oct. 18, 1951, box 201, series A, part II, NAACP Records; the appeals for solidarity: Patterson to White, June 15, 1951, box 202, *ibid.*; Doxey Wilkerson to White, June 16, 1951, *ibid.*; and White to Current, Marshall, and Wilkins, June 19, 1951, *ibid.* However, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the 1940 Smith Act on which the convictions of the CPUSA leaders were based. *Dennis v. United States*, 341 U.S. 494 (1951).

<sup>60</sup> See Otto Spaeth to White, Oct. 20, 1952, box 414, series A, part II, NAACP Records; Henry Lee Moon, memorandum on the Americans for Democratic Action request, Oct. 22, 1952, *ibid.*; resolutions of the NAACP Annual Conference, June 23–28, 1953, box 26, Spingarn Papers; Alfred Baker Lewis to the NAACP Committee on Administration, April 26, 1954, box 415, *ibid.*; brochures and other material against "McCarthyism," *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915–1972* (Athens, Ga., 1995), xviii. See also Adam Fairclough, *Better Day Coming: Blacks and Equality, 1890–2000* (New York, 2001), 215–16.

In joining the camp of liberal anticommunism, the association did not have to betray its history and long-standing ideological commitments. In retrospective, its choices were good politics in the basic sense that they helped prevent the cause of civil rights from being discredited along with Communism. In exploiting the discourse of national interest, the NAACP saved its political legitimacy and laid the foundations for the achievements of later years. This is not to deny that the anticommunist hysteria retarded the struggle for racial justice and narrowed the political options of the civil rights movement.<sup>62</sup> It is highly doubtful, however, whether any viable alternative existed. The counterfactual proposition of a broad-based progressive center-Left alliance tends both to inflate the strength of the American Left and to identify the fate of the Left with the fate of the civil rights movement at large. Contrary to the gloomy picture painted by some historians, the most important social movement of twentieth-century America did not become a casualty of the Cold War and its concomitant anticommunist hysteria.

<sup>62</sup> Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes*, 395.

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