

# The NAACP'S ROLE IN American Democracy - By Jessie P. Guzman

THE ROLE OF THE NAACP IN THE NEGRO'S PROGRESS

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Mr. Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, no story is more thrilling than that of the origin, the growth and the work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. On this occasion, NAACP Sunday, I can think of nothing more appropriate than that of going back a little and of reviewing something of the association's history.

I wonder how many of us know that the NAACP, which now has a membership of approximately 200,000 white and Negro members, did not begin as a democratic association? When that small group of 29 colored men representing 14 states, led by W. E. B. Du Bois met secretly at Fort Erie on July 9, 1905, on the Canadian side of the Niagara River and formed the "Niagara Movement," they had in mind only the problems of the Negro--they were concerned only with securing for Negroes the benefits of democracy. Whites could not become full-fledged members. They could only become associate members, because it was thought they were not then to be trusted.

Similarly, in 1908, when that still smaller group of whites composed of Mary White Ovington, ~~indefatigable~~ <sup>interesting</sup> welfare worker, Henry Mostovitz, also a social worker and William English Walling, a popular author from Kentucky, met at Walling's home in New York City, and formed the National Negro Committee, they did not have a democratic organization in mind. They had been moved by the Negro's tragic position in America, which had been revealed to them by the Springfield, Illinois riot, in which Negroes had been beaten and killed in the very home of the Great Emancipator, and nobody seemed particularly concerned. Their motive was a philanthropic one. From the National Negro Committee <sup>to</sup> ~~the~~ Negroes were excluded. It was formed only of white persons to help the Negro.



But in 1910, when it became evident that by working together the joint efforts of the two groups would be more fruitful, a new organization came into being, the NAACP, incorporated by 5 men under the laws of the State of New York. W. E. B. Du Bois, militant thinker, was the Negro member of the corporation. It was then that the organization took on its present democratic aspect.

Many of us remember the time when Negro newspapers were few and far between and recall with what anticipation The Crisis which stood for equal rights and equal opportunities for all regardless of race, color or previous condition of servitude was awaited by our parents, who wanted to know what W. E. B. Du Bois of the NAACP thought of an issue.

We would pay tribute today to all of that early group of men and women who worked untiringly to make this organization effective--Joel E. Spingarn, famous scholar; Jane Adams, social reformer; Arthur B. Spingarn, and Charles Studin, noted lawyers, never annoyed no matter how many times a day they were called for consultation on cases of injustice; Archibald H. Grimke, that famous Washington clergyman and fearless advocate of equality for all; Moorfield Story, Boston's great constitutional lawyer, and one of the most prominent members of the American Bar Association, who, before the organization was able to pay for such service, argued cases for it before the United States Supreme Court, and there was Oswald Garrison Villard, the grandson of William Lloyd Garrison; We would think of William H. Hastie, now Judge Hastie of the 3rd United States Circuit Court, former Chairman of the Legal Committee; and of the late Charles H. Houston, who literally worked himself into ill health for the cause of this association.

There are scores of others, white and colored, through all the years, over all the land who have given of their services at great



personal sacrifices in this work for democracy.

To name all of the persons important in the history of the NAACP is impossible, but we could not leave out that martyr, John R. Shillady, whose skillful organization ability brought order and system into the association's headquarters work during its early days; or how, in Austin, Texas, he was beaten almost into unconsciousness by politicians with whom he thought he could reason <sup>about the Negro's Condition</sup> as with reasonable men. He never did recover ~~from that experience~~ and died both mentally and physically from the shock of <sup>that</sup> his experience.

I could go on endlessly naming many persons, important in the NAACP's work--Robert W. Bagnall, William Pickens, James Weldon Johnson, Daisy Lampkin and of course the courageous Roy Wilkins and Walter White, all of whom kept before Negroes the ideal which they must attain if they are to count as a significant factor in this country's cultural life.

A very special place must be reserved for that recent martyr, Harry T. Moore, to whom Mr. Shaw has just so beautifully paid tribute today.

It is a most thrilling story--that of these workers for democracy. Our knowledge of it is not complete until we have read their autobiographies--telling in their own way the story of this organization.

Nor would I forget those unpublicized persons, some of whom we will never know--not even their names, who have rendered invaluable service to this cause. But their deeds will live on and on.

I like to think of that lone colored lawyer of Little Rock, Arkansas, Scipio Africanus Jones, who, unschooled in the law, had picked it up by reading and by working in the offices of white lawyers. For although he had never attended a law school, he had



acquired a skilled knowledge of the law which made him a formidable practitioner in any courtroom.

I like to remember the faith that those twelve Negro share-croppers, victim of the 1919 Elaine, Arkansas riot, had in ~~him~~ <sup>Scipio Jones</sup>. Imprisoned for no other reason than that of organizing to improve their economic status, they were repeatedly condemned to death. They were told, after much legal maneuvering, that they would surely die. Answered they: "Oh no, Scipio Jones won't let us die." And he didn't. Taking their cases to the Supreme Court, these men, all twelve of them, received justice and they were finally freed. I would pay tribute to those lowly colored people in the town of Helena, who took Scipio Jones into their homes during the week he was defending these men. Knowing it was unsafe for him to sleep at any one place more than one night, he had to steal, under the cover of darkness, unnoticed into a home selected at random for shelter. Those people let him in even though they did not know he was coming and when they knew too that they were opening themselves to danger by doing so.

Nor can one overlook that unnamed colored man who warned Walter White that his life was in danger in that same place and that he must get immediately out of town. On his way to the jail to interview the 12 men mentioned above, ~~he~~ <sup>Walter White</sup> had gone but one block from the railroad station when he heard the voice of a heavily built colored man say in a whisper as he passed him, "Mister, I've got something important to tell you--follow me. Following him into a clump of woods, out of sight, the man said: "I don't know what you are down here for, but I just heard them talking about you--and they say they are going to get you." Saving Walter White's life that day, this unknown man, ~~too~~ was as much a worker for democracy as all the ~~rest~~ <sup>others</sup>.



For if Walter White had stayed in that town a minute longer he would surely have been killed.

Just what has the NAACP as a democratic organization meant in the life of the Negro? First, it has unified the efforts, not only of Negroes themselves in their own behalf, but of all persons working with them for justice and democracy. Instead of scattered efforts, it has given direction to the Negroes' climb up the steep hill to free, and full, and complete citizenship, whether outlawing the Grandfather Clause as in its first case won before the United States Supreme Court in 1915; or in testing the validity of a city's segregation ordinance, as in its second case won before the United States Supreme Court in 1917.

It has caused others ignorant of the Negro's past and his real contributions to civilization to discontinue their belittling the race, which had the misfortune to fall as slaves into the hands of evil men, and thus attributed inferiority not to themselves for their inhumanity, but to those to whom they were inhumane.

It has caused some of our people themselves who uncritically accepted <sup>what</sup> was said and written about the <sup>man</sup>, to reject these unscientific views and to look with respect upon their past and to evaluate their achievements in the light of scientific fact.

The citizenship status that the Negro has attained today is largely the result of the work of the NAACP. For in 1909, when its work began, the times were most trying. Segregation laws and discrimination had just about excluded the Negro from the main stream of American civilization, and that before he even had an opportunity to participate fully in American life as a citizen. Public opinion crystallized into law made the situation more hopeless. He was out of politics, his schools were poor, and his housing worse. He lived



in the least improved sections of the city, partly because of his extreme poverty, the result of the lack of economic opportunities, but mainly because he was a Negro and thought to be an inferior being. His travel accommodations were ~~most~~ inferior. It was really a feat to secure a Pullman ticket and even after this was accomplished, one did not always reach one's destination unmolested. The Negro's apartness from American life was just about complete.

The supreme test of democracy comes in the local community where courageous men and women are willing, even as Harry T. Moore, Scipio Jones and others were to lay themselves open to personal danger for this and other just causes. Here in our own State there are courageous men and women who daily face the test of their faith in the democratic process, for who is more courageous and self-sacrificing than Mitchell or Gomillion or Beasley <sup>or Mrs. Johnson</sup> of Tuskegee; or Jackson, Shores and Patton of Birmingham; or De Hlove of Mobile or Nixon of Montgomery or Newman of Henry Co. and others in various parts of the State? I certainly would have to mention your own Mr. Thompson who is carrying on here in Roanoke. As in Alabama, so are they working in most of the states in the nation. <sup>P</sup> My friends, when on the local community level, Negro citizens actually take part in the administration of the school system, in the running of their government, and in the operation of all of the civic activities of city, county and State as well as of the national government, as their right, obligation and duty--then the democratic process can actually be said to be working. That day is not too far distant. It is coming. If one studies the gains that have been made by Negro citizens through the efforts of the NAACP and other organizations over the past ten years, the results are inevitable.



Let us note the gains in elementary and high school education. Here and there separate schools for whites and separate schools for Negroes are being eliminated and one school system instituted. In many places teachers salaries have been equalized or greatly increased. Millions of dollars, formerly denied Negro teachers are finding their way into our teachers pockets.

We have no figures on the number of new Negro schools built, or improved under the threat of law suits, but several states have equalization plans for their school system; whether they can actually carry them out under a segregated system or not, *is another question.*

We know that from 1,000 to 2,000 Negroes are attending classes in at least 20 white public institutions of higher education, located in 12 Southern States, along with white students. And that in 27 <sup>white</sup> private/educational institutions of higher learning, including theological seminaries, Negroes are admitted into classes on the same footing as whites.

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On the political scene, by knocking down many barriers in many places against ~~the~~ registration and voting more than 900,000 Negroes in eleven Southern States are now able to cast the ballot, where formerly this was almost impossible.

Not only this, but Negroes are running for local offices and are being elected to city councils, even in the South; as for example, in Fayetteville, Greensboro and Winston-Salem in North Carolina; as well as in Louisville, Nashville and Richmond. The battle is far from won, for the Negro has a potential of 9,500,000 votes in this country.

We certainly cannot forget the role played by Thurgood Marshall, the Association's present Special Counsel, when he went to Korea and there uncovered the injustices done Negro soldiers through prejudice and unfair court martials, thus causing harsh sentences to be commuted. Notable among such cases was that of Lieutenant Leon A. Gilbert whose death sentence was commuted to 20 years imprisonment and who ~~yet may~~ receive more commutation. Nor can we overlook the fact that more results are yet to be seen from the Association's fight against segregation in the public schools in southern civilian life <sup>and</sup> that on several army posts, namely, Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Fort Knox and Fort Campbell, Kentucky and at the Quantico, Virginia Marine Base, armed forces school children go to unsegregated schools and that in at least one of them a Negro teacher instructs white and Negro children. Its lobbyist in Washington certainly had influence in causing President Truman to refuse to sign a Federal Aid to education bill passed by Congress just before it adjourned October, 1951, which would have required racial segregation on Federal property in <sup>the</sup> 17 states that have segregation laws.

The forces of reaction are shrewd and clever. No tricks are left untried to prevent the onward march <sup>of</sup> democracy. The present political maneuvering is reminder enough of that. But justice is blind.



It sees neither white nor black, red or ~~brown~~<sup>yellow</sup> and it knows nothing (quote) about States Rights (end of quote).

Though full freedom of residence remains an unattained goal, no longer can racial restriction covenants barring Negroes and others from purchasing property in certain areas be enforced in the courts. In 1950, five separate cases were being fought to level ghetto walls in Detroit, New York City, Long Island, Schnectady, ~~New York~~ and Birmingham, ~~Alabama~~.

In recreation, barriers are falling fast. In recent years the NAACP time and time again has challenged prevailing restrictions which have limited Negroes in the use of such facilities or excluded them entirely.

Working with other organizations, notably the United Automobile Workers, CIO, the American Bowling Congress in 1950 removed its color bar. In Miami, Florida, Negroes, through the Miami Branch, were successful in their suit to gain unrestricted use of the city's municipally owned golf course. In Washington, D. C. at least 6 swimming pools are operating on a non-segregated basis.



These are but a few of the areas in which the NAACP is working to break down undemocratic practices. Violation of the Negroes Civil Rights is by no means confined to the South. The Negro's opportunity to enjoy peaceably the rights and privileges regarded as commonplace by other citizens is frequently curtailed in the North, <sup>in</sup> ~~the~~ ~~law not withstanding.~~ *spite of existing laws against it.*

The right to serve on juries, the right to be tried by his peers, these and many more rights have been gained for our people.

And while all barriers in transportation are yet to be eliminated, those most abominable of all segregation devices, the curtain and the screens on the dining cars have been abolished.

It is impossible for me to go into all of the test cases sponsored by the NAACP in breaking down one by one the barriers raised against Negroes or to give enough praise to the legal staff of the NAACP led by Thurgood Marshall, whose knowledge of constitutional law has won many cases before the United States Supreme Court, or to such brave and sacrificial men as Judge J. Waties Waring and others like him who are fighting to establish basic equality among all citizens of this country. We cannot express enough appreciation to those persons who have given themselves as guinea pigs in test cases--Ada ~~Lois~~ <sup>Fisher</sup> Sipuel, Heman Marion Sweatt, G. W. McLaurin, and Gene Mitchell Gray, who because he brought suit to enter the University of Tennessee has been deprived of the opportunity to make a living in Knoxville for himself and family.

Ladies and gentlemen, the NAACP of which we are a part has wrought well--it is up to us, you and me to further its work in our local branches. We often see in the southern press the statement, if "outsiders" would <sup>only</sup> let us alone, we would solve our own problems.



We are not "outsiders." Most of us were born right here in Alabama and Georgia and South Carolina and Virginia or some of the other Southern States. We are insiders and Southerners, born and bred in the South with forced excursions above the Mason and Dixon line for education, for recreation and a breath of comparatively free air.

But this is our home. It will be our children's home. Here our duty lies. To win more democracy for America, as I see it, is one of the Negro's jobs. I trust that when that task is done, we can say ~~with~~ *message of Howard University* with Kelly Miller.

"I see him who was once deemed stricken, smitten of God and afflicted, now entering with universal welcome into the patrimony of mankind, and I look calmly upon the centuries of blood and tears and travail of soul, — I SEE AND AM SATISFIED."

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