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**100th Anniversary of the NAACP:
What's in the Future for The Granddaddy of Civil Rights Groups?
Between the Lines
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This week, the most venerable of civil rights organizations, the National Association For The Advancement of Colored People, more commonly known as the NAACP, turns one hundred years old. Founded on the 100th birthday of Abraham Lincoln (February 12th, 1809), the organization had a controversial start.

The organization was born out of what started as an effort on the part of 29 black men to address the increased public assaults and lynchings against black men at the turn of the 20th Century. The Post Reconstruction era brought a twenty year "Redemption Period" from 1877 to 1896 that sought to reverse the social and political equality gains of African Americans (then Negroes) in Reconstruction, as social behaviors of exclusion and separation became the cultural norms and ultimately, law, as the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed "Separate But Equal" as legal.

This decision ushered in a 70 year period of de jure segregation that came to be known as Jim Crow. It brought forth an open season on blacks, targeting those most prone to "act white" (act equal and defend their rights) in the "New Negro" era (blacks born after slavery was abolished in 1865). Led by Scholar and sociologist, W.E.B. DuBois, the meeting was so controversial that they held it on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls. The meeting resolved to partner with well meaning whites to make public and political appeals for the eradication of lynching. It became known as the Niagara Movement.

However, once they returned to America, they found that while there were influential whites willing to organize around social protection of blacks, they weren't willing to do so without conditions. No radicals. No violence advocates. And the whites, who would fund the collaboration, would do the picking (of who was to be involved). Journalist Ida B. Wells and Publisher William Monroe Trotter would be excluded. The most influential Negro in the country, Booker T. Washington, would decline involvement and suppress the efforts funding its formative years. The most recognizable Negro to lend credibility to the effort was DuBois, who was not put in a leadership position but would be the public voice of the organization as editor of its publication, *The Crisis Magazine*.

This was the beginning of what became known as the NAACP. Its first twenty five years (1909 to 1934) was solely dedicated to getting Congress or the President (any President) to pass and sign into law, anti-lynching legislation. However, stand alone anti-lynching legislation was never passed in the history of these United States. In 1934, DuBois and the NAACP parted ways after DuBois publicly advocated, in the NAACP's own magazine, that blacks accommodate segregation.

It was at this time, the organization changed strategies to engage in a 20 year battle to end Jim Crow, by hiring Howard Law School Dean, Charles Hamilton Houston, and one of his law students, Thurgood Marshall (five years later), who started the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in 1939 and argued dozens of cases over a 15 year period that culminated in five cases (in four states and the District of Columbia) being consolidated in one case that came to be known as *Brown v. Board of Education*. In winning the *Brown* decision that outlawed "Separate But Equal," NAACP became the crown jewel of civil rights groups and the focus of the U.S. Government and state governments that sought to disband the organization and prosecute (intimidate) its members.

The NAACP was disbanded in Alabama for refusing a federal order to give up its membership lists. This gave rise to the birth of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the rise of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s direct action campaigns of Massive Resistance - what we now call the Civil Rights Movement. The NAACP thought King was crazy to directly confront southern segregationists. However, it was the NAACP, giving King legal protection in the courts, that gave the movement legs, something King rarely ever gave the NAACP credit for doing, which in turn, caused friction in the relationship between King, Thurgood Marshall and NAACP Executive Secretary, Roy Wilkins.

The uneasy alliance forged the first meaningful Civil Rights legislation in the 20th Century, the elimination of Jim Crow and the protection of voting rights. However, after the assassination of King, who had emerged as the central figure of the movement, and the rise of the pro-black radical movement (known as the "Black Power" movement), the NAACP lost its resonance in the movement.

In the Post Civil Rights Movement (1980s forward), the NAACP, except for its Fairshare and ACT-SO programs, lost its standing in the courts (after the Legal Defense Fund left the organization in the late 1970s, sued and won the right to keep its name), lost its membership ranks and lost its leadership focus (after Ben Hooks retired, the NAACP has had five executive directors/President and three board chairs in 15 years).

Now when you asked what the NAACP does, nobody can tell you. As a past NAACP

branch president, I can say that (though nobody else will-but they think it). In the last 15 years, the NAACP has lost its way and its relevancy. Only they and the National Baptist Convention stayed out of the Million Man March in 1995. They were ignored in eight years of the Bush White House. Few NAACPers backed Obama (most of its leadership, like most Congressional Black Caucus members, backed Hillary Clinton).

In the last year, the NAACP decided to "go young," hiring the youngest President in its history, 35 year old, Benjamin Jealous, a bright futuristic thinker with a global human rights advocacy focus. He recently announced it would also become the NAACP's focus. Hmmmm. That's futuristic thinking sho' nuff for a two headed dinosaur that hasn't found it way out of the 1980s.

The NAACP does entertainment better than it does advocacy these days. Not quite the credentials we were looking for at the age of 100. In the age of Obama, talk of post-racialism and a widening equality gap, there is space for the NAACP to play in the advocacy arena. The problem is, it's been 50 years since the NAACP was at the right place, at the right time, and therein lies its dilemma - being able to transition with the time. The question really is, what does the future hold for the NAACP, and can it get there in time to make a difference? You shiver at the very thought.


Let's hope so. Aside from that, Happy 100th Anniversary, NAACP.


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