National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) (United States)

CHRIS PARKER

Barely a decade into the twentieth century, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was founded. Its principal charge, issued by the cadre of white reformers, in addition to W.E.B. Du Bois and Ida B. Wells-Barnett, was to secure for blacks the rights guaranteed them by the Constitution. More concretely, the organization was originally intended to help black Southerners overcome what Aldon Morris calls the "tripartite system of domination" in which whites subjected them to social, political, and economic oppression (Morris 1984). The NAACP did so in manifold ways, most of which rested upon appealing to federal authorities for legislative and legal redress.

From the outset, a principal organizational priority was the preservation of the lives of black Southerners whose welfare meant nothing to white supremacists. During what has come to be known as the "lynching era (1882–1930)," the lives of well over 4000 blacks were snatched by mobs of white Southerners (Tolnay & Beck 1995). In this context, one in which blacks were murdered with impunity, the NAACP lobbied Congress to make lynching a federal crime. James Weldon Johnson, the NAACP's first black chief executive, managed to persuade enough members of the House of Representatives to pass the Dyer Bill in 1922. Yet, like much progressive legislation that would eventually follow, Southern senators used the filibuster to kill it, claiming that the Dyer Bill ran afoul of states' rights (Sullivan 2009). However, in 1930, the NAACP successfully lobbied Congress to derail the appointment of Judge John Parker, a North Carolinian jurist who thought blacks unfit to vote.

Even so, federal courts furnished the NAACP with more impressive victories. In 1935, the NAACP installed Amherst-educated, and Harvard-trained attorney, Charles Hamilton Houston, as its special counsel. Houston crafted a legal strategy that put the NAACP on the offensive, representing a departure from the early days when white reformers and legal giants such as Moorfield Storey and Louis Marshall defended black clients pro bono. Systematically, Houston sought to leverage the law, to use it as a tool for the "social engineering" he thought would move blacks closer to full citizenship (McNeil 1983). Cases were selected on the basis of their potential for setting constitutional precedent (Meier & Bracy 1993).

The strategy worked. Thurgood Marshall, Houston's student at Howard University, led the effort that successfully defeated the all-white Democratic primary in Texas in 1944, moving black Southerners closer to political equality. Among other things, Marshall argued that barring blacks from voting was at variance with the 15th Amendment, the constitutional corrective guaranteeing the right to vote regardless of race. This was followed by the Brown decision, in 1954, in which Marshall and his team successfully argued that segregated schools, a practice consistent with the "separate but equal" doctrine that emerged from the Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), ultimately violated the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. At the very least, the Brown decision moved black Southerners closer to social equality by increasing their collective resolve to continue challenging white supremacy (McAdam 1999).

Ironically, the NAACP's victory in sweeping aside formal segregation unleashed forces that would all but cripple the organization in the South. With the rise of "massive

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resistance," a campaign to at least forestall desegregation if not end it (Bartley 1969), the South retaliated against the NAACP, forcing it to play defense as the 1950s played out. Among other measures, southern state legislatures dusted off old corporate tax and registration laws to force the NAACP out of business and force it to reveal the names of its members. While the NAACP refused to comply, its access to courts was suspended, and the organization was largely driven underground in the South, both of which caused membership to plummet (McMillen 1994; Jonas 2005; Sullivan 2009).

While its ability to press for litigation stalled, and its history of lobbying Congress long over, the NAACP managed to continue to contribute to the movement. It did so through its ability to help mobilize its membership for the direct action protests that took place throughout the South in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Along with the black church and black colleges, the NAACP was one of the institutional pillars on which insurgency would come to rest. Indeed, each possessed ready-made networks amenable to rapid mass mobilization (McAdam 1999). Moreover, in the absence of local branch leadership provided by Amzie Moore, Aaron Henry, and W.W. Law, to name but three, it is not clear that the movement would have been as successful (Carson 1981; Payne 1995; Brooks 2004).

Through the early 1960s, it is beyond dispute that the NAACP realized its founding charge: securing equality for black Southerners. They are far better off now than they would have been otherwise. Of course, blacks elsewhere benefited from the work of the NAACP through this period, including winning in *Shelley v. Kraemer* (1948), in which the court held that attempts to enforce restrictive housing covenants would run afoul of the Constitution. Yet, as the 1960s wore on and bled into the 1970s, America's oldest civil rights organization achieved fewer successes. The reasons for this are manifold.

Increasing resentment on the part of many whites, many of whom felt threatened by what they perceived as blacks' improving status, and frustrated with the disturbances of the late 1960s, made it difficult for the NAACP to retain its support among progressive donors (Jonas 2005). In the face of this increasing hostility, the NAACP found it difficult to work with other civil rights groups. Part of this is due to the fact that the more progressive movement organizations, including the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and, later, the Black Panther party, criticized the NAACP as too conservative when it rejected black power as necessarily antiwhite (Carson 1981). Further, it preferred to continue working within established institutional channels to ease the plight of blacks in the urban core, as other organizations continued to embrace protest as a means of redress. Moreover, the NAACP continued to aim for integration as a goal even as other social movement organizations began to move toward separatism as a tactical solution to the backlash (Lawson 2003). Further adding to its conservative image was the NAACP's refusal to join with CORE and SNCC to take a hard line against the war in Vietnam (Hall 2003). Finally, the NAACP's coziness with the Johnson administration further diluted its effectiveness by causing some to see it as successfully co-opted (Reed 1999). Ultimately, Nixon's capture of the presidency summarily severed the NAACP's access to the White House, spelling doom for the relatively conservative course it sought to chart, as the new administration worked to undermine all efforts for which the organization had fought; a pattern that continued in two of the next three administrations (Sitkoff 1981).

SEE ALSO: Civil rights movement (United States); Ethnic movements; Law and social movements; Social movement organization (SMO); Strategy; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) (United States).

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