

“Let the Children Lead”?: The Youth Marches for Integrated Schools,
Washington, DC 1958 and 1959
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Abstract: This article examines the Youth Marches for Integrated Schools that took place in 1958 and 1959 in Washington, DC, and argues that it was a critical turning point in youth civil rights activism. These marches saw American youth breaking free from adult-dominated civil rights groups, such as the NAACP, and helped establish youth-centred organizing from 1960 that helped reinvigorate the civil rights movement. The use of marches in Washington, DC in the late 1950s attempted to channel concepts of youth as promoters of social change that could reflect fundamental American values of liberty and democracy during the Cold War, especially after the *Brown* decision (1954) and the lack of progress in integrating schools. The marches were attempts by established civil rights groups to utilize youth optimism and vitality whilst also attempting to impose strict boundaries on their activities to promote traditional methods of activism and citizenship. Such mass meetings at the US capital gave youth a presence in the national consciousness yet also led to youth groups seeking greater organizational autonomy. The Youth Marches became a bridge to the 1960s youth movement and shows the generational conflict and suspicions of independent youth activism by established rights groups.

On October 25 [1958] we came here 10,000 strong and didn't see anybody. We said we would come again, and again, and again. We doubled the number [in 1959] and gained admittance...When we come with 100,000 Congress will sit in special session. With 200,000 the Congress, the President and the Supreme Court will all be in Washington.¹ –Bayard Rustin, April 18, 1959

Let the children lead... Our great hope is that this voice will reach the conscience of the country.² – Walter P. Reuther, April 18, 1959

We have witnessed the first stage of a revolution in the South against segregation and discrimination. Heroic Southern students have injected their very bodies into the non-violent struggle for freedom and have declared undying battle against Jim Crow. In recent years scores of thousands of Negroes and

their white allies have converged on the nation's capital to demand an end to gradualism in all of its forms.³—A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King, 1960

...the time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South; through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham... We must say: "Wake up America! Wake up!" For we cannot stop, and we will not and cannot be patient.⁴—John Lewis, August 28, 1963

This article argues that the two Youth Marches for Integrated Schools, both of which took place in Washington, DC, on October 25, 1958 and on April 18, 1959, served as critical bridges between the NAACP-led (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People), adult-dominated, African American civil rights struggle of the 1950s, and the origins of Black youth as the movement's moral guidelight and driving force beginning in 1960 with the sit-in movement and then the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). The first march drew about 10,000 people and the second one brought 26,000 people to the nation's capital. Although the two Youth Marches originally sought to focus national attention on the failed implementation of the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, from them emerged key ideas about youth activism that would have lasting effect on the Black freedom struggle's direction. The undeniable potential of youth as both troops in civil rights activism and a symbolic force garnering empathy would coalesce in these two marches to the capital, which deserve credit as a demarcation point from which the movement would go in their aftermath.

The Youth Marches of 1958 and 1959 signaled a significant change of direction for contemporary civil rights activism that directly challenged the accepted wisdom that youth were useful and enthusiastic but also could be explosive and unruly, and thus had to be linked with established rights groups in order to become a force whose demands would be taken seriously. The Youth Marches straddled a unique middle ground; its organizers felt that they had built an exciting plan featuring intergenerational strands of activism, marches in the republic's capital, and a model

student ideal that would help the movement be heard and its demands eventually met through what is now known as the politics of respectability.

But the Youth Marches also bolstered the growing youth consciousness in the rights movement that sought to move away from adult control toward becoming agents of their own destiny, foreseeing the move to youth-centered civil rights groups such as SNCC. By 1960, some pioneers in the sit-in movement were actively resisting the intention by established organizations to join forces, realizing that such linkages would constrain them within moderate cultural and political limitations. As the 1960s proceeded, though, debates about whether youth should take leadership roles in the movement were replaced by new critiques that made it vital to differentiate between acceptable, middle-class youth activism and undesirable, urban youth activism.

The Youth Marches also brought to the forefront critical debates, especially within establishment civil rights organizations such as the NAACP, about the role of gender in contemporary activism. Black youth became ever more central to the national conversation by 1960 due to increased media attention and because they sought greater autonomy from the civil rights establishment in that decade. The marches of 1958 and 1959 were a bridge to this growing independence and developing youth consciousness.⁵ Many whites, of course, saw African American male activists as a threatening group from whom they would need protection. African American women were singled out as a potential moral problem in relation to rearing the next generation, as they were “spreading their interests between the home, the community and their jobs.”⁶ The NAACP eventually came to believe that marches like this, and the media coverage they would generate, could shift these perceptions and pave the way for a robust contribution to the civil rights movement by model youth. The two Youth Marches for Integrated Schools at the turn of the 1960s, then,

were a part of the process by which the NAACP consciously allowed youth a central role, hoping not only to affect the national consciousness and achieve the movement's aims, but also to keep any such changes within the scope of its control. The NAACP certainly did not underestimate the "obstacles facing Negro youth" that made it feel that the guiding hand of adults was vital in youth supervision.⁷

The Youth Marches of 1958 and 1959 also portended a proprietary conflict over civil rights activism, especially over the use of the *Brown* decision, between the NAACP and other rights organizations, as the popularity of direct action surpassed legal attacks on Jim Crow. The marches also became a turf battle over youth leadership between the NAACP's national officers and longtime activist A. Philip Randolph, who had founded a March on Washington campaign during the 1940s to challenge anti-Black discrimination in wartime industries. The NAACP, with its legal expertise and financial reach, saw itself as large enough to be a scaffold for any activism, while newly emerging groups, such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and SNCC, tried whenever "possible to take advantage of the NAACP branch apparatus," in the words of the organization. Black youth activism, in Randolph's narrative, gave a "sharp picturization" of America's sin while at the same time offering the solution through educational integration.⁸ The breach with the adult movement that had been brewing during the 1950s became unmistakable with the formation of SNCC.

Finally, the Youth Marches, especially the initial one in October 1958, injected key new perspectives into the movement that came from young people themselves who recognized their own potency as activists. They registered their antagonism toward established organizations like the NAACP and older leaders like A. Philip Randolph and U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Recognizing their

growing importance in both civil rights propaganda and contemporary religious allegory, Black youth asserted themselves during the planning of these events in new and forceful ways. The significant numbers attached to the marches, ten thousand in 1958 and twenty-six thousand in 1959, evidenced that these demonstrations tapped into an important wellspring of activism that would go on to characterize the movement in the next decade. Direct action campaigns in Washington, DC had gained in prominence since the Marion Anderson integrated concert at the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, and gained traction again in World War II and into the 1950s, but this was the first time youth had threatened to become the central actors of such an event.⁹

Scholars of the civil rights movement have evolved their views on African American youth as a separate group worthy of study. Howard Zinn, in one of the early books on youth groups in the civil rights movement focusing on SNCC, sought to challenge the widespread concept of an ‘uncommitted generation’ born during the 1940s and coming of age in the 1950s and 1960s. Zinn saw the emergence of SNCC in 1960 as propelled by the young who were “radical, but not dogmatic; thoughtful, but not ideological.” Indeed, youth tended to be “reluctant to rely completely on the niceties of negotiation and conciliation, distrust those who hold political and economic power...They are fed up with what has been; they are open to anything new and are willing to start from scratch.”¹⁰ In many ways, such attitudes were a reaction to the influence of older civil rights leaders who had tried to direct them within adult-centered groups, such as Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. Youth movements wanted autonomy, not containment. Such a philosophy was espoused by civil rights organizer Ella Baker, who had worked for the NAACP and SCLC, and advised student activists

in 1960 to maintain their independence from both groups, rather than be controlled and absorbed by them.¹¹

Zinn's observations notwithstanding, African American youth as a separate activist group worthy of study was mostly absent from the early civil rights texts; the historical literature instead focused on specific legal campaigns by adults on behalf of youth, such as the Little Rock Nine. But since then scholars have uncovered a long-term pattern of youth activism going back to the National Negro Congress of the 1930s and 1940s and forward to the Southern Student Organizing Committee of the 1960s. *If We Could Change the World* by Rebecca de Schweinitz gives one of the best approaches to the Black youth movement by placing it within the developing ideas of human rights and changing perceptions of young people through the twentieth century. Thomas Bynum, meanwhile, has given a detailed account of young people's activism in *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom*. Similarly, Prudence Cumberbatch has looked at the 1930s development of NAACP Youth Councils through their chief architect Juanita Jackson, who as youth director organized the Youth and College Division to oversee Youth Councils.¹²

Scholars had once viewed the NAACP Youth Councils from the mid-1930s to the 1950s as conservative but now these same organizations are described in the literature as birthplaces of militant youth activism for the civil rights movement. Generational conflict within the NAACP saw new youth groups emerge to gain independence and pursue more militant strategies. Educational historian Jon Hale has framed youth activism in the 1950s as developing out of the "dynamic interplay between adolescents, high schools, and the NAACP." Adults saw youth groups as part of a broader and long-term enterprise to gain rights in which younger activists were guided but not full participants. This was partially in order to protect younger activists

from violent racism but also to sustain a permanent movement. The NAACP had a “passive vision of youth,” whom it saw as being guided by the adults of the local branches. From the Second World War, according to Hale, the NAACP sought increased control over youth groups, which ultimately increased their opposing desire for autonomy.¹³ By February 1960, the student-led sit-ins at Greensboro, North Carolina had reinvigorated civil rights activism. The two Youth Marches in the late 1950s, however, constitute a partition between adult-directed youth activism and the emergence of a full-fledged youth movement in 1960 that declared increasing independence from adult strictures.

At the NAACP’s 49th Annual Convention in July 1958, the organization placed great emphasis on its youth and college meetings, noting “the role that family, church and other community agencies can play in motivating our youth to higher vocational goals and academic achievements.” Due to “increased mobility of people,” however, there was a “consequent loss of both youth and adults of close family and personal ties.” Urbanization loosened the “normally strong family structure” while “moral and ethical values...place heavy emphasis on material possessions as indices of success.” The conference placed great emphasis on “marriage and the family, preparation for marriage” and stressed the “responsibilities of parents in developing positive moral attitudes in youth.” Such guidance to conform to traditional American family values was even greater during a time of “insecurity caused by national and international tension and unrest.” Youth provided an opportunity to push for social progress yet also constituted a potential threat, along with communism, sexual deviancy, and a worship of materialist values, to the established social order, that might undermine the American national consensus during the Cold War. African

American men were particularly susceptible to the charge of delinquency due to the stereotype of Black male savagery.¹⁴

The involvement of Black youth was a way that civil rights organizations could get “new blood” for the movement and build “tomorrow’s leadership.” This encouragement was often couched in parental terms. An adult NAACP branch should take care of younger activists—youth were adjuncts, rather than autonomous units in the organization—who would eventually develop into proper American citizens. Adults were to “nurture by an understanding and intelligent leadership...the work of these young people [who] will form the reserve force for the older members of the branch.” This transitional stage of development was considered a highly vulnerable part of the process when the wrong values could be formed by questionable ideologies or instant gratification. This top-down approach often sounded patronizing to younger people and could also reinforce attitudes of older people toward allegedly callow youth.¹⁵

In this manner, the NAACP did not view its Youth Councils and College Chapters as “separate and autonomous bodies operating irrespective of the local branches and the national office,” but instead as integral and subservient groups under the tutelage of older, wiser heads. This view of youth was central to organizational approaches toward them. On the one hand they were potentially antisocial and politically radical, while on the other hand they could provide “enthusiasm,... energy...[and] faith” that, if properly utilized, could invigorate a movement and ensure its success. The parent-child description was a popular analogy but the NAACP officially preferred to be seen as an older male sibling. In a 1940 pamphlet it stated that “the relationship is not one of father and son, but of older friend and younger friend, one of cooperation and mutual respect.” Avoiding a patriarchal

analogy was useful if not entirely candid, as youth members often found adult branches to be overbearing and patronizing and dysfunction could ensue if a branch tried to impose its will on a youth group. Youth under adult management often felt that their autonomy was compromised and that they had become instruments of older activists who did not necessarily have their particular interests as young people in mind.¹⁶

The issue of how to define youth was a continuing matter of debate for the NAACP and during its 1958 annual conference the organization discussed whether the age limit for membership of Youth Councils should be reduced from 25 to 21, although no change was actually made. The major governmental agencies classified young adults as 18 to 24 and these “young people have many problems which are unique to persons within this age range. In addition, persons in this age category have not yet completed their development into full, mature adulthood.” Lowering the age would, however, lead to a loss of “gifted older youth” to NAACP Youth Councils and lose a “vast body of new young leaders and members who have been privileged to secure education, training, experience and associations which we need very badly at the present to bolster our fight.” The voting age in the United States was set at 21 until the 26th Amendment (1971) so the NAACP’s continued setting of the ending of youth at 25 years of age signaled a view that it was a developmental stage that required gradual citizenship to create responsible adults who upheld traditional American values. Such an intervening stage from childhood to adulthood also dispensed with the stereotypes perpetuated in the South that regarded all Black people as childlike and referred to as either ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ regardless of age and persistently denied them rights based on an unending tutelage stage. It similarly mirrored white teenage

associations while also showing African Americans as developed, civilized, and educated.¹⁷

The sense that youth in America required close supervision by adults was set alongside the popularity of sociological perceptions that racism was an internalized pathology and second-class citizenship was a learned social experience. Therefore, reform of education became essential and formed the basis of the NAACP-inspired *Brown* decision. A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, at a White House conference, deliberated over the centrality of education to changing attitudes: “Let us realize that children learn their prejudices. They are not born with them. They learn the ways of racial inequalities from their parents, from their attitudes and words and behavior patterns....Can we re-educate our children? Can we re-educate ourselves?” Randolph asserted that “young people tend to be less prejudiced than adults” and “have a stronger sense of justice...which attracts them to programs concerned with eliminating injustice.”¹⁸

Alongside the *Brown* decision, the Emmett Till lynching in Mississippi in 1955 created an impetus for a growing youth movement. The Till lynching represented a major turning point for African American youth in realizing the limits of gradualism in the face of entrenched and violent racism. Youth saw that while *Brown* might be a step forward it could not change the minds and actions of the South, therefore more direct action was required to protect them. The propaganda battle that ensued to control the image of “the murder case of a 14 year old,” from Chicago, “a mere boy” in Mississippi against racist claims that he “grappled with a white Mississippi housewife” indicated a shift in civil rights strategy that equated youth with innocence and directly undermined the stereotype of the savage Black male.¹⁹

While the NAACP attempted to make the Till murder into an example that disgraced “our country” and was holding the United States to “international ridicule” during the Cold War, many youth groups in the North saw it as an attack against their own identities and organized protests directly targeted to channel their personal outrage. At a Chicago memorial service, Camille Carter, president of the city’s NAACP Youth Council, organized a petition to President Eisenhower²⁰:

The Youth of Chicago are shocked at the inhuman murder of Emmett Louis Till in Greenwood, Mississippi. The lynching of a child is one of the most barbaric crimes ever committed by the racists and bigots of our country to perpetuate their doctrine of white supremacy. Young people all over the country and the world are looking to you, Mr. President, to speak out against the lynching and to bring all the influence of your office to bear on this case...The Youth of our country have a tremendous stake in the future. All our lives are before us and we feel that the outrages, abuses and the denial of civil rights to the Negro People, as exemplified in the murder of the 14 year old Emmett Louis Till, can and must be thoroughly investigated and immediately stopped.²¹

NAACP National Youth Adviser Herb Wright asked the Youth Councils and College Chapters to flood politicians with letters about the murder and to get in touch with “other youth and student groups and urge them to take similar action,” thus directing youth protest into traditional forms of activism. Wright organized college conferences that would “inform and educate young people about our civil rights program, and to arouse their interest in helping to eliminate racial discrimination and segregation from this country. Special emphasis will be placed on legislation and political techniques. Such a program would dramatize the important role which young people can play in our program.” NAACP youth organizing sought to channel young people’s anger into practical action so that they could “learn what...[they] can realistically do.”²²

The two Youth Marches portrayed the Black middle class and its youth as mainstream and patriotic Americans. The organizational leadership and inspiration for the marches lay with A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin, while formal public leaders included Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, Jackie Robinson, and Harry Belafonte, alongside grassroots leaders in the news, such as Daisy Bates, and youth

representatives, such as Minnijean Brown of the Little Rock Nine. While King was a figurehead of the marches, indeed it was impossible to foresee any publicity or degree of success without his input, it was Randolph who pursued the march with unflinching faith in the concept of youth as civil rights soldiers, alongside Rustin's genius for organizing. These public leaders each added a self-conscious example of responsible leadership to guide youth activists. Wilkins and the NAACP symbolized "to American youth the long slow struggle to build an organization that would fight for the rights of the Negro." Jackie Robinson, the first African American major league baseball player, was seen at "a time when fear and conformity are youth's greatest enemies...[as having] the courage and conviction of those who are first to break down deeply rooted barriers...He has set an example for American young people and added a new dimension to sportsmanship on the playing field and in human relations." Harry Belafonte, singer and actor, as well as funding many campaigns, was seen as "a figure of encouragement and inspiration to youth the world over." The Little Rock Nine campaign was a vital focus of the march and was essential as a representation of the practical activism of youth. A "small delegation from Little Rock...would have a tremendous effect and would electrify everyone," Randolph expressed, by underscoring the problems of implementing *Brown* while presenting the best of student activism.²³

The Youth Marches consciously incorporated national memorial space into the demonstrations, joining a longstanding American protest tradition when trying to achieve a response from the federal government. For African Americans, such protests dated back to the Marion Anderson concert of 1939 at the Lincoln Memorial, albeit one of the most salient protests was the march that was organized but ultimately did not take place in 1941. The cancelled March on Washington Movement (MOWM)

of 1941, organized by Randolph, successfully applied pressure on the Roosevelt administration to ensure that jobs in federally funded defense contracts were distributed on a non-racist basis, in exchange for the calling off of the demonstration. The March on Washington was felt by many Black youth to be a lost opportunity, as it would have demonstrated their unity and determination to collectively push for civil rights alongside adults as their ostensible equals. The New York Division of MOWM was particularly aggrieved at the cancellation of the march and reflects an early rift between youth and the civil rights establishment²⁴:

[T]o Negro Youth and perhaps millions of other Negroes the March-on-Washington was received as the hope of a new day. To us it symbolized an opportunity and an inspiration to struggle for job equality, to throw off the chains of racial prejudice and to walk as free men and women. The march highlighted the ambitions and pent-up emotions of the Negro masses as never before in the life of Negro Youth. Its psychological momentum was tremendous towards achieving the aspirations of Negro Youth...More than this, the meeting in Washington would have cemented the grievances of the Negro masses into more determined demands for justice, and strengthened the organization and unity of the Negro people throughout the world, particularly in the United States.²⁵

The signing of Executive Order 8802 setting up the Federal Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) by Roosevelt was seen by the youth division of New York MOWM as a “partial victory” when “we consider what might have been achieved by having the March.” Youth felt aggrieved that the march had been postponed without their consultation. Walter White, executive secretary of the NAACP and executive committee official for MOWM, responded that youth should “face realities and not insist on procedures or theories which are not in accord with intelligent and sound practice.”²⁶

The younger people who were interested in the Washington march also reflect the concepts of how youth was defined in the mid-twentieth century. Pauli Murray, civil rights activist and feminist, was the national chair at the annual student conference of the NAACP in 1942 and disapproved of the postponement of the march. Born in 1910, she was 31 years old in 1941 and saw that the “caliber of young

militants, ranging from eighteen to thirty-five is to be found at the core of the New Negro.” Regretful of the cancelling of the march, Murray blamed “older leaders” and especially the NAACP, which “throttled and controlled” a youth movement “by an adult setup”:

I am merely representative of an increasing number of militant young negroes, still outside the folds of communism, born or reared in the post-war period of World War I, graduating from college in the depths of economic depression, veterans of home relief, WPA, labor organization and other struggles for the underprivileged of which we are a part, and simply waiting for one man or group of men with sufficient courage, imagination, and determination to say and do publicly the things we believe must be said and done. As a ‘lost generation’ we have no prestige to lose and can afford to be critical and militant.²⁷

Murray saw that the NAACP had a role as a “training ground for the struggle” that had “corralled that section of the middle class willing to agitate, write letters, and occasionally picket, but not yet willing to put on overalls...and preach freedom to the masses.” The local division of the MOWM instead planned a “silent parade to the beat of muffled drums” (reflecting the NAACP’s own Silent Parade of 1917 in New York City) and rally against “fascist-like brutalities” of mob violence against Blacks and against segregation and discrimination, reflecting the desire for collective action. Indeed discussion continued between the MOWM and the NAACP to have rallies in major cities, namely New York, Chicago, and the nation’s capital that fed from frustrations of the cancelled 1941 march and to push for a presidential proclamation to abolish segregation in “Washington, DC and all government departments and the armed forces.”²⁸

The Prayer Pilgrimage for Peace in 1957 also symbolically restructured public memorial space to reflect political and social objectives. Although the pilgrimage was meant to avoid overt political messages, Black congressman Adam Clayton Powell exemplified how the Lincoln Memorial could be used for propaganda purposes. His speech compared Lincoln the Great Emancipator unfavorably to Eisenhower: “We

meet here in front of the Lincoln Memorial because we are getting more from a dead Republican than we are getting from live Democrats and live Republicans.” However, like the Youth March in 1958, it was an assembly that the Eisenhower administration ignored.²⁹

The Prayer Pilgrimage stressed non-political agency but had political overtones, more akin to a church service than a protest, with only one section (out of 31 on the program) dedicated to “reports of southern freedom fighters.” A customary pledge was taken: “We believe that in the household of God there can be no discrimination among his children on the irrelevant basis of race, color, or religious affiliation... We believe that to compel the segregation of the children of God on such basis is sinful defiance of God’s will.” The way to “arouse the conscience of the nation” was by having a physical manifestation of innocence played out through civil rights campaigns. The innocence of youth could transform the sins of the past into a stronger and more united (Godly) country in the future. At the pilgrimage Randolph stated “that children can unlearn to hate other children and adults...by contact in the schools, by sound science, education and Christian teachings.”³⁰ One person described the march as a protest to “demonstrate the solidarity of our people with the embattled leaders of the South to help awaken the dozing conscience of America”:

young people from the fourth grade to college level, both Negro and white, are being called to march in a solemn procession through the nation’s capital. We have asked churches, trade unions and community organizations in New York City, Philadelphia, Baltimore and Washington to join in this event. The young people, marching hand in hand down Pennsylvania Avenue will present a living symbol of the integration ideal.³¹

Randolph explained that the campaign “put before the country the great moral issue of integration” in order to “make a deep and effective impression upon President Eisenhower and other government officials.” Trades unions and churches provided numbers for a march that would “reflect every segment of the American public –

religious, labor and civic.” The NAACP was seen as the essential foundation for the march, with its relatively stable membership numbers and ability to fund national events. While Randolph believed that “American youth has taken the initiative” as they “are most directly concerned, intimately involved” it was up to adult members to assist in creating this space to provide clear boundaries for the movement. For example, Randolph wrote to Sergeant William Bracey, president of the Guardians Association, NYPD, to join the march because, “members with their experience may be of particular help to us in the actual forming of the line of the march...which will guarantee an orderly and dignified procession.” Adults keeping order in the march were to be framed in contrast with the “reckless destruction of public education by segregationists.” Similarly “firm religious convictions would do much to enhance the prestige and dignity of our program,” stated Randolph.³²

But established civil rights leaders challenged this vision. Roy Wilkins was reluctant to “commit the NAACP as an organization to these responsibilities,” because he felt the “objective of the youth march on Washington is unclear” and that “it seems to me to waste valuable times and opportunity...when the times (and the maneuvers of our enemies) call for analysis, understanding and countermaneuvers.”³³ Wilkins’ voice mattered; there was a reliance on the NAACP for manpower and money, not least for the number of Youth Councils and College Chapters that could be utilized—by 1958 there already existed 980 NAACP Youth Council branches and 887 College Chapters. With the NAACP on board for a campaign it could be financially underwritten and a crowd could be expected to turn up for any events. The organizational experience of the NAACP was essential to this march’s success and it was not optimal to sideline NAACP leaders. Wilkins expressed his displeasure that the NAACP had not been “invited to participate in the planning meeting...It seems

odd that a project touching on a case in which the NAACP is a central figure should have been launched without consultation with us.” Furthermore, the “extreme shortness of the notice of the Washington project” made it difficult for branches to participate. Wilkins was willing to offer the NAACP name to the event but could not “assume, as we did with the Prayer Pilgrimage of 1957, any major responsibility for executing the plan of those who conceived the project.” Local chapters, however, sometimes diverged from national leadership cues. Particularly, the New York and Baltimore NAACP branches showed grassroots enthusiasm for the project.³⁴

In a letter to the NAACP that asserted the philosophy of the first Youth March, Randolph argued that heavy-handed, entirely top-down models missed the point that, “it is the youth who are immediately and personally affected and involved. In many respects an expression from them is more meaningful than from the generations like myself, decades removed from schools.” Older people were not necessarily irrelevant, but without any tactical embrace of youth activism, even in necessary conjunction with legalistic methods and adult organizing, they would be ignoring that a “demonstration of youth adds to the chain of actions its own unique element, needed in a total struggle”:

All major social movements of revolutionary quality involve a structure in which masses of people are the foundation. On that foundation depend the tactical moves, whether in courts, legislative chambers, or executive departments. There cannot be maneuvers merely by the General Staff. It directs, but the army maneuvers. There is no army if the people are not enlisted, not orientated, not disciplined for sacrifice and action. I do not advocate mass action because I have a sentimental predilection for it; it is the recruitment center and basic training camp from which committed forces emerge, whose convictions and consequent actions deeply trouble politicians counting on apathy and passivity to evade responsibilities.³⁵

The NAACP and the labor unions’ “ultimate resource were its people,” albeit directed by wise and seasoned leaders. Randolph planned for an audience with President Eisenhower as “part of a larger voice” to explain joint youth and adult frustrations at the slow implementation and conservative reaction to *Brown*. The march would be

interracial and would involve the “biggest street rally in decades,” that included the “involvement of the ordinary person who does not attend dinners, who hasn’t fifteen, fifty or a hundred dollars for a ticket or a tuxedo, but who has zeal, energy and native talent which cannot be bought, but be given without cost if we ask for it.” This critique of the older rights organization juxtaposed with a burgeoning youth movement was a classic generational and tactical debate. The NAACP preferred the tried and tested methods of legalism and bureaucratic leadership while Randolph advocated involving “the masses” to invoke the “revolutionary sweep” of change that “only the multitudes can carry through.”³⁶

Despite Randolph’s urgings, the NAACP hierarchy still needed to be convinced of the tactical approach of the project, and still wanted to garner some control over the event. Wilkins advised Randolph that he ought to get “a small group of approximately 500 youth together with outstanding youth leaders in the Civil Rights field who could serve as symbols of the struggle for integration.” NAACP leadership distributed to branches a letter which referred to a “Children’s March on Washington” that produced significant interest in the event despite Wilkins’ critique: “Our official position is that we are not opposing this project...but...that we are able to give only such support as we can spare from our regular program.” Wilkins saw little point in the project as “Congress is not in session. The President is there but thus far proved to be inaccessible.” Therefore, Wilkins stated, “why go to Washington? If a demonstration of concern over desegregation and civil wrongs in the South is the objective, could not a much larger and more effective demonstration be staged in New York?” New York City, of course, was the location of the national NAACP headquarters.³⁷

Wilkins also worried about the logistics of a “children’s march” and expressed his “sober reservations about the responsibilities involved in transporting a large number of children by bus to Washington.” Practical issues were always to the fore, especially with regard to civil rights activists acting *in loco parentis*, therefore any “younger children, of course, should be accompanied by teachers or parents.” There were also worries about violence erupting, which would cause permanent damage to the school integration cause. The president of the NAACP Washington, DC branch envisioned that a “group of irresponsible teenagers from Virginia could make the ‘March for Integration’ a debacle which would do our cause almost irreparable injury” and cause an increase of tensions in DC “to alarming proportions.”³⁸

Officially, organizers wanted a wide range of children from the “fourth grade to college level” that “will join hands in a march down Pennsylvania Avenue and will send a delegation to visit the White House. Thereby presenting to the world a living symbol of their own convictions; that the children of the nation wish to live and study and play together, hand in hand.” It was estimated that about 1,000 “young people...will give their support and heart to those small children [of the South] whose firm stand against terrifying risks has aroused the admiration of millions throughout the world.”³⁹ Contemporary observers labeled the year 1958 a “climax” of the civil rights struggle as segregationists “in desperation” were “closing down public schools. In cold fury they employ violence against integration leaders, their acts shames our nation throughout the world at a time when prestige is most precious.”⁴⁰

The two Youth Marches also exposed a longstanding rift between the NAACP’s national office and some of its local chapters. Several major NAACP branches supported the events as best they could, expressing what Randolph called “severe dissatisfaction” that people were “not sufficiently called into play” in the

events' planning and execution. Branch enthusiasm came not only from the northeast but places further afield, such as Chattanooga, which saw the Youth Marches as potentially "revitalizing this dying branch" even though funds and short notice posed barriers to attendance. Some branches signaled their disappointment that the NAACP national office had "not actively supported the Youth March." The Jamaica, New York chapter, for example, "voted to have a letter written...expressing their opinion that the NAACP should have given its whole-hearted support to the march."⁴¹

Organizers had to reschedule the 1958 march for two weeks later, from October 11 to October 25, when an attacker stabbed King in New York, nearly killing him, but that did not weaken the estimated final turnout of around 10,000 activists, who chartered 131 buses to get to the nation's capital. His wife Coretta delivered King's address to the marchers at the Lincoln Memorial, linking slave resistance, the underground railroad, and the Montgomery Bus Boycott in an undeviating progressive history⁴²:

There is a unique element to this demonstration; it is a young people's march. You are proving that the youth of America is freeing itself of the prejudices of an older and darker time in our history. In addition, you are proving the so-called 'beat generation' may have been hit hard, but it is definitely not 'beat.' It is standing up and fighting hard for the rights of all Americans...Keep marching and show the pessimists and the weak of spirit that they are wrong...The future belongs, not to those who slumber or sleep, but to those who cannot rest while the evil of injustice thrives in the bosom of America. The future belongs to those who march toward freedom.⁴³

March organizers were careful to avoid accusations of anti-Americanism. Activists were encouraged to "carry one or more American flags in the line of the march."

Letters in the *Washington Post* declared that students "had conducted themselves with marked decorum and dignity, [and] were safely returned to their homes where in the near tomorrow they will be citizens with a vote." The NAACP claimed to have organized at least 1,600 NAACP youth members from the eastern seaboard and organizational participation also came from the United Christian Movement and the

US National Student Association (USNSA), which endorsed “direct social action” for the first time.⁴⁴

During the 1958 march a youth delegation went to the White House but was “denied admission.” The delegation consisted of an interracial cross-section of young individuals and youth organizations, headed by Harry Belafonte. Importantly, this youth delegation reflected the NAACP’s internal redefinition of gender respectability. Assertive young women who achieved great academic success and whose community value stemmed from their willingness to fight for freedom in the public sphere made up a critical share of the group. Black representation included: Josephine Boyd, 18 years old from Greensboro, North Carolina, the first African American graduate of an integrated school in that state; Minnijean Brown of the Little Rock Nine; Norman Bailey and Leon Thompson, both from Maryland, two of the first Black Americans to integrate Baltimore schools in 1954; Paula Martin, 11 years old from Virginia, who fought a court order resisting integration in Norfolk; and Fred H. Moore, who had led a student strike at South Carolina State College for Negroes, had been expelled, and continued his studies at Howard University. Among the white students was Reginald Green, a 23-year-old Harvard graduate who was vice-president of the USNSA. New attitudes toward the capabilities of young women would be crucial to the NAACP’s attempts to reinvigorate the organization by the end of the decade.⁴⁵

The delegation statement covered a range of topics but its main point was that the “Chief Executive should make an explicit moral as well as legal commitment of the full resources of the Federal Government to the objective of achieving orderly, effective and speedy integration of schools.” Specifically, they wanted a “truly effective Civil Rights Bill in the present session of Congress,” and passage of the bipartisan Douglas-Javits-Celler Bill which would give the federal government power

to enforce school desegregation. While central government action was part of a civil rights mantra, a call was also given for the president to have a White House Conference “of youth and student leaders to discuss ways in which youth may participate in the implementation of the Supreme Court decision.” Youth, therefore, were not mere soldiers taking orders by congregating in the capital but were to be central in the debate to find a solution, not simply allowing adults to take over and potentially compromise their objectives.⁴⁶

One of the white students in the delegation, Harlon Joye, a graduate student at the New School for Social Research in New York City, called the presidential rejection “most undignified.” The delegation, however, was not expecting to be received by the president a mere two weeks prior to the midterm elections (he was not even in Washington at the time, suspected to be on a golfing trip somewhere else), so it was a purely symbolic act. Sympathetic newspapers carried the event, however, to the chagrin of the White House, claiming that the “young generation” was “neither silent nor beat, but the vocal and determined hope of a democratic future for this divided land” and painted a picture of unionists, students, and young Americans together being ignored by the establishment as they marched through Washington, DC. Randolph attempted to turn the presidential rejection into an anti-communist speech, claiming that the “visit was not designed to embarrass Mr. Eisenhower or ‘put him on the spot’” but to “strengthen his hand.” It was reported in the leftist newspaper, *National Guardian*, that during Randolph’s remarks, “many youths stirred uneasily and one was heard to say: ‘I didn’t get up at five o’clock to come down here to apologize.’”⁴⁷ Students from Brooklyn College explained that they felt it “profoundly disturbing when the President of the United States makes himself inaccessible to thousands of his younger fellow Americans who come to ask his aid in

a matter which directly affects their welfare...He has remained aloof from morality.” The students further criticized Randolph’s supportive statements about Eisenhower because “the President has performed a saddening disservice to the cause for which many of our fellow students in the South daily risk their lives. We owe it to them to defend their rights, indeed the rights of all of us, with all the moral strength of which we are capable.”⁴⁸

Activists at the Lincoln Memorial shouted their unanimous approval of a resolution to undertake another march on May 17, 1959, the fifth anniversary of *Brown*, by which time they would seek to collect a million signatures for a petition to integrate schools which would then be presented to the president and Congress. While student comments exposed a potential generational rift between Randolph and the youth activists, but Randolph’s tactics and goals matched those of youth activists, including the use of mass protest and immediate integration, which mitigated the conflict. On the other hand, established groups like the NAACP were gaining a reputation for being the barrier to immediate action, as they encouraged gradualism and delay. Randolph believed that such generational disagreement was “evidence of the health, strength and integrity of our Youth March...and I welcome the expression of our views and criticisms on the statement made by myself.”⁴⁹

The Youth Marches faced inevitable accusations of leftist and communist intent and control. Indeed the events received much focus in the left-wing press within the United States, such as the *Young People’s Socialist League*, and not much other coverage in other mainstream media, except from the *Washington Post*. Even sympathetic members of the public criticized Randolph for the speaker lineup, particularly Harry Belafonte, who “read the youth pledge,”⁵⁰ and according to one critic represented a poor choice:

unwise from a purely tactical point of view in that it could conceivably give our enemies a chance to raise the extraneous issue of intermarriage and Communism. This can cause confusion in the minds of the public who are not yet sufficiently clear on the race question, who are still too backward to view this objectively, but whom we want to win over to the cause of integrated schools...May I also argue, in the interests of the idealistic youth participating in this moral endeavor, as well as in the interests of the growth and influence of the movement itself, that disavowal of CP support be as adequately stressed in press releases and public statements.⁵¹

The march organizers turned the predictable accusations of communist infiltration of the event into a sideswipe at “anti-American” groups generally, including segregationists that ignored the word of the US Supreme Court: “The sponsors of the March have not invited Communists or communist organizations. Nor have they invited members of the Ku Klux Klan or the White Citizens’ Council. We do not want the participation of these groups, nor of individuals or other organizations holding similar views.”⁵²

The 1958 event, however, qualified as sufficiently American to make it onto the Armed Forces Radio Service overseas broadcast, which garnered it international publicity. Indeed, Roy Wilkins saw the march as promoting the benefits of a capitalist economy and its education system against communism; segregation, meanwhile, thwarted progress in the arts and sciences: “when electronics, engineering, chemistry, and the atom have sent our world forward to unprecedented speed, education is more necessary than ever...Ignorance and lack of skill not only hurt, but may well destroy.”⁵³

But Wilkins and other NAACP staffers felt that march organizers were using the NAACP simply for numbers and funding, and openly wondered whether to support a second march. He claimed that the NAACP entailed “a deficit of at least \$85,000 as a result of 1958 operations” and warned of the costs of another mass demonstration. Gloster Current, who represented the NAACP at the 1958 march,

reported the event in underwhelming terms to Wilkins, especially the youth delegation being turned away from the White House⁵⁴:

This was the highpoint of the rally, if there was one, and unfortunately it pointed up the 'failure' of the entire affair. There was little enthusiasm in the entire gathering...I am of the opinion that though these spectacles are troublesome and costly, that they do give people who want to demonstrate and to make a trip somewhere, an opportunity to feel they are doing something in this great struggle for democracy. It is better, therefore, that such demonstrations be channeled and have the full support of the Negro community, if this is at all possible, than to give those who always want to criticize the Association, an opportunity to say 'we are not cooperative.'⁵⁵

Indeed, the original choice of May 17, 1959 for the second march indicated a rather stunning lack of regard for NAACP tradition. If it was not changed, the NAACP would have problems supporting the campaign. Wilkins reminded organizers, "May 17 is more or less an 'NAACP Day,'" because *Brown* had been announced on that date in 1954. As per annual tradition, branches were "planning observances." Furthermore, the year 1959 was also the 50th anniversary of the NAACP, and thus any participation by its youth groups in outside events that year would "depend upon their schedule." When the NAACP asserted that it would not guarantee any financial assistance to the project, organizers moved the event to April 18.⁵⁶

Soon, though, the NAACP changed its tune and supported the idea of another march, seeing it as a recruitment opportunity. After all, Wilkins' eventual public avowal to "fully endorse the March and the Petition Campaign" dovetailed with the NAACP's 50th anniversary goal of recruiting 100,000 new youth members. The NAACP's internal position shifted quickly: "therefore, doubly important that we secure a large turn-out of young persons for this very important event." In the spirit of cooperation, the march would be co-coordinated by Bayard Rustin (seen as being in the Randolph orbit) and the NAACP's national youth secretary, Herb Wright. Events and committees leading up to the march tended to be explicitly connected to the NAACP. For example, after the Youth Committee for the march gathered on February

14, 1959, the traditional evening formal Valentine fundraiser in aid of the NAACP's anniversary and sponsored by the NAACP Youth and College Division followed the meeting.⁵⁷

The financial weight did initially fall upon the NAACP and in early April 1959 Randolph appealed for further support from NAACP branches. Wilkins' reply was to outline the NAACP's original pledge of \$1,500, which was quickly followed by a further \$1,000 and the setting up of an additional "emergency fund" which totaled \$3,000. The NAACP Board felt that "the Youth March is useful activity and unquestionably has enlisted the interest and enthusiasm of young people...Our branches have sponsored buses and have contributed generally to the effort." But the march had become a costly undertaking; organizers raised an additional \$5,000 through a dinner hosted by Harry Belafonte and Sidney Poitier and paid off a \$4,000 debt only after Rustin organized a Count Basie and Odetta benefit concert in May at Hunter College Auditorium.⁵⁸

Between the two marches, the NAACP experienced a vast increase in membership of its Youth Councils, and its leaders began to sense that the organization had to expand its definition of the capabilities of youth. Contemporary youth direct activism vastly increased during the late 1950s and early 1960s and it was during the period between the two youth marches that the NAACP finally started to link its future to these movements. Oklahoma City's NAACP Youth Council reported 2,000 new members in a four-week period in 1958; Philadelphia reported 1,100; Cleveland 1,000. Yet even within this reinvigorated climate, there also crept a growing disquiet toward the established civil rights organizations from Black youth. Direct action became more popular and apparently effective, as evidenced by gains in Wichita, Kansas, and in Baltimore, Maryland. The NAACP was losing its monopoly on youth

activism as groups sought independence from the establishment. In Baltimore, for example, the NAACP had competition from local independent youth groups in the late 1950s, such as the Civic Interest Group (CIG), and from SNCC and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) as the 1960s progressed. Herb Wright disclosed in 1958⁵⁹:

Several branch presidents refused to allow their youth councils to participate in 'sit-down' protests...As a result of this attitude, many of the young people have become dejected and have resigned their memberships in the organization. One of the results of the [NAACP Youth Career] conference [in Torrington, Connecticut] was an understanding among branch presidents, that youth council members can, and will be allowed to participate in such projects as long as they are properly planned and coordinated by the chairman of the Youth Work Committee of the adult branch.⁶⁰

Many in the NAACP still desired to keep control over youth activists in order to continue a certain style of activism. Wright often seemed to be temperamentally at odds with this structured organizing of youth within the NAACP and was generally receptive to the idea of encouraging recruitment through social events and decentralized planning of activism. Wright, who had personal experience as a youth activist in the 1940s, perceived that "one of the major deterrents to larger youth participation in community and civic programs is indifference and negative attitudes among adult leaders."⁶¹

Indicating the zeitgeist of youth enthusiasm, the April 18, 1959 march was significantly larger than the prior one; approximately 26,000 people participated. But the march had been denied use of the Lincoln Memorial, which held significant symbolic weight as the setting for a growing tradition of Black protest. After a march along Pennsylvania Avenue the crowds gathered at the Sylvan Theater at the foot of the Washington Monument. When this site had been proposed for the Prayer Pilgrimage in 1957, NAACP attorney at the Washington Bureau, Clarence Mitchell, explained⁶²:

if we were denied the use of the Lincoln Memorial...it would be a catastrophe in race relations in the United States...[T]hat the symbolic value of the Lincoln Memorial for this

meeting was of tremendous importance in overcoming the despair, disillusionment and anger which have been generated by recent acts of racial violence and intimidation in the South... [E]very newspaper in the country would regard that kind of thing as contemptuous treatment by the U.S. Government and the resentment among colored people would reach unpredictable heights.⁶³

March organizers accepted this slight, however, because the event was larger than in 1958 and this time they had access to federal officials.

Part of the increased numbers for the second march came from its national representation. Whereas the first march primarily was populated by people from the East Coast, this time buses came from the Midwest, California, Alabama, the Mississippi Delta, and the South more generally. The largest cohort came from New York and the northeast, including a group of Puerto Ricans situated in Harlem who sought sponsorship from the CIO-AFL to attend. As Rustin correctly predicted, “the 1958 March was an action planned and carried out primarily by people on the East Coast. The Youth March in 1959 will be much broader. We hope to have contingents from all parts of the nation.” Some young people wanted to attend the march but lacked the funds and could not find sponsorship. Herb Wright could only suggest to Wilberforce University students who could not find a way to get to the march from Ohio that they sponsor a “dance on campus or some other kind of activity through which to raise funds to underwrite this project.”⁶⁴

Martin Luther King, healed from his stabbing wound in the previous year, spoke to the gathering, as did Randolph. Describing the youthful crowds who “intermingled like the waters of a river, I see only one face, the face of the future.” King felt that American youth had “shown themselves to be highly alert, highly responsible young citizens”:

Thus, the Negro, in his struggle to secure his own rights is destined to enlarge democracy for all people, in both a political and a social sense... You have awakened on hundreds of campuses throughout the land a new spirit of social inquiry to the benefit of all Americans.⁶⁵

King pronounced his traditional exhortation to Black Americans, in this case African American youth, that they were the new Israelites who would lead America from the desert of apartheid to the promised land of true democracy.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, Randolph's opening remarks highlighted the centrality of youth activism while using traditional tropes of mainstream American politics alongside the importance of education as a signifier to overcome racism:

Youth and their allies have come back to Washington because, in this fleeting moment of history, the problem of integrated schools has become the conscience of the nation. We have returned to our Nation's Capital today with a democratic participation in a great mass demonstration by youth and adult to indicate the uncompromising commitment of American youth to the principle of the God-given right of every child, regardless of race or color, to secure an education in the public schools free from the insult of discrimination... We have come to Washington because it is the heart not only of America but of the free world. It is the Capital to which rulers from all nations of the world come to discuss their problems and seek support and cooperation from the President of our country, the most powerful ruler in the world today... There can be no civil rights except within the framework of a democratic society.⁶⁷

Randolph concluded his speech by emphasizing his "unqualified support" for President Eisenhower and the statement was placed into the Congressional Record by Sam Rayburn, the Speaker of the House of Representatives.⁶⁸

Unlike the previous year when they ignored such rhetoric, this time youth activists pushed back more stridently against Randolph's Cold War rhetoric, to the disdain of Wilkins and other anti-communists. Gloster Current observed that youth representatives from New York were "purveyors of the party line" critical tone of the march. Current felt "particularly disturbed by the remarks" of a student from Hunter College who had criticized Randolph's anti-communist statements as "unnecessary...red baiting"⁶⁹:

I felt it incumbent upon me to take issue with the young man from Hunter College pointing out the contribution of Mr. Randolph in the past... who had given his life to the struggle; that the Youth March had a unique experience of receiving cooperation from a wide variety of religious, civic, labor and other groups, which would not have been possible were it not for the respect for Mr. Randolph's leadership and integrity.⁷⁰

Student criticism overlooked Randolph's condemnation of colonialism in Africa as paralleling American racism, a concept developed by another speaker on the day, Kenyan labor leader Tom Mboya. But Randolph did not take it personally, nor did he believe that such resistance would "indicate the existence of any considerable pro-communist sentiment among the student groups that participated in the Youth March." Wilkins added his own red-baiting critique of the youth activists, writing that "any group which winces at the comparatively mild (but positive) statements...raises a suspicion in my mind."⁷¹

The 1959 Youth Petition, signed by over 400,000 people, expressed the demands of the marchers. These demands included: passage of the Douglas-Javits-Celler civil rights bill; federal powers to enforce school integration; formal acceptance of the petition by federal institutions; and the liberation of Asbury Howard Jr, who had been sentenced to a chain gang in Alabama after attempting to protect his father who had been attacked during a voting rights campaign. The petition was successfully presented at the White House by Congressman Charles Diggs of Michigan, who had accepted the petition at the march and "promised to do everything in his power to see that they were entered into [the] Congressional Record and brought to the attention of the proper authorities."⁷²

Federal recognition of the march had come to be an important goal for organizers, and the 1959 march committee made far more resolute plans for official White House acknowledgement of the event than it had in 1958, when organizers symbolically called out Eisenhower in absentia. Randolph declared "that this is a movement to be reckoned with and reflects a new stirring of hitherto passive youth.... This will be the first interracial youth delegation to present a program on civil rights" to Eisenhower "since he took office." The delegation that went to the White House

included two students, both women, nominated by the NAACP who exemplified the model student approach to activism, classic demonstrations of the organization's lean toward respectability as the hallmark of readiness for citizenship.⁷³ Josephine Boyd, from Greensboro, North Carolina, was selected for her "outstanding scholastic accomplishment," and Sallye Phillips from Hartshorne High School, Oklahoma, was "a straight 'A' student and has just been elected the first Negro valedictorian of her graduating class." Reginald Green and Harlon Joye were among the white youth representatives to the executive mansion. While there was federal government recognition of the event, the president did not personally receive the delegation. Instead, Eisenhower's special assistant John Morgan received the petition in a 15-minute meeting at the White House. Vice President Richard Nixon would not receive the petition in Congress but Sam Rayburn did. Reports claimed that Morgan "showed interest" and promised that the federal government would "place its weight behind the movement for the integration of the schools."⁷⁴

Some activists suggested that the Youth Marches coalesce into an annual, permanent movement, like the wartime MOWM, with Rustin touted as director of the new group to orchestrate demonstrations and political conventions in various cities, but that idea seems to have been abandoned by June 1959. Randolph supported the notion but the NAACP did not. Randolph urged that activists "must make pilgrimage after pilgrimage to Washington to keep the issue of human dignity alive in America in particular and the world in general." Gloster Current, at a meeting of march leaders and participants, questioned the usefulness of such a new organization and felt that the marches had "served its purpose [and] had no real justification for further activities in Washington." The NAACP also opposed a proposal to create a permanent youth lobby in the nation's capital, because such an assemblage would compete with its own

youth organizations. Wilkins declared the NAACP to be “competent and oriented to filling all needs of the movement, from specialist tasks to mass action projects... Whatever they do is duplicatory.” One of the major issues at the start of any 1950s civil rights campaign, especially as the movement transformed to include more direct action, was whether the NAACP was “with it, opposing it, [or] faking cooperation.”⁷⁵

The breach by young activists with the adult movement that had been brewing through the late 1950s fully opened with the formation of SNCC. Indeed, King saw the Youth Marches as playing a vital role in this process because they were “an important project not only for our ultimate goal of dignity and freedom, but more importantly because it permits our youth, Negro and white, to engage in a great social struggle by means that are consistent with the way of sacrifice and love – they have only to persuade and walk.” Even the NAACP came around to this way of thinking. Wilkins admitted in 1959 that “children helped, too, by their determination and courage and by their exemplary behavior,” although his ensuing speeches invariably credited the success of *Brown* to the NAACP while remaining silent on the Youth Marches of 1958 and 1959 or about independent youth activism in general. But by the time of the sit-ins during 1960, Herb Wright’s actions reflected the change in NAACP values. He organized an Emergency Conference on Youth to help teach younger activists “effective methods” of protest so that they could develop into a national movement, hopefully under establishment tutelage, but even the NAACP would have to accept that its dominance over youth activism had forever ended. This article has argued that the Youth Marches of 1958 and 1959 played a key role in that evolutionary process.⁷⁶

¹ Cited from Mrs. Ruby Gill to A. Philip Randolph, July 11, 1959, box 35, folder 2, A. Philip Randolph Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter “Randolph Papers”).

² Telegram, April 17, 1959, box 35, folder 1, Randolph Papers.

³ Statement by A. Philip Randolph and Martin Luther King, press release, n.d. 1960, box 34, folder 13, Bayard Rustin Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC (hereafter “Rustin Papers”).

⁴ John Lewis, “Speech at the March on Washington,” August 28, 1963, accessed <https://voicesofdemocracy.umd.edu/lewis-speech-at-the-march-on-washington-speech-text/>

⁵ Report of the National Youth Work Committee, July 13-19, 1959, Group III, box a-8, folder 8, NAACP Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Washington, DC (hereafter “NAACP Papers”).

⁶ Herbert Wright to Frank T. Simpson, June 25, 1958, Group III, box a-8, folder 3, NAACP Papers; Workshop 1, Youth: Meeting the Challenge of Change, report, 49th Annual NAACP Convention, Cleveland, Ohio, July 8-13, 1958, *ibid*.

⁷ Resources in Negro Youth, Feb. 1940, Group II, box e-45, folder 6, NAACP Papers.

⁸ Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, Lincoln Memorial, May 17, 1957, program, box 34, folder 10, Rustin Papers; Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, press release, n.d., 1957, *ibid*; Press Statement, A. Philip Randolph, October 25, 1958, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers; Statement by A. Philip Randolph at Youth March Rally, Hotel Theresa, September 19, 1958, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers.

⁹ Scott A. Sandage, “A Marble House Divided: The Lincoln Memorial, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Politics of Memory, 1939-1963,” *Journal of American History* vol. 80, no.1(1993): 135-167.

¹⁰ Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston, MA.: Beacon Press, 1968, original printing 1964), 2, 7, 13, 14.

¹¹ Peter Ling, “Uneasy Alliance: The NAACP and Martin Luther King,” in Kevern Verney and Lee Sartain, *Long is the Way and Hard: One Hundred Years of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 63-64; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 215, 219.

¹² John Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002); Rebecca de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World: Young People and America’s Long Struggle for Racial Equality* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); Thomas L. Bynum, *NAACP Youth and the Fight for Black Freedom, 1936-1965* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2013); Prudence Cumberbatch, “What the Cause Needs Is a Brainy and Energetic Woman: A Study of Female Charismatic Leadership in Baltimore,” in *Want to Start a Revolution?: Radical Women in the Black Freedom Struggle*, eds. Jeanne Theoharis, Dayo Gore, and Komozi Woodard (New York: NYU Press, 2009); Gretchen Cassel Eick, *Dissent in Wichita: The Civil Rights Movement in the Midwest, 1954-72* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001); Gregg L. Michel, *Struggle for a Better South: The Southern Student Organizing Committee* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Lee Sartain, *Borders of Equality: The NAACP and the Baltimore Civil Rights Struggle, 1914-1970* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2013).

¹³ de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World*, 311; Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Southern Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 203-204; Jon H. Hale, “Future Foot Soldiers or Budding Criminals: The Dynamics of High School Student Activism in the Southern Black Freedom Struggle,” *Journal of Southern History* vol.84, no. 3 (2018): 618-619, 634.

¹⁴ Herbert Wright to Frank T. Simpson, June 25, 1958, Group III, box a-8, folder 3, NAACP Papers; Workshop 1, Youth: Meeting the Challenge of Change, report, 49th Annual NAACP Convention, Cleveland, Ohio, July 8-13, 1958, *ibid*.

¹⁵ Roy Wilkins address to Freedom Fund Dinner of Chicago NAACP branch, June 12, 1959, box 54, folder 6, Roy Wilkins Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Washington, DC (hereafter “Wilkins Papers”); Wilkins speech to Jamaica, New York, branch Freedom Fund Dinner, October 26, 1959, *ibid*; Resources in Negro Youth, February 1940, Group II, box e-45, folder 6, NAACP Papers; Workshop I, Youth: Meeting the Challenge of Change, report, 49th Annual NAACP Convention, Cleveland, Ohio, July 8-13, 1958, *ibid*; de Schweinitz, *If We Could Change the World*, 236-37; Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 417.

¹⁶ Open letter to the President from Muriel I. Symington, *Arkansas State Press*, November 7, 1958, box 34, folder 11, Randolph Papers; Resources in Negro Youth, February 1940, Group II, box e-45, folder 6, NAACP Papers; Committee on Youth Services, National Social Welfare Assembly, October 22, 1959, Group III, box e-53, folder 6, NAACP Papers.

¹⁷ *Ibid*; Bynum, *NAACP Youth*, 155: The Youth Council's age range was set from 16 to 25 in 1938.

¹⁸ Welcome address by A. Philip Randolph, honorary chair, White House Conference 'To Fulfill These Rights,' press release, 1966, box 34, folder 1, Randolph Papers.

¹⁹ C. R. Darden to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, January 17, 1956, Group III, box a-229, folder 4, NAACP Papers; Flyer: Emmett Till is Alive, American Anti-Communist Militia, *ibid*; Press Statement, A. Philip Randolph, October 25, 1958, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers; Davis W. Houck and Matthew A. Grindy, *Emmett Till and the Mississippi Press* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 7.

²⁰ Roy Wilkins to J. P. Coleman, attorney general of Mississippi, January 9, 1956, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers; NAACP press release, October 17, 1955, *ibid*; NAACP Press Release, Youth Protest Rally on Till Case, October 11, 1955, Group II, box a-424 folder 4, NAACP Papers; Herbert Wright to Gloster Current, memo, November 21, 1955, *ibid*; Camille J. Carter to dear Christian friend, September 1955, *ibid*, folder 3; Alvin Simon, president of New York State Conference of Youth Councils and College Chapters to branches, October 6, 1955, *ibid*, Group III, box a-424, folder 4.

²¹ Camille J. Carter to President Dwight D. Eisenhower, September 1955, Group II, box a-424, folder 4, NAACP Papers.

²² Herbert Wright to Youth Officer, September 20, 1955, *ibid*; Wright to Gloster Current, September 26, 1955, Group III, box e-53, folder 3, *ibid*; Sartain, *Borders of Equality*, 122-23.

²³ Daisy Bates could not make the march due to an imminent circuit court of appeals decision. A. Philip Randolph to Dr. John Brooks, New Lincoln High School, October 18, 1958, box 35, folder 1, Randolph Papers; Citations awarded by the Youth March for Integrated Schools to the Following Americans for their Contribution to Democracy, n.d., 1958, box 34, folder 10, *ibid*; Daisy Bates to Randolph, October 23, 1958, box 35, folder 10, *ibid*; A. Philip Randolph to Daisy Bates, March 14, 1959, box 35, folder 2, *ibid*.

²⁴ Sandage, "A Marble House Divided."

²⁵ New York Youth Division to National Executive Committee for March on Washington for Jobs and Equal Participation in National Defense, meeting held June 28, 1941, Group II, box a-415, folder 3, NAACP Papers.

²⁶ Walter White to the New York Division for the Negro March on Washington Committee, July 14, 1941, *ibid*.

²⁷ Pauli Murray to George S. Schuyler, July 31, 1942, *ibid*, folder 5.

²⁸ NAACP press release, July 20, 1942, *ibid*.

²⁹ Adam Clayton Powell, speech, Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, May 17, 1957, Group IX, box 191, folder 7, NAACP Papers; Walter White to Daisy Lampkin, April 2, 1942, Group II, box a-416, folder 1, *ibid*; Address by A. Philip Randolph in Chicago Coliseum, June 26, 1942, *ibid*; *Des Moines Register*, May 1957, box 53, folder 3, Randolph Papers.

³⁰ Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, September 22, 1958, box 32, folder 12, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Washington, DC, (hereafter "BCSP Records").

³¹ Dear Reverend, letter, Youth March for Integrated Schools, September 11, 1958, box 34, folder 10, Randolph Papers.

³² *Washington Post*, October 6, 1958; A. Philip Randolph to sir and brother, September 30, 1958, box 35, folder 1, Randolph Papers; Randolph to Meyer E. Stern, United Packinghouse Workers, October 15, 1958, *ibid*; Randolph to Sergeant William Bracey, October 13, 1958, *ibid*.

³³ Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, September 22, 1958, box 32, folder 12, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress Washington, DC, (hereafter "BCSP Records").

³⁴ There were 980 Youth Councils and 887 College Chapters in 1958; Miss Lucille Black to Herbert Wright, memo, November 28, 1958, Group III, box e-53, folder 6, NAACP Papers; Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, September 12, 1958, *ibid*, box a-334, folder 11.

³⁵ A. Philip Randolph to Roy Wilkins, October 6, 1958, box 32, folder 12, BCSP Records; Randolph to Wilkins, October 15, 1958, *ibid*, folder 11.

³⁶ *Ibid*; Press Statement, A. Philip Randolph, October 25, 1958, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers.

³⁷ Roy Wilkins to Herbert Wright, September 17, 1958, Group III, box a-334, folder 11, NAACP Papers; Wilkins to Eastern Seaboard branch officers, September 19, 1958, *ibid*; Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, September 22, 1958, *ibid*; Randolph to Wilkins, September 17, 1958, *ibid*.

³⁸ Dear Reverend, letter, Youth March for Integrated Schools, September 11, 1958, box 34, folder 10, Randolph Papers; Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, September 12, 1958, Group III, box a-334, folder 11, NAACP Papers; Eugene Davidson to Randolph, September 24, 1958, *ibid*.

- ³⁹ A. Philip Randolph, Ralph Bunche, Jackie Robinson to 'dear friend', September 11, 1958, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers.
- ⁴⁰ Daisy Bates, Ralph Bunche, Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph to 'dear friend and co-worker,' September 19, 1958, *ibid*.
- ⁴¹ P. A. Stephens to NAACP, October 15, 1958, Group III, box a-334, folder 11, NAACP Papers; Florence V. Lucas to Wilkins, November 3, 1958, *ibid*.
- ⁴² Urgent Note: Date of Youth March changed, A. Philip Randolph and Jackie Robinson, September 23, 1958, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers.
- ⁴³ Address at Youth March for Integrated Schools, delivered by Coretta Scott King, October 25, 1958, *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957 – December 1958*, vol.4, (Berkeley: California University Press, 2000), 483-85.
- ⁴⁴ *Washington Post*, October 6, 1958; Instruction Sheet #4 New York City, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers; William D. Nixon, president, Oldest Inhabitants, Inc., Washington, DC, *Washington Post*, November 6, 1958; Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, November 20, 1958, box 35, folder 1, Randolph Papers; Herbert Wright to Willard Johnson, November 10, 1958, *ibid*; Wright to Randolph, November 21, 1958, *ibid*; NAACP Annual Report, 1958; News from the NAACP, press release, November 7, 1958, Group III, box a-334, folder 11, NAACP Papers; USNA to 'dear friend,' n.d. 1958, *ibid*; Bayard Rustin to 'dear friend', February 19, 1959, *ibid*, folder 12.
- ⁴⁵ Youth Delegation to the President, April 18, 1958, box 35, folder 9, Randolph Papers.
- ⁴⁶ Summary of Presidential Delegation Statement, April 18, 1958, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers.
- ⁴⁷ *Washington Post*, October 6, 1958; *National Guardian*, November 3, 1958; Harry Belafonte (with Michael Schnayerson), *My Song: A Memoir of Art, Race and Defiance* (London: Canongate Books, 2011), 189-90.
- ⁴⁸ Ruth Stack, Rachele Horowitz, Jack Stuart, Naomi Friedman, Dell Greenblatt, Brooklyn College, to A. Philip Randolph, November 1958, box 35, folder 1, Randolph Papers.
- ⁴⁹ A. Philip Randolph to Stack et al, Brooklyn College, November 24, 1958, *ibid*; *Washington Post*, October 6, 1958; Resolution on the implantation of the youth pledge, October 25, 1958, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers.
- ⁵⁰ *The Challenge: Young People's Socialist League*, April 1, 1959, box 34, folder 11, Randolph Papers.
- ⁵¹ Gretl Steinberger to A. Philip Randolph, October 19, 1958, box 35, folder 1, *ibid*.
- ⁵² Anti-American groups not invited to youth march for integrated schools, statement by A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and Martin Luther King, April 17, 1958, Group III, box a-334, folder 11, NAACP Papers.
- ⁵³ James Carey to A. Philip Randolph, n.d. March 1959, box 35, folder 2, Randolph Papers; Roy Wilkins remarks at Youth March for Integrated Schools, April 18, 1959, box 49, folder 3, Rustin Papers.
- ⁵⁴ Yvonne Ryan, "'Leading from the Back': Roy Wilkins's Leadership of the NAACP," in Verney and Sartain, *Long is the Way and Hard*, 43-58.
- ⁵⁵ Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, October 27, 1958, Group III, box a-334, folder 11, NAACP Papers.
- ⁵⁶ Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, November 20, 1958, box 35, folder 1, Randolph Papers; Gloster Current to Wilkins, October 27, 1958, Group III, box a-334, folder 11, NAACP Papers.
- ⁵⁷ Memo of suggestions on NAACP letter to Branches as related to Petition Campaign and Youth Marches, February 10, 1959, box 35, folder 2, Randolph Papers; Herbert Wright and Bayard Rustin to dear friend, 22 January 1959, *ibid*, folder 3; Roy Wilkins to officers of the NAACP branches, youth councils and college chapters, March 4, 1959, Group III, box a-334, folder 12, NAACP Papers.
- ⁵⁸ Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, April 8, 1959, folder 13, *ibid*; Wilkins to Randolph, April 14, 1959, *ibid*; Ralph Bunche to dear friend, April 15, 1959, *ibid*; Bayard Rustin to policy committee members, May 10, 1959, *ibid*.
- ⁵⁹ Sartain, *Borders of Equality*, 132-33.
- ⁶⁰ Monthly report of youth and college division, November 1-30, 1958, Group III, box e-53, folder 6, NAACP Papers.
- ⁶¹ Herbert Wright to Gloster Current, memo, December 3, 1959, *ibid*; on Wright's early activism in the 1940s and early 1950s see Lee Sartain, "Student Activism, the NAACP, and the Albuquerque City Anti-Discrimination Ordinance, 1947-52," *New Mexico Historical Review* vol.93, no.2 (Spring 2018).
- ⁶² *Washington Post*, April 19, 1959; Phil Heller to Jewish Labor Committee field staff, May 11, 1959, box 35, folder 2, Randolph Papers; Youth Pledge, Youth March for Integrated Schools, flyer, April 18, 1959, *ibid*, folder 7; NAACP Annual Report for 1959.
- ⁶³ Clarence Mitchell to unknown, April 18, 1957, box g-2, folder 4, NAACP Papers.
- ⁶⁴ Youth March for Integrated Schools, Interim Report, December 30, 1958, box 35, folder 4, Randolph Papers; Youth March for Integrated Schools Notice, n.d. 1959, Group III, box a-334, folder 12,

NAACP Papers; Herbert Wright to Conrad Rivers, March 31, 1959, *ibid*; A. W. Henderson to Bayard Rustin, March 26, 1959, *ibid*; A. Philip Randolph to Charles Zimmerman, telegram, October 20, 1958, box 35, folder 4, Randolph Papers.

⁶⁵ NAACP press release, April 20, 1959, Group III, box a-334, folder 13, NAACP Papers.

⁶⁶ Anna Hartnell, *Rewriting Exodus: American Futures from Du Bois to Obama* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011), 63.

⁶⁷ Statement of A. Philip Randolph at the Youth March for Integrated Schools, Washington, DC, April 18, 1959, box 35, folder 2, Randolph Papers.

⁶⁸ Senator Jacob K. Javits of New York, Congressional Record 1959, *ibid*.

⁶⁹ Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, May 6, 1959, *ibid*; Randolph to Wilkins, June 5, 1959, *ibid*.; *Sunday Star*, April 19, 1959.

⁷⁰ Gloster Current to Roy Wilkins, memo, May 20, 1959, Group III, box a-334, folder 13, NAACP Papers.

⁷¹ Roy Wilkins to A. Philip Randolph, May 26, 1959, *ibid*.

⁷² Youth Pledge, Youth March for Integrated Schools, flyer, April 18, 1959, box 35., folder 7, Randolph Papers; Petition to the President and the Congress of the United States, folder 8, *ibid*; NAACP press release, April 20, 1959, folder 13, *ibid*.

⁷³ Marisa Chappell, Jenny Hutchinson, & Brian Ward, "Dress modestly, neatly...as if you were going to church: Respectability, Class and Gender in the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Early Civil Rights Movement," in Peter Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds., *Gender in the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Routledge, 1999), 69-70.

⁷⁴ Herbert Wright to Bayard Rustin, April 13, 1959, *ibid*; NAACP press release, April 20, 1959, *ibid*; Bunche, Martin Luther King, and Martin Luther King to Sam Rayburn, February 26, 1959, box 35, folder 2, Randolph Papers; A. Philip Randolph to Richard Nixon, March 23, 1959, *ibid*; Phil Heller to Jewish Labor Committee field staff, May 11, 1959, *ibid*; Randolph to George Meany, March 31, 1959, *ibid*; Randolph to Patrick E. Gorman, March 30, 1959, folder 3, *ibid*; Youth March for Integrated Schools financial statement, September 8, 1959, *ibid*; Herbert Wright to Youth Officer, April 1, 1959, Group III, box a-334, folder 12, NAACP Papers; *Washington Post*, April 19, 1959.

⁷⁵ Phil Heller to Jewish Labor Committee field staff, May 11, 1959, box 35, folder 2, Randolph Papers; A. Philip Randolph to Ellen Lurie and Preston Wilcox, The East Harlem Project, June 8, 1959, *ibid*; Randolph to Wilkins, June 5, 1959, *ibid*; Stanley Levison to Bayard Rustin, November 1, 1959, box 1, folder 8, Rustin Papers; Randolph statement at Youth March for Integrated Schools, April 18, 1959, box 49, folder 3, *ibid*; Gloster Current to Wilkins, May 20, 1959, *ibid*; Roy Wilkins to Randolph, May 26, 1959, Group III, box a-334, folder 13, NAACP Papers.

⁷⁶ Roy Wilkins, speech to Portsmouth, Virginia NAACP branch, February 15, 1959, box 54, folder 5, Wilkins Papers; Wilkins speech to statewide rally of NAACP branches in Jackson, Mississippi, May 17, 1959, *ibid*; Martin Luther King to FOR members, March 24, 1959, box 35, folder 3, Randolph Papers; Herbert Wright to Wilkins, March 3, 1960, Group III, box e-53, folder 6, NAACP Papers.