TRANSCRIPT

Roy Wilkins

May 14, 1964

American Race Crisis

Lecture Series

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(APPLAUSE)

Mr. Wilkins: Thank you, Mr. Anthony, and thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for coming out an hour early in order to permit me to discharge some of my other duties. It so happened that the date for the Spectacular had to be changed a couple of times because of the facilities in certain states. And it finally turned out to be on the same night that I was scheduled to be here with you. But the lecture series was kind enough to advance it from 8:30 to 7:30, and I hope it has not inconvenienced a great many of you, and I certainly assure you that it is deeply appreciated by me and by those of us who are working so hard on this television show.

I might add, because I will not have an opportunity during the lecture, that the bail bond money is rather unspectacular, but very necessary. We are now paying out about $5,000 a week in bond money on appeal bonds for cases whose principals were arrested in Mississippi last summer. Last summer, we put up $500 a piece for their bail, and when their cases were heard this winter, they were found guilty, of course. And if they desire to appeal, we must post another bond of $1,000 for each appeal. So that this has been averaging about $5,000 a week. And this is a considerable amount of money. Last year, in Mississippi alone, we put out $240,000 in cash bond money, the whole year. So that tonight's Spectacular is vitally necessary — and you can understand that when I found out that Liz Taylor and Richard Burton had unexpectedly consented to appear, I raised no questions of moral turpitude.

(LAUGHTER)

Especially since the ticket sales immediately began to go up.

(LAUGHTER)

Thus proving that the great American public perhaps took the same, shall we say, philosophical view of the situation that I took.

(CHUCKLES IN AUDIENCE)

Three days from now will mark the tenth anniversary of the United States Supreme Court Ruling of May 17, 1954, which declared unconstitutional the practice of racial segregation in the public schools. The tense racial situation this spring which has

become the greatest civil rights crisis since the Civil War, is the direct result of a refusal of America to put the 1954 ruling into effect. And if the nation continues to play with this ruling as though it were a zoning ordinance to be settled upon at some undefined future moment, we are certain to have no peace on the racial front.

It is possible that we may have the worst kind of violence, the kind based senselessly but hotly upon race and color.

This is no threat, but a sober conclusion resting solidly upon the epochal nature of the 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which is the technical name of the 1954 decision. If you may or may not remember, there were five cases decided by the Supreme Court on this question. And they were arranged, as is customary, in alphabetical order. And therefore, the case of Topeka, Kansas, whose plaintiff was named Brown, came first. And after the manner of lawyers and courts and our whole system of legal jurisprudence, they named these series of cases *Brown, et al. v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, et al.*, which means, if my translators have given me the correct information, and I can't translate it myself, that this is the first of a series of cases in which Brown is one of the plaintiffs against boards of education, of which Topeka, Kansas is one of the defendants.

Anyone who reads the *Brown* decision as merely an adjudication of a school dispute is in error. The ruling is a reaffirmation of the citizenship status of Negro Americans. It brings them fully under the guarantees of the Constitution of the United States. It abolishes the old concept of separate-but-equal constitutionality, established by the 1896 ruling in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. And this, you may remember, as the ruling in which the Supreme Court, by a vote of eight to one, Mr. Justice Harlan being the lone dissenter in 1896 — and I won't bother you with all of Mr. Harlan's dissent, the most famous line of which is that the Constitution must be color-blind — but I call your attention to only his last paragraph, and the gist of it, which was that if these laws should be passed, namely, segregation laws such as the one that Plessy was arrested under in Louisiana, which was a railroad segregation car case. Mr. Justice Harlan said if laws of like nature should be passed by the several states, it would be very mischievous and would be practically a return to slavery and would pass upon the civil rights of all of us, common to all of us, on the basis of race and color; and significantly, he said, it would place in a condition of legal inferiority a great body of American citizens.

Well, *Brown* overturned *Plessy*. And *Brown* restores to Negro citizens those rights under the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments, which should have been freely ensured by them beginning about 1870, when the last amendment was adopted. It restates the principle that there is no constitutional sanction for laws, local, state, or federal, which differentiate between citizens of the United States on the basis of race or color.

Now, if this basic aspect of the *Brown* ruling is understood, then the deep feelings of the Negro population become understandable. The upheavals and upsurges become significant, and the prediction of continued racial unrest becomes credible. For what is

involved here is much more than the number of Negro children integrated into a school system hitherto racially segregated, important as that is. The root disturbance is to be found in the defiance of the citizenship and human equality doctrine enunciated by *Brown*. This is what has stirred and angered the Negro community. This is what has sent its youths surging into the streets and overflowing into the jails. This is what has rallied the adults into a united-as-never-before financial and psychological army behind the young front-line demonstrators. This is what has produced the incredible sacrifices: the jailings, the delayed careers, the beatings and other maltreatments, the losses of jobs, homes, farms, the bombings and killings.

It is this that has aroused the conscience of that part of that part of white America that still has a conscience, and has drawn a vast number of its churches and its clear-eyed college youth into the crusade for individual freedom. And it ought to be said right here that one of the important aspects of the present crusade has been the activity of the churches of all three major faiths: the Protestant, the Catholic, and the Jewish. And side by side with those churches, if not out in front of them slightly, have been the college white students, who have heard the call and the challenge of this present day civil rights crusade, and have thrown themselves into it with enthusiasm and tenacity and skill and sacrifice.

Emphasis upon this major aspect, the aspect of the denial of citizenship rights, does not discount the shame and the callous inadequacy of the implementation thus far of the 1954 decision. In 11 states regarded as southern, as distinguished from border states, the ten-year average percentage of Negroes in public school with whites is 1.06%. At the top, if you call it a top, of this list is Texas, with an average of 4.29%, and at the bottom is, of course, guess who? Mississippi, with no percent. The only others with an average of more than 1% for the ten-year period are Tennessee, 2.71%, Virginia, 1.57%, and Florida, 1.53%. Arkansas is just under 1% with 0.968%. The advanced state in race relations, North Carolina, musters barely more than 0.5% as a result of her effort over a decade. Louisiana, which never pretended to be liberal on this issue, and whose legislature fought desegregation dirty tooth and dirty claw, in contrast to North Carolina's correctly-behaved legislature, nevertheless shows up, if we may use this phrase in referring to miniscule matters. The Tarheel State, with a percentage of 0.602%.

Now, six border states and the District of Columbia have a ten-year average of 56.2% of Negroes in school with whites, ranging from 87.9% in West Virginia to 28.1% in Oklahoma. Now, the overall average of southern and border states is 9.3%: less than 1% a year for the decade '54 to '64.

If this disgraceful rate should continue, it would require more than 100 years to effectuate the *Brown* decision. Yet the segregationists shout that this pace is going too fast and pushing too hard, and that if the Negro persists in this pell-mell drive, he will lose his friends and alienate those who would be his friends.

Well, obviously, Negro Americans, now in the 101st year of the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, are not going to wait 100 years for their constitutional rights to be acknowledged and accorded them throughout the land. Any public official who still believes after these years of direct action and after continued legal assault upon the remaining bastions embodied in laws and legal subterfuges that Negro citizens are happy and satisfied, and that only a few agitators are involved is in for some jarring realism.

The resentment of the Negro community is sparked, of course, by the Southern statistics on school desegregation. The people realize full well that each year of deprivation of Negro children weakens and cripples the Negro generations of the future. Their resentment is fed also by the artful dodges and the bald defiance uncovered in many northern cities, where *de facto* school segregation is being combated.

Negro citizens are spurred as well to protest action, to hot words, and to frustrating beating-on-the-wall demonstrations by a wide range of discrimination in employment, in housing, in voting, in public accommodations, and in other segments of American life. I know I do not have to recall for this audience here in New York City the demonstration of white plumbers, members of the Plumbers' Union, walking off the job when Puerto Ricans and a lone Negro were hired by a contractor building the new Bronx Market.

And I'm sure I only have to recall for you that out in California, in the aspect of housing, California passed a fair housing law, and the real estate interests are there, busy spurring an initiative not only to recall the law and get rid of it, but carrying the proviso that hereafter no municipality and no legislature — that includes the State Assembly — shall pass any kind of law restricting the freedom of a man to buy and sell his property as he sees fit. In other words, the California bigots not only want to recall the fair housing law that already has been enacted, but they want to be certain that no other kinds of fair housing laws, municipal or state, shall be enacted, and that discrimination in housing shall thus be free of any restraint.

In the matter of voting, I call your attention to the announcement just the other day that some 2 million Negroes are now registered in the south, whereas there should be about 5 million registered. But the 2 million represents an increase from 1,300,000, so that the increase since 1960 has been about between 600,000 and 700,00, largely due to intensified drives there to secure registration in some of the larger urban areas.

As far as schools are concerned, I point out to you that in that citadel of culture, Boston, where the ambassador to Vietnam has only to announce his name in order to be nominated in the New England primary, in Boston it was discovered through a little research that the schools in the Negro neighborhoods, Roxbury and surrounding areas, that the children had less spent on them per capita out from the rest of the Boston schools, that their graduates failed more often in the citywide tests than those from other schools, and that the schools themselves form a majority of the oldest schools in the Boston system.

Now, if this is true in Boston in 1963, you can imagine what is true here in New York and in Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, Cleveland and Detroit, and other northern cities. And you can understand why the NAACP has action going, either of a community or legal nature in 80 cities in 15 states in the north, in the matter of *de facto* school segregation.

But, my friends, a sustenance for these separate protests, and the link which binds New York employment pickets to California housing campaigners, to Boston school boycotters, to Nashville restaurant pickets, to Mississippi voter registration workers, is the common conviction that their citizenship is at stake. They believe deeply that racial differentiation by their government, local, state, and federal, as expressed in laws and customs in defiance of the *Brown* doctrine, is an affront to them as members of the human family. They feel they can make no acknowledgment of this practice, however temporary. They feel they cannot remain silent or inactive when the disciples and practitioners of the life decreed for them under the discredited separate-but-equal citizenship doctrine seeks to perpetuate it in the 1960s. They want no more of what Justice Harlan called the status of legal inferiority.

Thus even the taciturn and the normally cautious ones enter audible demurs to the continuance of the old order. It must be emphasized that on this point of common and equal citizenship and on common humanity there is no division whatsoever within the Negro population of this country, although there is and well may continue to be a difference of opinion and difference between certain Negro organizations as to timing, as to methods, as to strategy.

But these organizations, which have met informally since February 1963, on an average of four to five weeks apart, in which they exchange views and take tally on what is being done, these organizations do not differ at all on the goals that they seek. It is for this reason that the civil rights bill now pending in the United States Senate has aroused hope, but hope accompanied by large doses of cynicism and despair. This bill, requested originally by President John F. Kennedy in June 1963 and endorsed fully and repeatedly by President Lyndon B. Johnson, was passed by the House of Representatives on February 10, 1964 by an overwhelming bipartisan vote of 290 to 130. A total of 138 Republicans, led by Representative William McCulloch of Ohio and by Republican minority leader, Representative Charles Halleck of Indiana, joined 152 Democrats in passing the House bill. The Democratic floor leader was Representative Emmanuel Celler of New York.

Now, the Senate has had this bill since March 9, 1964. It spent weeks after that date discussing whether the bill should be taken up at all as the official business. It has spent weeks since that decision debating the bill itself. It has spent three weeks alone discussing one amendment having to do with jury trials in contempt cases. And yesterday, Senator Richard B. Russell of Georgia, the leader of the 19 Southern Senators who are filibustering and preventing the 81 other Senators from voting on the bill, announced arrogantly that he would not permit a vote on the jury trial amendment until

next week. Now, since there are several pending amendments of this nature, the whole of next week could be taken up with this one item.

For Negro citizens, this Senate discussion and delay, accompanied by intolerable arguments on the racial situation and the relationship of the federal government to it, has been a humiliating experience. It is galling to have one's rights as a citizen debated as though the Senate were discussing the eligibility of a Tasmanian to the rights and privileges of United States citizenship. In truth, it is not at all far-fetched to assert that a Tasmanian would have an easier time securing full American citizenship rights than a tenth-generation American Negro. The Senate is listening to the technicalities, to hair-splitting, and to lies, such as the one linking the civil rights bill to a communist, but not a fascist, police state.

Negro Americans who have slaved and worked for this country, who have defended and died for it in every war it has fought, whose faith has withstood lynchings and persecution and cruel inequalities across the whole spectrum of life, are forced to hear once more from the highest deliberative body the old slanders and the old degrading proposals. It is contended, for example, once more that the Constitution never contemplated them, the Negroes, that the Supreme Court was doing the bidding of international communism in its *Brown* decision, and that the Senate must not acquiesce in this recognition of sub-humans as humans. It must not permit the government of the United States, through a civil rights law, to interfere in the status and treatment of the Negroes as determined by those states which came to such wealth and power as they now enjoy on the slave backs of the grandfathers, grandmothers, and great-grandfathers and great-grandmothers of the present-day petitioners.

The federal power, the argument goes, must not be invoked here. The right of a public business to select white customers as against black must not be curtailed or forbidden. The right of an employer and of unions to exclude and starve Negro wage-earners and family heads must remain inviolate as far as Senate action is concerned. The Negro must fight his way to the ballot box through the antebellum obstacle courses erected by the beneficiaries of the lily-white exclusionist system and undisturbed by Senators who sit in that chamber, only because their black residents are barred from voting.

There is a pause now in the alleged deliberations while an effort is made to agree upon amending language that will permit some non-Southern Senators to vote to shut off debate and to get on with the business of the United States. Thus, it appears that in addition to Senator Russell and his cabal, the Negro citizens must give a password of some sort to some of the Senators in the party that came into being on an anti-slavery platform. The stalwart Republican Senators who have supported this type of legislation and stronger, year in and year out, must join their fellow Negro citizens in shame that in 1960 some of their party colleagues should be debating human rights.

Yesterday it was announced an agreement had been reached on some of these amendments. But just late this afternoon, the conferees in the leadership conference on

civil rights issued the following statement: our preliminary study indicates that some proposals would weaken the measure and result in unnecessary delay in enforcement. A line-by-line analysis of each proposal must be made before a final decision can be reached. We appreciate the efforts of our friends in the Senate to explore every possible avenue toward prompt passage of this bill. And every proposal they make will be carefully weighed by us. But this point must be made crystal clear: we do not intend to compromise our principles. We insist on passage of a measure which will be meaningful, enforceable, and just, and which shall provide speedy relief from today's intolerable situation. This statement is made in the absence of the exact text.

You know, these agreements reached in the Senate take 24 to 48 to 60 hours to get an exact text, the exact language. So that this statement was issued in the absence of having what Mr. Dirksen and Mr. Humphrey and Mr. Kennedy agreed upon yesterday, if they did agree.

In this discussion of the civil rights bill, the crowning something or other was given two days ago in a Madison Square Garden speech by Senator Barry Goldwater, leading candidate for the Republican nomination for President of the United States. In a distortion which has to be deliberate, he declared, "You can't pass a law that will make me like you or you like me."

The pending civil rights bill does not seek to force anyone to like anyone else. It seeks to secure the elementary rights to which every American citizen is entitled, whether anyone loves him or not. And whether he intends it or not, Senator Goldwater's position of leaving civil rights matters to the states grants immunity to the use of cattle prods and shotguns by Alabama state troopers, the armored tank and dogs and fire hoses of Birmingham police, the bomb murders of little children in churches in Alabama, and the assassin of Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi last June.

Negro citizens will not return to this 1896-1954 pattern of life. If their pleas continue to be met with sophistry and Civil War oratory, there will certainly be violence in the streets and elsewhere. Nothing else will be left. There will be nowhere to turn. The Negro will be forced back upon his own resources. The frustrated ones, the outraged ones, the ones whose sole strategy is blind battle against any and all, will win recruits from among the disillusioned. Polarization on color alone will increase, with whites against blacks and blacks against whites, and no grays in between.

To permit this to happen would be folly of the worst sort, especially since the price of respect and progress is simply justice and compassion. More than Negro/white relations is at stake. On trial is the basic question of whether a Western democratic society can do justice to Negro and white citizens of a country established by a declaration of independence that declares all me to be equal before the law: not all white men, not all black men, but all men. If this is not to be for Negro Americans, we will come sooner or later to a place where we'll not obtain for other Americans. The concept of individual freedom and justice under law will go down the drain.

Now, in the present contest, the segregationist have turned from action to block segregation itself to action to block petitions for desegregation. And these include legislations such as the civil rights bill. They have trampled upon freedom of speech and assembly, upon the right of petition for redress of grievances. The battle is now pitched on that level, a level openly posing the problem not of racial rights, but of the survival of a free society.

In his immortal Gettysburg address, Abraham Lincoln called for a resolution that this nation under God shall have a new birth of freedom. Now, Lincoln did not mean freedom for individual states to go their various ways; he was fighting a war against that. Nor did he mean freedom for the Negro alone. He meant, of course, freedom for our nation, for the composite whole, and all the people thereof. The crisis today is only incidentally a Negro crisis. It is a crisis of national life, and in a very deep and real sense, a sense sharpened by the turn of history in which we find ourselves, it is a crisis of free men in our century, the resolution with which we meet it, burying racism and regionalism and burying the political shenanigans inherent in the states' rights system, could determine whether freedom or a type of slavery shall be the lot of men of every color everywhere. Thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

QUESTION & ANSWER SESSION

Moderator: First question: cannot the Supreme Court, through suit, be requested to specifically define the phrase in the 1954 decision, "with all deliberate speed?"

Mr. Wilkins: I don't think you can get the Supreme Court to define its own language. I think the court has already indicated in a number of cases that have come before it from lower federal courts, either in an affirmative decision of its own or else leaving standing a decision of the lower court, that it is dissatisfied with the way the communities have interpreted the term "deliberate speed." But as to whether you could file suit in the Supreme Court to make it define its own language is a question that's beyond me. I'm not a lawyer, but I venture the opinion that a lawyer would tell you that you would have to get a resolution of this question on a specific case of desegregation arising in a specific community, that the Supreme Court, like professors, will refuse to define their own language.

Moderator: In view of white resistance to Negro demands, what can we reasonably expect within the foreseeable future?

(PAUSE)

In view of white resistance to Negro demands, what can we — we, meaning *vox populi*, I guess, all of us — reasonably expect within the foreseeable future?

Mr. Wilkins: I don't know. And this question puzzles me a little. In the first place, it seems to acknowledge acceptance of the view that resistance or opposition should either change your objective or cause you to cease your activity. Of course, this is not possible in the present situation. There has been resistance to the Negro's ongoing campaign all down the line, from the very first time he raised his head, there's been resistance. And if we had acknowledged that resistance or acknowledged that it was supreme, and that nothing could be done about it, we wouldn't have had any future to write about from, say, 1830-1850 or 1860-1896 or 1896-1910. There would have been nothing in front of us, because all along the line there was resistance.

When Theodore Roosevelt entertained Booker T. Washington in a luncheon in 1903 in the White House, you would have thought the world was coming to an end, because there was resistance and condemnation by white people that this was terrible.

Now, I'd like to say another word about this, and I have a very strong personal feeling on it. I personally don't care how many white people resist. They are not in their proper role. The resistance on the part of white people assumes that they are the donors of my rights. They are not.

They do not decide what rights the Negroes shall have. How did they get their rights? Did anybody decide to give them their rights? They got their rights just by being citizens of the United States. And I'd like to see anyone try to take them away from them. You wouldn't have any marches or any protest demonstrations or any picketing going on; you'd have a war on your hands if anybody tried to take away white people's constitutional rights.

You see, one of the troubles with this whole Negro revolution, in fact, one of the troubles with most of the public issues in the United States, is the ignorance of the population on the issue. And the assumption that because white people object to Negroes enjoying their rights, the Negroes should stop, or that are we going to have bloodshed or are we going to have violence or are we going to have unrest, or is the whole thing coming to a stop? No, no.

White people do not decide — that's the trouble now; that's the reason the Negroes are out in the streets — because white people have been deciding to feed them with a long-handled spoon. You can have a little voting rights this year, and we'll let you into this restaurant this year, and you can go to this motel next year, and you can go to the fourth grade this year, and next year we'll see about you going to high school. And we'll try and decide whether you're fit to live in this neighborhood or that neighborhood or the other neighborhood.

This is the root of one of the troubles of the Negro revolution: he's sick of all this. Negroes died on Boston Common, fighting in the Revolutionary War. Three thousand Negro soldiers were under George Washington at Valley Forge and Appomattox. They helped to defeat the British. He belongs to this country, and the country belongs to him. And who is going to come along in 1964 and say, "Well, white people object to this, so

what are you going to do?" We're going to continue to take what belongs to us, that's what we're going to continue to do. Now I warned you, I had some personal feeling on this matter, and I do.

(APPLAUSE)

Moderator: Now, in connection with that, what do you think of the new plan for integrating New York City schools, recently proposed by the state education department?

Mr. Wilkins: I was afraid I'd get that one. I haven't had time to read the state report or to make an analysis of it. My staff member who has charge of that, Miss Shagaloff, is busy on an analysis which she's promised to have on my desk tomorrow morning to let me know about the state report, what's good about it and what's bad about it.

But I'll say to you here that in general, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People feels that this is a fresh, new approach, that it is extremely useful, and that it can help in meeting some of the problems, both of the white parents and of the Negro parents, and of the white children and the Negro children, and incidentally will help the Board of Education of the City of New York out of its floundering around on this very vital and important issue. But as for explaining it and expounding what it is, I'm sorry not to be able at this time to do that for you.

Moderator: Well, maybe this is a little easier. Can you give us any information, then, about the demonstration planned at City Hall this coming Monday?

Mr. Wilkins: This'll be a protest demonstration in the traditional manner. I don't anticipate anybody's going to chain himself to the mayor's desk or to lie down on the City Hall steps or anything of that sort. But the purpose of this demonstration is simply what I talked about tonight: to call attention to the fact that ten years after this new charter of constitutional liberty was issued by the Supreme Court in the form of the *Brown* decision, ten years after that, we're still wrestling in New York City — not in Albany, Georgia, not in Meridian, Mississippi, not in Tallahassee, Florida, but right here in New York City — we're still wrestling with housing discrimination, with employment discrimination, and with school desegregation, and that these problems are right here on our doorstep. And we're asking the city administration and the state administration and all interested citizens in civic bodies to get to work on this problem. And the demonstration at City Hall is for the purpose of focusing attention on this tenth anniversary to the fact that the job is far from done.

Moderator: Will you please discuss the "blood brothers" charges: true or false, and how these charges can be counteracted, if false?

Mr. Wilkins: While I understand that the matter of whether there is an organized gang or group in Harlem dedicated to the proposition of killing white people, it has not been officially established as yet. All of the organizations that have branches in Harlem, or

that have offices there, or have members there or followers there, have declared that they know of no such organized group.

Now, of course, in a population of 350,000 or 400,000 people such as live north of 110th Street, 99th Street, it is possible that there are individuals who are so deranged that they feel that the only solution for this is to kill white people, any white person. Out of a population of 350,000, which is a good-sized city, you will have a good sprinkling of these kind of people. And if it's a depressed area, which has been kept out of touch with the mainstream of city life, and where all of the inequalities are sharpened and into focus that appears distorted to people outside, but appears very real to the people inside, then you will have, perhaps, an additional number of these persons.

But officially, it hasn't been determined that they exist. Now, how do you get at them if they do exist? Let's say they exist as individuals. The only way you can get at them is the way you get at a criminal: after, unfortunately, after they commit a crime. You can't tell when you walk out here on 12th Street whether you're walking past a robber, a burglar, a would-be killer, a dope fiend, a slasher. You have no way of knowing the person you meet on 12th Street, or whether he's a Ph.D. or a minister or who. And the only way you can discover that is when he breaks loose and commits a crime and is arrested.

Now, if they are organized, I would assume that sooner or later the police department would discover that an organization exists. And then something might be done by the existing bodies there, and by the police themselves, by all the machinery of an organized society to do something about a group that believes in killing. You know, there are all kinds of groups in this country. We have anti-Semitic groups, viciously so, spreading propaganda, scurrilous sheets, mailed all over the country, week after week after week. And these people don't kill Jews, but they inspire weak-minded people to persecute Jews. And the same kind of societies, often the identical societies that are anti-Semitic are anti-Negro and/or anti-Catholic. And if you have read any of these sheets, you would see that they are as potentially dangerous as the blood brothers in Harlem.

If we discover any existence of any organized body, we will bring it to the attention of the constituted authorities, because our organization — in fact, all of the Negro organizations who are in the civil rights field — do not believe in violence and do not believe in killing. It's a senseless business that can get you nowhere. But the mere fact that it's talked about and that it might exist indicates how far down the road we have gone in our persecution and mistreatment of the Negro minority, when that number of people believes there is no further hope and that everything rests in a gun or a knife.

(TWO OR THREE PEOPLE APPLAUD)

Moderator: Mr. Wilkins, the two speakers who preceded you, who are Bayard Rustin and Ossie Davis, and I think this question more or less relates to their philosophy as propounded here: speakers here in the past few weeks have portrayed the problem as an economic problem, not necessarily one of race. They maintained that without jobs,

there can be no equality, and that our society is not providing the jobs necessary. Do you think it is an economic problem?

Roy Wilkins: Well, I'm familiar with this, and I agree with it in part. But this is an old socialist theory. Mr. Rustin, for whom I have high regard with respect to his analysis of the civil rights racial relations situation, is an old socialist — old in the sense that he's been brought up on it since he was a lad. He's an old pacifist, who believes not in fighting or not in war. And I wasn't aware of Mr. Davis's personal beliefs in this area, because I've always known him as a distinguished actor.

But I think it's oversimplification for anyone to say that this question is an economic one. It has tremendous economic aspects, and it's true that if you got jobs, you might ease some of the tension. But I'd like to call attention to the fact that where Negroes have accumulated an economic competence, where they have exercised thrift or ingenuity or skill or perseverance or persistence or acumen in getting together an economic competence and even independence, they still have not delivered themselves out of the tentacles of racial prejudice.

Negroes who are able to buy and sell, as the saying goes, an average person in the community, white or black, still suffer the same disabilities as poor Negroes in many respects. They have more creature comforts. They may be able to ride in a Cadillac instead of a second-hand Rambler, and they may live in an $85,000 ranch home instead of in a four-room apartment. But they run into the same difficulties, regardless of the fact that they have solved the economic problem.

Now, let's get away from them and come down to the Negro who earns his wages. We have tens of thousands of Negroes in the trade union movement, largely in the industrial unions, who are making the same wages or good wages — the same wages as their white fellow workers in the same categories. And they have solved their economic problem, as much as the white workers have solved theirs. Because if each of them gets $2.10 an hour with overtime and this and that and the other and all the fringes they add to it, they're doing all right for themselves. And yet, those very same Negroes are wrestling with the problems of race. And so race is a very grave question as to whether, if we solve the economic problem, everything else would be solved.

I'm not so sure. I'm sure it would go a long way towards solving it, but I'm not sure that it would solve it. It's just like the people who say, "Well, Mr. Wilkins, don't you think it's a matter of education?" Even Negroes say, "You know, if our folks get educated, so that they understand," not educated so they can read books and argue about whether you should have poetry that rhymes or poetry that doesn't rhyme or this, but whether they can absorb what's going on around them in the world and be alert and intelligent as to the movements, and protect themselves or take part in it, so they're educated. "Mr. Wilkins, don't you think if we got education, we could solve the race problem?"

You can't. You can't, just by education.

And then there were those pundits who said, "What did the NAACP go off on this education kick for and desegregation of schools? Why didn't you try to get the vote for the Negro? If he gets the vote, won't he be able to solve all the other problems, if he has the vote?"

No, he won't. He won't be able to solve all of them with either: if he has the vote, or if he's educated, or if he's rich, or if he's comfortably situated. The problem is vastly more complex than that. And so I hesitate to adopt these solutions proposed by Mr. Rustin: some of the same solutions proposed by his mentor, Norman Thomas, and by all the very fine socialists who have given such tremendous boost to the civil rights movement in this country. Yet I'm unable, from my observation and from my own personal experience over the years, and from the experience of the hundreds and thousands of Negroes that I have known, and the case histories with which I am familiar, to say that such a pat solution will work. It's very valuable. It will help a lot, but I'm not sure.

It presupposes, of course, full employment, because if you don't have full employment, then you have rivalry for jobs. And if you have rivalry for jobs, the difference in skin color, the difference in an accent, the difference in a nationality background, the difference in a religious background enters into the equation. And so then it becomes 100% American, whatever that is, competing against an Italian or a Jew or an immigrant who can't even speak English, they say, no matter how smart they are, can't speak English, or a Negro.

For Mr. Rustin's theory, and for Norman Thomas's theory, and for all the other economic determinists' theories to work, everybody must have a job and must be satisfied in this job or must have access to progression to satisfaction in his job. Then after that, the friction will be reduced. Well, we could go on talking about this all night.

(APPLAUSE)

Moderator: Some of you are going to boo me the minute this question gets out of my mouth, I'm sure. But I have been criticized for selecting only those questions which I respect and think should be answered. I hope this will show you that I have not really loaded the dice in my selective process. Please explain, Mr. Wilkins, why the NAACP has never made concentrated public drives on the self-improvement and the economic betterment of the Negro?

Mr. Wilkins: That's a good question. It's a good question to ask; it's not a good question.

Well, the people who say we haven't done certain things need to go back and read our record. And the truth of the matter is that a good many drives for self-improvement have been initiated; in fact, the NAACP was the only one to initiate them because it was the only organization for so many years. As for public drives for improvement, I assume there was a word left out here: improvement of the behavior—

Moderator: Yes.

Mr. Wilkins: —of Negroes. "Self-improvement," it says. As for economic betterment, all the things we've done for economic betterment would take too long to go into here now, and I don't propose to stand here and go back to 1910 and tell you what we've done about economic betterment since 1910.

Suffice to say that we were among the first, if not the first, organized Negro body to bring up the question of union exclusion. We were the first to take up sharecropping. As a matter of fact, this whole Negro revolution, if I would get into the present day dispute — which I have no desire to get into here and now; we can save that for another time — about where was the NAACP in all these years, and why did things just start to happen in the last two or three years?

Well, the short answer to that is that nothing would have happened in the last two or three years if the NAACP hadn't cleared away the underbrush and laid down the pathway and the channels in the previous 45 or 50 years. This is the short answer.

But now as for self-improvement, and a public drive, have you ever heard of any civil rights organization fighting for the citizenship status of its people — and remember, that is the sole and principal duty of the NAACP — have you ever heard of them watering down their effort by a companion campaign which admits, by its very nature, that the people for whom it is asking citizenship rights are not behaving as the general public would have them behave? Tactically, this is never done.

You don't tell the other baseball team that your third baseman is weak on a sinker. You let them find it out. Perhaps they won't throw him a sinker. They might throw him a hard fast one on the outside that he can slam into the bleachers.

Now, there are more reasons than that pragmatic one. One reason is, and this is my own personal, prime reason, and I think this was Walter White's reason, and it goes back to what I said earlier: your rights in this country as a citizen do not depend on your behavior. They do not depend on whether you are a good boy or a bad boy, or whether you are a good girl or a bad girl. Your rights you get because you're here. You don't earn them. This is nonsense, about people earning their rights as citizens. They earn respect and esteem of their fellow citizens, or they earn their contempt or their hostility or their indifference. But they do not earn their rights. Frank Costello, a man you would never invite to your home, perhaps, nevertheless enjoys his full American citizenship rights. He's not a person of whom you approve or I approve or Cardinal Spellman approves or Rabbi Hillel Silver, if he were here, would approve. But nevertheless, there it is: he's an American citizen with a right to a trial by jury, the right to arraignment, the right to a lawyer, the right to have his constitutional rights adjudicated like anybody else, and to enjoy his constitutional rights.

Lucky Luciano, who sold dope and dealt in prostitutes, a more reprehensible occupation we can't imagine in our society, and yet Lucky Luciano enjoyed his full rights as an American citizen. Nobody said, "You're behaving in a reprehensible manner, and therefore you cannot be treated as an American. You're not entitled to these rights."

Negroes who couldn't rent an apartment in a certain address on the East Side woke up one morning to find that the police had raided an apartment there, where the young women were carrying on the world's oldest profession.

Now, they could run a house of assignation or prostitution on East 57th Street but a respectable Negro family that went to church every Sunday and kept its kids in Sunday school and whose father was a college graduate and whose mother is a college graduate, and who knew the difference between Beethoven and Bach couldn't get an apartment in that building.

So I don't want any questions about whether the Negro organizations shouldn't try to exercise some self-improvement in the Negro. We have plenty of organizations devoted to self-improvement. We have our churches. We have our women's clubs. We have our crime prevention bureaus. We have our YMCAs and our YWCAs. We have all the accoutrements of a modern American community. And each has its function. And the organization who is devoted for fighting for the citizenship rights of Negroes doesn't have to stop and turn around and say, "Hey there, Samuel. Behave yourself. Straighten up. Fly right. Be nice so the white folks will like you, and so you can get your rights or I can get your rights for you." That's not their job, and that's not Sammy's job. And if Sammy gets out of line, the police are there to take care of him, and not the NAACP or CORE. We're about our main business.

(APPLAUSE)

Moderator: What is the significance of Governor Wallace's performances in the state primaries?

Mr. Wilkins: I don't know that there's any great significance. It proves one or two things that we all knew in advance. One of them is that the north has its share of prejudiced people, bigots. But I don't think they numbered as many as Governor Wallace got in Wisconsin, or that he got in Indiana or that he may get in Maryland next week. In both Wisconsin and Indiana, the governors there had a tax problem. People, voters were inclined to be opposed to the governor in Wisconsin because his tax program was unpopular. In Indiana, the tax program was unpopular. They both had to raise taxes.

Now, you're here in New York State, and you remember when Governor Rockefeller raised our taxes and put in the pay-as-you-go income tax system, and some of you still haven't forgiven him for doing it. You know, you can forget all about Happy and his divorce, but you can't forget about those taxes. And one of those who can't forget is Mrs. Roy Wilkins. And she reminds me all the time.

(LAUGHTER IN AUDIENCE)

Yes, she says, "Rockefeller may be liberal, I don't know. But I remember that he took my tax money." There's nothing you can do to a woman that hurts like that except maybe to imply that she's not 18, you see.

(A FEW CHUCKLES IN AUDIENCE)

But when you start fooling around with her money, then you lose, all right, Governor Wallace picked up a lot of people in Wisconsin who were sore about the taxes. And same way in Indiana. Now, in Wisconsin, he picked up a lot of McCarthyites, old McCarthyites. And in Indiana, he picked up a lot of old Ku Klux Klan. Some of you remember that Indiana used to be run by the Klan. The Secretary of State was the Grand Dragon of the Ku Klux Klan in Indiana. You may remember that. You may remember how he came to fall down, too, in a case involving the death of a girl whom he took on a train ride.

Well, anyway, but Indiana was a Klan stronghold, and the government of Indiana was indistinguishable from the Ku Klux Klan. And it was knocked out and destroyed or scattered, but Governor Wallace picked up the remnants of the Klan in Indiana. Now it's my unhappy duty to report that he also picked up an ethnic group in both places. He picked up Polish voters in Wisconsin and Polish voters in the Lake County district of Indiana, the northern part: Gary, Whiting, Indiana Harbor, South Chicago, all around the industrial complex around there, around Inland Steel and all the steel companies and the oil companies, so that there's ample basis for Governor Wallace's vote.

I would say unhesitatingly and flatly that his vote does not represent a referendum on the civil rights bill. That is the size of the vote. I would say probably less than half of the vote he got represents opposition to the civil rights bill. And even there, the opposition comes from people who are opposed to a strong centralized federal government, and who believe that the states should have more power. These are some honest ones and some Birchites.

Moderator: What was the benefit derived from, or the loss suffered by, the severance of W.E.B. Du Bois from the NAACP?

Mr. Wilkins: Well, this occurred so long ago, it's difficult to assess it now. Du Bois left the NAACP of his own volition in 1934. He resigned and went to Atlanta University to teach. And he stayed there for ten years, and he resigned from Atlanta in 1944.

He came back to New York, and through an arrangement the details of which I at that time did not know much about, he was given the title of Director of Special Research at the NAACP. This is a euphemism. It was little more than an excuse for giving him a desk and a secretary and a telephone and providing him with a mailing address. In characteristic Du Bois fashion, he permitted no interference in his affairs at all. He did not act as a staff man; he didn't take any part in staff activities. He didn’t want to be bothered with any consultations, either on a high level, medium level, or low level. He didn’t permit the mail desk to open his mail; it was his mail personally. It came directly to him without being opened. And he used his connection there to do research, to write articles, and to give lectures. He went out on sorties. He gladly took our stenographic help; he didn’t have to pay them. He didn’t have to pay any telephone bills. He didn’t have to pay anything.

And in 1948, we came to a parting of the ways because he persisted in endorsement of Henry Wallace for President. Now, it's long been a rule of the NAACP — actually a rule of self-preservation because we have so many different kinds of members — for the national office staff members not to select or endorse candidate or parties. You might look at me and listen to me and guess that I would endorse Henry Higginbotham for President, but I may never say that I endorse Henry Higginbotham or his party. Du Bois endorsed Wallace again and again, and after about the third time, the organization concluded that it could not have him officially identified with it, if this was the kind of activity he wanted to engage it.

Thereupon he left, and immediately identified himself with a left-front organization. He had only been moderately identified up to that time, but he moved down into 26th Street — 23 West 26th, where the left-wing organizations had a kind of headquarters — and proceeded to operate from there. And from then, of course, he went progressively left, until he finally, at the age of 92 or 93, formally declared his membership in the Communist party. By then, of course, he was a venerable scholar and not of much use to the Communists in recruiting or enlisting Negro Americans. He had already done a monumental task of shaping the Negro revolution in the 20th century. The philosophy of the NAACP is the philosophy of W.E.B. Du Bois in his early years, in his middle years, up until the time he was 70 years old. And all the things that we now preach, and the program that we espouse is a program that was envisioned by Du Bois, was largely guided by him and instilled by him in his brilliant editorship of the crisis, over the period from 1910 to 1934.

(APPLAUSE)

Moderator: The last question, Mr. Wilkins: what gains will Northern Negroes achieve if the civil rights bill is passed without weakening amendments? Is the bill really meaningful for Northern Negroes?

Mr. Wilkins: Well, I've heard this question before, and it strikes me as being sort of nitpicking. It assumes, first of all, that there are two Negro communities: Northern and Southern. And if this were true, we would have had some demonstration of it a long time ago. Of course the bill will help Northern Negroes. And of course it's valuable. And let us assume, however, that it won't help them, and that it will only help the Southern Negroes. There are only 9 million of them down there; don't you want to help them too?

But from the stories that I read in my papers and the experiences I hear as I go about the country, the Negroes in Buffalo need it as well as the Negroes in Texas. And as I pointed out or attempted to point out in my main thesis, the real importance of this is not whether it enables the Negro to get into a motel or a hotel or to get into a certain school, this is very important. But the primary importance of the civil rights bill is an affirmation by the legislative branch of the government of the United States that he is a

constitutional citizen, and that his rights may not be denied or abridged by the states, and that here is a federal law which says so.

Now, if anybody thinks this law is not important, and I get some of this thinking, which I can only characterize as crazy, as I go around — particularly among the young people, the young, sharp thinkers. They sit around, take off their shoes and sit around on the floor and decide on the world, see. But if this bill were no good, then why would the state of Mississippi send $260,000 up to Washington to a lobby in order to defeat it? You don't spend a quarter of a million dollars to defeat something that's no good and of no value.

And why would Senator Wallace be going around beating up the air and deluding himself with the idea that he's now a serious candidate for presidency of the United States based on his opposition to the civil rights bill? And if it were of no importance at all, why would the Senate spend ten weeks on it? Why wouldn't the Southern Senators simply say, "Well, this is a matter of no consequence, so why shouldn't we let it be enacted? We put in a little *pro forma* objection to it for the sake of the folks back home, make a few speeches, put them into the Congressional record, put them under our frank, and send them home, and let the folks know that we fought the good fight against the Yankees and the Negroes and let the bill go on through?"

You know, we can get so smart that we outsmart ourselves. And this sentiment, which I find here and there in the Negro community and in the young white community, the so-called emancipated, sophisticated, far-out community, I find just a little hard to take. Not hard to take because it's distasteful, but hard to take because it represents such lazy and inadequate thinking.

(APPLAUSE)

END OF RECORDING