The 75th Anniversary of the NAACP—A Long-time Symbol of Leadership

The NAACP's 75th Birthday

FROM its founding in February of 1909—just 75 years ago this month—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has been on the frontline of the struggle for the rights of the oppressed. The Association's first major victory came in the case of *Guinn v. United States,* in which the Supreme Court ruled that the grandfather clause, included in the Oklahoma Constitution by a 1910 amendment, violated the Fifteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The grandfather clause effectively barred Blacks from voting by requiring that either they or a lineal ancestor had to be eligible to vote prior to 1866 for them to vote in current elections.

The NAACP entered *Guinn* through an *amicus* brief. Moorfield Storey, a noted constitutional lawyer from Boston and first president of the NAACP, argued the case before the Supreme Court.

This involvement established the NAACP as much more than a mouthpiece for Blacks. For, by assuming the legal challenges that were required to gain the rights of full citizenship for Blacks, the NAACP demonstrated that no obstacles would be impenetrable to this assault against racial injustices. This determination was the message the founders conveyed in "The Call" that was issued on February 12, 1909, thus establishing the NAACP as a new vehicle for freedom.

The catalysts for the Lincoln Day Call were the race riots that broke out in Springfield, Illinois on August 14, 1908. It took 4,200 militiamen nearly two days to end the riots. By then, two persons had been lynched, six had been killed and more than 50 had been wounded. More than 2,000 Blacks fled the city while hundreds took refuge in militia camps. Springfield, after all, was the city where Abraham Lincoln had lived and was buried.

Benjamin L. Hooks, Executive Director of the NAACP, 1977-

The conflict that such a specter posed for human justice and respect for the lives of citizens was too much for Oswald Garrison Villard, grandson of William Lloyd Garrison, the abolitionist. Villard expressed his outrage in the *New York Evening Post,* of which he was president.

Meanwhile, William English Walling, another White liberal, expressed his outrage over the prevailing lawlessness in an article, "The Race War in the North," which appeared in *The Independent,* a sympathetic periodical. Walling, a wealthy White southerner, blamed the local press for inflaming the public against Blacks before the Springfield outbreak. He showed how one newspaper had linked crime with race, while it also suggested that the South knew how to deal with such situations. The prevailing weapon of intimidation was lynching.

Among the readers of Walling's article was Mary White Ovington, a White Unitarian social worker who was also a socialist and descendant of an abolitionist. She had been studying the social problems of Blacks and had attended the 1905 meeting that Dr. W.E.B. DuBois had convened with other Black scholars in Niagara Falls to discuss the race problem.

From preliminary discussions held in early 1909, Miss White, Walling, Dr. Henry Moscowitz, a social worker among New York immigrants, Villard and Charles Edward Russell, another sympathetic member of the Liberal Club in New York, decided to issue "The Lincoln Day Call." Joining this core group of Whites in this decision were the Rev. Alexander Walters, a bishop in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church and the Rev. William Henry Brooks, minister of St. Mark's Methodist Episcopal Church in New York.

The Call, signed by 60 prominent Blacks and Whites, focused on the problems of disfranchisement, the Jim Crow system and brutality against Blacks. The North was held equally responsible with the South for what was perceived to be an "assault upon democracy." To help remedy the racial division within the nation, the signers issued their call for a "national conference for the discussion of present evils, the voicing of protests, and the renewal of the struggle for civil and political liberty."

This National Negro Conference, as the initial meeting was called, was held at the Charity Organization Hall in New York on Monday and Tuesday, May 31 and June 1, 1909. The evening mass meetings were held at Cooper Union. DuBois, who was to serve as the sage of the Black liberation movement for more than a generation, observed then that the "Negro problem" was separated from other humanitarian movements. But the New York conference represented an "awakening" about this mistaken thinking.

This conference created a Committee of Forty on Permanent Organization, ordered the incorporation of a national committee for the Advancement of the Negro Race, and passed resolutions demanding equal civil and educational rights for Blacks. It also demanded the right to work for Blacks and protection against violence, murder and intimidation.

The following year, the organizers for-

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