The Rise of the NAACP

NAACP Activist Enrolls a New Member

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Description:

In 1909, in response to the lynching of two African Americans in Springfield, Illinois, the year before, a group of blacks and sympathetic whites formed the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The new association drew members from several other groups, including the Niagara movement. The NAACP's goals included fighting racial discrimination and segregation on a national scale. One of the organization's most influential organizers was W. E. B. DuBois. This photograph shows an NAACP activist enrolling a new member.

The immediate event that led to the formation of the NAACP was the murderous race riot in Springfield, Illinois, in August 1908, which, as mentioned earlier, the radical journalist William English Walling had rushed down from Chicago to cover for the *Independent*. Walling reported that the rioters showed no remorse or shame for the barbaric bloodletting and property destruction that they had inflicted on blacks in Lincoln's hometown. He furthermore discovered a contagion of racism sweeping across the Midwest with whites of all classes conducting "permanent warfare with the negro race." Sounding like an old abolitionist, Walling warned the nation, "Either the spirit of Lincoln and Lovejoy [a martyred abolitionist] must be revived and we must come to treat the negro on a plane of absolute political and social equality or Vardaman and Tillman will soon have transferred the race war to the North." "What large and powerful body of citizens," Walling asked, was ready to come to the rescue of endangered blacks? By the time of the tragic event in Springfield, a small group of racially liberal progressives or "new abolitionists" had already begun to tune out Washington and listen to the voices of Du Bois and Trotter. One of the important new abolitionists was John

Milholland, a rich Republican businessman from New York. Once a supporter of Washington, Milholland broke with Tuskegee and founded the Constitution League in New York City in 1906. The intensely religious Milholland explained his motivation in his diary, "I feel that my time has come at last—to lead … this Crusade for the Negro's Political & Civil Rights … the Supreme Moral Issue of the Hour and this Republic." The Constitution League campaigned against disfranchisement, peonage, and mob violence and won the support of black activists such as Du Bois, Trotter, Archibald Grimké, Bishop Walters, and Mary Terrell. Milholland's league constituted an important link between white and black liberals and provided a base for the NAACP.

No one was more important for the formation and survival of the early NAACP than Mary White Ovington. A descendant of abolitionists, Ovington grew up in an affluent family in Brooklyn, New York, and attended Radcliffe College in the early 1890s. Ovington's interest in the race problem heightened when she heard Washington speak at the Social Reform Club in New York in 1903, but she was more impressed with Du Bois, whom she met the following year. Persuaded that Du Bois was on the right path, she covered the meeting of the Niagara Movement at Harper's Ferry as a journalist. In 1907, at Du Bois's invitation, she became the only white member of the Niagara group. The following year she moved into a black settlement house in New York City to study the conditions of its inhabitants, an experience that led to the publication of her muckraking book, *Half a Man: The Status of the Negro in New York* (1911). Although Ovington, like Walling, was a Socialist, she hid her political orientation so as not to endanger the cause of racial equality.

Ovington became obsessed with Walling's call to action at Springfield and committed herself to forming an effective organization to work for racial change. In the first week of 1909, Ovington met in New York City with Walling, Charles Russell, and Henry Moskowitz—all radical reformers like herself. They decided to enlist the influential journalist Oswald Garrison Villard to draft a call for a new civil rights organization, which they planned to release on the centenary of Lincoln's birth on February 12.

Ovington and her allies could not have picked a better person to sound the battle cry of racial reform. Villard, who described himself as "a young radical … ready to believe truths which shocked were sometimes called for," was the son of the railroad magnate Henry Villard and the grandson of the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. It

was his love of the unvarnished truth that had soured him on the meek and platitudinous rhetoric of Washington.

When the "Call" was indeed released on Lincoln's birthday, sixty-nine prestigious progressives had attached their names to it, including Jane Addams, Clarence Darrow, William Dean Howells, Lincoln Steffens, and William Hayes Ward. Powerfully worded, Villard's call asked what Lincoln would think if he miraculously returned to America in 1909 and found that blacks and whites could not mingle in a common market place, ride trains together, or watch a play in the same area of a theater. "This government cannot exist half slave and half free any better today than it could in 1861," Villard declared. He concluded with the following invitation, "We call upon all believers in democracy to join in a national conference for the discussion of present evils, the voicing of protests, and the renewal of the struggle for civil and political liberty."

Meeting from May 31 through June 1, 1909, some three hundred men and women—Booker T. Washington was not among them—gathered to establish what would become the NAACP. William Ward, the longtime supporter of civil rights and the editor of the *Independent,* said in the keynote address that it was time to proclaim the "absolute divergence of view between the ruling majority in the South" and northern reformers. Color-blind justice had long been extinguished in the South, he continued, and it was retreating rapidly in the North. On the last day of the meeting, the conference organizers nominated an interim governing body known as the Committee of Forty, which had the power to decide the administrative shape of the new organization and pick its board of directors.

Despite the enthusiasm at the interracial conference, the last day of meetings revealed signs of racial discord. Ida Wells-Barnett and Monroe Trotter argued heatedly with more-conservative whites about the strategy and goals of the organization. How, they asked, could there be "too much racial agitation"? Wells-Barnett and Trotter then complained that whites were trying to dominate the proceedings and set goals for blacks. More acrimony ensued when these two outspoken blacks were excluded from the Committee of Forty, with Du Bois's acquiescence. Villard, who still hoped the NAACP might work with Washington and his followers, omitted Wells-Barnett and Trotter from the all-important committee because he thought they spoke with "a nasty spirit" that would make cooperation with Tuskegee impossible.

Predictably, the Tuskegee Machine sprang into action and tried to nip the new agency in the bud. Though usually reluctant to attack white people, this time Washington used the power at his disposal to try to tarnish all the leaders of the NAACP. Washington's men particularly targeted the white women of the NAACP and planted slanderous articles full of sexual innuendo in the press about white women dining with black men at the Cosmopolitan Club and in private homes. The attractive Mary Ovington received so many obscene letters that she had to have male relatives screen her mail for her. Washington asked the businessman William Baldwin to get his wife to start a conservative organization in New York to compete with the NAACP, a request that helped lead to the formation of the National Urban League in 1911. Washington's ability to limit the flow of white money to the NAACP probably damaged the organization more than anything else, for lack of funds was a constant and pressing problem the organization faced in its early years.

Publicity posed another problem. Officials of the NAACP constantly complained that it could not get the mainstream press to publicize its activities. The *New York Times* gave only the barest mention of Villard's call in 1909, while Washington's attendance at the annual Lincoln Dinner in the Waldorf-Astoria made headlines. The nation's most prestigious newspaper described Washington as a man of "penetrating intelligence" and "lofty ideals." February 12, 1909, was also the one hundredth anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, and in close proximity to its praise of Washington, the *Times* lauded the theorist whose views had unwittingly facilitated the entrapment of Americans in a web of scientific racism.

Without doubt, the most brilliant act of the newborn NAACP was the selection of Du Bois as the Director of Publicity and Research in 1910. The only full-time black employee of the NAACP for many years, Du Bois was taking a chance on a job guaranteed him for only a year. He took the risk because he believed the NAACP offered a golden chance for blacks and whites to work together as equals. He also thought the agency would give him the opportunity to fulfill his self-avowed destiny as the leader of his race. In 1910 Du Bois finally stepped out of his "ivory tower of statistics and investigation" and became a full-time agitator for black equality. The black Brahmin had crossed the Rubicon.

Du Bois's great weapon for racial agitation was *The Crisis,* the official magazine of the NAACP. For more than twenty years the editor of *The Crisis* powerfully articulated

the aims of the civil rights organization. In a flamboyant style laced with vituperation and sarcasm, Du Bois condemned race prejudice, forced segregation, disfranchisement, lynching, and the denial of equal education and economic opportunity for blacks. His trademark was ennobled grievance. Du Bois asked God never to forgive him if "I ever weakly admit ... that wrong is not wrong, that insult is not insult, or that color discrimination is anything but an inhuman and damnable shame." In the first issues of *The Crisis,* Du Bois assaulted every racial taboo known to Americans, including social equality. He thundered that blacks who did not have the courage to demand social equality should keep a dignified silence. On the subject of lynching, he was at his fulminating best. When a black man was burned alive in 1911 before a large crowd in Coatesville, Pennsylvania, Du Bois described the atrocity with searing eloquence:

> The flames beat and curled against the moonlit sky. The church bells chimed. The scorched and crooked thing, self-wounded and chained to his cot, crawled to the edge of the ash with a stifled groan, but the brave and sturdy farmers pricked him back with the bloody pitchforks until the deed was done.
> Let the eagle scream!
> Civilization is again safe.

Du Bois encouraged blacks to resist such outrages, crying out, "If we must die, in God's name let us perish like men and not like bales of hay."

Nor did Du Bois spare African Americans from his barbs. He lambasted compromising black editors, preachers, and educators. He charged that the black press was anti-intellectual and often ungrammatical. In response to some of Du Bois's diatribes, Moorfield Storey, a noted white lawyer and the first president of the NAACP, complained to Villard that Du Bois must be deranged from his long subjection to racism. *The Crisis* nonetheless struck a chord in African Americans; and it prospered. In the first year the circulation of the magazine reached 10,000 a month, which by the end of the second year had climbed to 20,000. By 1919 *The Crisis* enjoyed a readership of 100,000 a month, about 80 percent of it being African American. By the time the United States entered World War I, *The Crisis* had helped forge an new measure of black pride and unity in the nation.

While *The Crisis* brought more unity and self-identity to blacks, it sorely divided officials at the NAACP. Du Bois was quickly at odds with Villard, the chairman of the board. Paternalistic and condescending toward assertive blacks, Villard objected strongly to Du Bois's vitriolic attacks on Washington and his blanket indictment of whites. He also insisted that the board of directors had ultimate power in

the NAACPand could censor *The Crisis*. Du Bois, on the other hand, considered the magazine his "soul-child" and treated it as a separate entity from the NAACP. He wanted a magazine with independence, personality, and focus, something no large board could create. Since *The Crisis* was self-supporting, Du Bois had bargaining power and knew in fact that he was indispensable, a reality that made him even less amenable to compromise.

Unfortunately, Du Bois had a tendency to assume that all whites were racists, and he was programmed to expect insults from them. To be sure, Du Bois had reason to believe that the condescending Villard had not been fully cleansed of racism, a view reinforced by the fact that the journalist's southern wife would not allow him to entertain blacks in their home. Even so, Du Bois was too quick to discern racism even in the most well-intentioned whites. Although Du Bois had warned blacks against undue race pride and blind hatred of all whites, he often lashed out angrily and judged all whites as debauched. He almost seemed to enjoy adversity with whites, as he apparently had back in Great Barrington, when he longed "to beat their stringy heads." During the Atlanta race riot, Du Bois sat on his porch with a newly purchased double-barreled shotgun and buckshot and anxiously awaited the arrival of white vigilantes. With some bravado, he recalled, "I would without hesitation have sprayed their guts over the grass." His poem about the riot, "A Litany at Atlanta," curtly lectured the Deity:

Sit no longer blind, Lord God, deaf to our prayer and dumb to our dumb suffering
Surely, Thou, too, art not white. O Lord, a pale, bloodless, heartless thing!

About mere white mortals, he later versisfied:

I hate them, Oh!
I hate them well,
I hate them Christ!
As I hate hell!
If I were God,
I'd sound their knell
This day!

Du Bois's race pride also grew year by year. In 1907 in "The Song of Smoke," Du Bois beat his light-skinned breast and chanted "I am the smoke king / I am black."

If not all black leaders exhibited Du Bois's intense suspicion of whites, they largely shared his romantic racialism and attraction to the black mystique—Washington and

Trotter were noted exceptions. African American leaders of all stripes simultaneously attacked white racism and celebrated the superior gifts of the black race. William Ferris wrote that blacks had "poetic imagination" and "a loveable nature, a spiritual earnestness and a musical genius." The Reverend Reverdy Ransom spoke of "the deep emotional nature" of blacks that made them innately religious. James Weldon Johnson characterized blacks as being "warmed by the poetic blood of Africa," giving them "extreme rhythm, color, warmth, abandon, and movement." To him, the black woman with "her rich coloring, her gaiety, her laughter and song" was more alluring than her "sallow, songless, lipless, hipless, tired-looking, tired moving white sister." Kelly Miller wrote, "The Negro possesses patience, meekness, [and] forgiveness and spirit which surpasses that yet manifested by other races." The belief in the saving grace of blackness led many blacks to the messianic conviction that African Americans had a mission to save America and the world from aggressive and grasping whites. Blacks understandably needed an escape valve for the steady diet of white racism that they were subjected to, but racial chauvinism was, like Washington's timid accommodation, a problematic way for black leaders to advance the cause of racial equality, especially in an interracial setting. In any case, Du Bois's racial chauvinism made it impossible for him to work harmoniously with Villard and many other whites of the NAACP.

Du Bois's suspicions about Villard's bigotry, however, constituted only a fraction of the rancor between the two men. For example, Villard had written an unfair and scathing review of Du Bois's 1909 biography of John Brown, just before he brought out his own biography of the martyred abolitionist. Furthermore, *The Crisis* was published in the offices of Villard's *New York Evening Post,* where the veteran journalist cast a critical eye on what he considered Du Bois's sloppy administrative practices. The friction grew so intense that Villard resigned from the NAACP in 1913 and threatened to take his rich white friends with him.

Fortunately, Du Bois found two whites at the NAACP whom he could admire and trust. Foremost was Joel Spingarn, who replaced Villard as chairman of the board. Spingarn was an affluent Jew and a Renaissance man. A professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, a poet, a horticulturalist, a soldier, and a pluralist like Du Bois, he did not seem to have a racist bone in his body. It was the NAACP's good luck that Spingarn lost his job at Columbia in 1911 over a dispute with the president of the university. At the age of thirty-six this talented man was free to devote much of his time

to the NAACP. Du Bois confided in his correspondence and autobiography that Spingarn had more influence on him than any other white man.
The other white person at the NAACP that Du Bois liked and trusted was Mary Ovington. Walter White called her the "Fighting Saint" of the movement. For more than thirty years Ovington devoted her life to the work of the NAACP. She sat on the first executive committee of the board and served without pay as acting chair and chair of the board from 1917 to 1932 and as treasurer from 1937 to 1941. Ovington and Spingarn generally defended Du Bois against attacks in board meetings, but privately they also criticized him for his obstinacy and for needlessly offending whites (actually, Du Bois argued with everyone, including blacks at the NAACP). As chairman, Spingarn, like Villard, explained to Du Bois that *The Crisis* could not be autonomous. In the end, Spingarn and Ovington worked out a fuzzy compromise with Du Bois and the board that designated *The Crisis* as the official organ of the NAACP but stated that its editorials would be considered the views of the editor alone. The board further elicited a promise from Du Bois that he would keep his editorials free from pettiness, insult, and vulgarity—a promise he only partially kept.

Although the NAACP grew and wielded increasing influence in the Progressive Era, it never became a mass movement. Top-heavy and ruled by a self-perpetuating board in New York, the NAACP had but 6,000 members and 50 branches in 1914. At the end of World War I, however, it had more than 90,000 members and 310 branches. The 1915 controversy over the cinematic bombshell, *The Birth of a Nation,* attracted new members as NAACP chapters demanded that the notoriously racist movie be banned. Even Booker T. Washington waged war against the film. Another factor boosting membership in the NAACP was the appointment of James Weldon Johnson as field organizer in 1916. A lawyer, novelist, poet, songwriter of Broadway hits, and a diplomat for the State Department, Johnson organized many new branches of the NAACP in the South and on the West Coast between 1916 and 1919. In 1920 he became the first black executive secretary of the NAACP.

The NAACP had some notable successes in its first decade. Its crusade against lynching persuaded many whites of the necessity of a federal antilynching bill. The Dyer antilynching bill pushed by the NAACP passed the House in the early 1920s but died in the Senate. The NAACP's investigation of lynching also led to the publication of the important document, *Thirty Years of Lynching, 1889–1918* (1919). *The Crisis* exposed the horror of the race riots that plagued the nation during and after the war. In 1917 Du

Bois and Johnson lead a silent march down Fifth Avenue to protest the race riot in East St. Louis, Illinois. With the help of Moorfield Storey, former president of the American Bar Association, the NAACP won victories before the Supreme Court in *Guinn* v. *United States* (1915) and *Buchanan* v. *Warley* (1917), which, respectively, outlawed the grandfather clause and statutes requiring residential segregation. As stated earlier, these victories were rather hollow and did not end the disfranchisement of blacks or urban segregation.

Meanwhile, as the NAACP rose in visibility and significance, the decline of Washington's influence, which had begun with his support of Roosevelt's high-handed discharge of black soldiers at Brownsville and his acceptance of the lily-white policies of Taft, fell to its low point under President Wilson. Washington lost his remaining political patronage when the Democrats captured the federal government in 1913. Wilson's segregation of the federal city and deteriorating race relations even pushed Washington to the left. After a visit to the capital in 1913, he confessed that he had never seen blacks "so discouraged and bitter." In an article of his published in the *New Republic* shortly after his death, Washington condemned segregation as "not only unnecessary, but, in most cases, unjust."

The death of Washington in 1915 ground to a halt the Tuskegee Machine and eased tensions between the Bookerites and the anti-Bookerites. In 1916 Du Bois proposed a meeting of reconciliation between the black factions, and Spingarn offered to host the conference at his magnificent estate in Amenia, New York. Invitations went out to radical and conservative black leaders, and to those in the middle. More than fifty African Americans attended the Amenia Conference in August, including James Weldon Johnson. Inviting Johnson was a masterstroke. No longer a member of the diplomatic corps, he emerged from the conference as the consensus choice as the NAACP's national organizer. Although Johnson had been closely tied to Booker Washington in the past, he was an easy-going, gracious man who had no trouble getting along with the irascible Du Bois. In any case, Johnson's views, like those of many other blacks, had been moving closer to that of Du Bois since Wilson's victory in 1912.

The placid, beautiful setting at Amenia seemed to have the right effect on the delegates. The conferees unanimously agreed on an agenda that stressed support for black suffrage, education of all kinds, and full rights under the Constitution. As a concession

to southern blacks, the agreement made allowances for those who had to temper their militancy in the Jim-Crow South. The Amenia Conference marked a shift in the position of black leaders toward Du Bois's position. As America mobilized to make the world safe for democracy, African Americans were more determined to make America safe and equal for blacks than at anytime since Reconstruction.

Premier civil rights group in the United States. It was founded in 1909 by a group of whites and African Americans in reaction to bloody rioting in Springfield, Illinois, during which eight blacks were killed and over 2,000 others were forced to flee the city. Many of the NAACP founders, including W. E. B. DuBois, had been involved in the Niagara movement, which is generally considered the precursor to the NAACP. Early leaders included James Weldon Johnson and Walter White, whose light skin color allowed him to pass for white in order to investigate lynchings and antiblack riots, including the Elaine, Arkansas, Incident in which at least 20 blacks were killed and many more injured. Roy Wilkins, who joined the organization while in college, became White's assistant in 1931 and led the organization during the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Though active in many areas, the NAACP focused primarily on litigation and legal challenges to discrimination.

Its lawyers, including Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall, were responsible for such successes as an end to the white primary and the *Brown V. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court decision ending school segregation. The importance of the NAACP was underscored by the fact that during the Civil Rights movement, several southern states attempted to ban it and/or force teachers and other civil servants to quit the organization. Efforts were made by segregationist forces to obtain NAACPmembership lists for purposes of harassment. The NAACP magazine *The Crisis*, which was edited by W. E. B. DuBois for 24 years, was of critical importance as a forum for political and philosophical thought and as a means of promoting the work of black writers and artists during the Harlem Renaissance.

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