

ROBERT PENN WARREN - MR. ROY WILKINS Tape 1 April 7, 1964

Warren: This is tape one of a conversation with Mr.

Roy Wilkins, April 7th. Back on - I guess we're going now.

I'll use some of these guides, but please head off anywhere or time you feel inclined. May I start with a quotation of Mr.

Galamison of a few weeks' ago, for a response? This is

a T. V. interview, which I picked up from the press. "I would

rather see it, the public school system, destroyed" - than not

conform to his time table of integration - and, I'm quoting again,

"maybe it has run its course anyway - the public school system."

Wilkins: I recall this.

Warren: You recall that?

Wilkins: I recall this, Mr. Warren, and I must disagree absolutely with every syllable of it. I cannot imagine that anyone

soberly would want to contribute to the destruction of the public

school system, because it did not conform completely to his image

of it, or his desire of what it should be, or - and this is the

most fantastic of all - to the time table that he had set for its

revision. Now - I know the Reverend Mr. Galamison, and he was

at one time the President of the N. A. A. C. P. chapter in Brook-

lyn, New York. He's the minister of a successful congregation -

or, I should say, he's a successful minister of a good, Presbyterian

congregation - the Siloam Presbyterian Church. I have respect

for Reverend Galamison's devotion to this cause, for his single

attention to the public school system of the City of New York and especially of the Borough of Brooklyn. He knows a very great deal about it and about its deprivations of Negro children, but I cannot imagine a man saying that he would destroy a system and that perhaps it had run its course - just because it did not conform to a revision as scheduled, set up by the Reverend Dr. Galmison, and I would say the same thing if a man in Pittsburgh said this, or a man in Omaha, or a man in Meridian, Mississippi. We Negroes want the improvements in the public school system - and among them, of course, the elimination of segregation, based upon race - the institution of the same quality education in the schools attended by our children as those attended by other children, and we want Negro teachers and we want Negro supervisors, and we want all the opportunity, but the only way our form of government and our structure of society can survive is by some common indoctrination of our citizenry, and we have found this in the public school system. And, for any reformer, black or white, zealot or not, to come along and say, "I'll destroy it, if it doesn't do like I want it to do", is very dangerous business, as far as I'm concerned.

Warren: Here's a line of speculation now, which I'd like to refer to here in terms of integrated schools. There are situations where it becomes more and more difficult to implement the idea - no

matter what the good will is - let us say, Washington, D. C. ten years from now, when the City becomes almost entirely a Negro city. How can integration as an objective, you see, of the school system be achieved in those circumstances? Or can it be?

Wilkins: I think this is a very real question, and it applies not only to Washington, D. C. and what it might be ten years from now, but it applies, for example, to the Borough of Manhattan and the City of New York. We have here, in the Borough of Manhattan, a very steady trend toward Negro and Puerto Rican enrollment increase, and a decrease in the so-called white enrollment in the Manhattan Borough. I think the question of whether you can achieve what is now popularly called integration under such circumstances or not, is a very real question - and I don't know but that we then may be faced with the question that we ought now to be facing along with the question of integration - and that is the quality of public education. I don't think white people would assert that schools attended only by white people were inferior schools, with respect to the quality of education - mathematics, history, social science, chemistry and so forth. They might well admit, as we maintain on our side, that their schools could be better schools if they had a diversity of enrollment and different racial strains in that school, and that these children would amplify their education

by learning to live together and know -

Warren: Let's grant that -

Wilkins: That's right, that's right.

Warren: Let's grant that. I'm not - that's not the point I'm raising, you see.

Wilkins: That's right. But the - when you say that you can only achieve quality education through integration, then it seems to me you go a long way toward admitting that a school composed of your own racial group from top to bottom under the most favorable circumstances could not be a superior school. Personally, I'm not willing to admit that.

Warren: Someone with whom I was talking about this - some weeks ago - said, "Take Washington. If necessary, we will have to go out to Virginia and bus them in" - them being white pupils - this being an absolute necessity in this person's view of a school system - ignoring all the legal and other problems.

Wilkins: Yes, and also ignoring the welfare of the children. Now, you will find, if you have investigated this matter very extensively, you will find Negro parents who also object to bussing their children - small children - great distances. Every parent does this. Now I hope nothing will be understood here to mean that I discourage the desegregation of the schools and all of the evils that have gone with desegregation. This must be a prime objective of the Negro community, and we in the N. A. A. C. P. intend

to work at it consistently and persistently. But, I think we ought to come to grips with the idea that a school in the midst of a black district, which isn't going to melt soon, no matter how much progress you make in housing and chipping off the peripheries of so-called Negro districts, that a school in the midst of such a black ghetto has to be made a good school - so good in fact, that maybe pupils in other areas will want to transfer to it. It must have good teachers. It must have a top-grade curriculum, adapted to the needs of the people in the district, and it must have all the latest educational gimmicks to make it a good school, and it must offer incentives and it must give its graduates a horizon and all this sort of thing that a good school does. Now, when we say that this can never be achieved unless the pupils in that school consist of more than one race, we make this as an absolute condition - then I think we're on the way to not achieving what we want to achieve. The reason Negroes made a drive for integrated schools was because it was demonstrably clear that the best education was over there where the white people are - and the bad education is over here where the black people are. Therefore, if we want to get the best education - we've tried every other way - there's nothing for us to do, but to go over there where they are.

Warren: The tactical aspect of this, then, should take precedence

over some reading of integration as a - as an ultimate goal - and I'm referring now to the school system as such when it isn't possible to integrate at the practical level.

Wilkins: Yes, I think we have to meet those problems when they come and we have to meet them with practicality and with good sense - with never any retreat on the idea of equality of opportunity for the races and the absence of racial compulsion, and direction - which is involved in segregation, and the inferiority that creeps into it, a segregated set-up, no matter how hard you may try. Look, witness the Northern school cities. Take a city like Cleveland, which has been thought for many years to be ideal. Take a city like Buffalo, or Boston, or Philadelphia, or Pittsburgh, or Indianapolis, or Detroit. Here you have systems, and some of their administrators swear and be damned that they're not segregated - that they're not unequal. "Well," they say, "they may be unequal, but they're not segregated. It was the housing people that segregated it." But, little by little, the administration of those schools has gone down; the downtown central authority has slighted them when it came to assignment of teachers. It put substitute teachers out there. It put new teachers out there. It gave the old teachers the favorable suburban or high-class residential areas where the children are presumably easier to teach because of their home backgrounds. It cut them on curriculum, and

where they assign books, gave them not such good books, and so - even supervision and the tests and all the other things were slighted, and so segregation and inferiority did creep in. This is a very complex question.

Warren: That's inevitable, isn't it? The past - it seemed inevitable in the past, which -

Wilkins: Well, I'm telling you - I tell you, you know, of course, that this has been a problem with educators for a long time, even when there were no colored children involved. The question of how do we equalize, or move toward equality of the education in the lower socio-economic levels of our cities?

Warren: The class issue overlaps the - confuses the race issue of this kind, doesn't it?

Wilkins: Exactly. Take a city that didn't have - that doesn't have any Negroes in it. It still has a school problem - a problem of how to provide the poor youngster with the same kind of education that the middle-class and upper-class youngster gets. And, the teachers in this school system dodge the schools in the poor districts, even though they're poor white districts, because they say they come from homes where they don't have books, where the parents didn't go to college and where this - and it's hard to talk to them - they don't have the same vocabulary - the words don't mean the same - and they can't read as fast. I'd rather go to a middle-class home, where they subscribe to news magazines

and picture magazines, and they go to museums and they go to the opera and they use their library cards, and it's easier to communicate with those kids.

Warren: May we test this now to see if we're doing all right? You remember, no doubt, the article by Norman Padorits in Commentary a little time back?

Wilkins: I do, yes.

Warren: I won't read the quote then, about assimilation being the only - racial assimilation being the only solution to the Negro question in America. How do you respond to that, Mr. Wilkins?

Wilkins: I don't know. I don't know that I can put it into words. I've had the feeling that the author was trying to be daring in his analysis of the problem. I got the feeling that he was trying to say the unsayable. I don't know. I couldn't help but think of whether he could be found among those who might maintain that the Jewish-Gentile relationship will never be solved except by assimilation. I don't think he is in that school. I don't know how far assimilation will go in this question, or how much it is inevitable. I can't see a thousand years ahead, or two thousand years ahead. I think there are some segregationists who claim they can see two thousand years ahead, and they say that this is not what we want here in 1964 - we don't want this to happen in 5064, or something like that.

Warren: There are some who would what they want too - not

segregationists, but white people I know, who say - "Any price to be rid of the problem". That's almost - that's between the lines of this article, isn't it?

Wilkins: Exactly. Now, I think, of course, that there will, as the Negro's economic and cultural position improves - and by cultural, I mean his adjustment to what the lords of culture of our day say is the culture. I don't mean by that that his culture is necessarily inferior, but as he adjusts - as he becomes more like the people, and as he wins some economic advances - I look for more and more mixture between the races. I don't ever look for it to take on substantial proportions. I think the Negro is very proud of himself. I think he has been proud in a sort of defensive way for many years. I think he is now proud affirmatively. He's proud of being black. He's found that black people are not what his white people told him they were and he, thus, will find no ready reason for escaping into the white race via marriage, or passing, or any other subterfuge.

Warren: There's - that is the notion of escape has become less and less important, is that the idea?

Wilkins: Exactly so.

Warren: And with the sense of identity as Negro is more and more important -

Wilkins: More and more important - and as the economic barriers are removed. A great deal of the passing, you know, that was

done by light-skinned Negroes was done for two great reasons. One was to avoid the humiliation that automatically went with the brown or black skin - the personal humiliation, and the other was to secure economic advancement.

Warren: To get a job.

Wilkins: To get the jobs that you couldn't get otherwise. Now, when you walk into a downtown store, and you see the clerk, who is a Negro, or a buyer in a department store who is a Negro, or a treasurer, or a cashier, where once you had to be light-skinned and conceal your Negro background in order to aspire to such a job, it thus becomes unnecessary to pass. And, this cause has been removed. Now, it hasn't been completely and entirely removed. I don't mean that - but I mean, it's nowhere near what it was fifty years ago, or forty years ago.

Warren: Say, five years.

Wilkins: Indeed so.

Warren: On that point, DuBoise long ago wrote more than once about the split in the Negro psyche, as he understood it - the pull toward the African tradition, whatever that could be said to be, or toward the Negro and Negro culture, even one thought of as deriving from Africa, or one as developed in America. All of this, that pride in Negrohood, as opposed to the other pull, the other direction, where the Negro can move into the orbit of Western European, American culture, even to the point of losing his racial

and cultural identity, these being the two poles of the split that pulled him apart. Or - does that problem present itself to you as a real one, as something you observe among Negroes and/or something you feel?

Wilkins: DuBoise, I think, was talking in a time and in a day when there might have been, among his class - and I stress this - some pulling and tugging. I don't know. I can say only that in my own generation coming up, the Negroes who were born since 1900, and who live outside the areas of greatest racial tension and conflict, they -

Warren: You get outside of the - yes.

Wilkins: Outside of that area. They, I think, have no discernible pull toward any African culture. They were Americans. They knew they were excluded from many areas of American life and opportunity, but they never thought of themselves as anything else, except disadvantaged Americans. Now, DuBoise himself led the American Negro toward, and directed his attention toward his African heritage. In fact, he was a lone voice, crying in the wilderness for many years - Ethiopia, Pan-Africanism, and the Pan-African congresses that he started - the essays and articles he carried in the Crisis Magazine - the encouragement that he gave to Negro artists, and to sculpture - the beauty that he pointed out in African sculpture and African history. He did all these things himself and created in a rather reluctant American Negro - in fact, the Negro

was so Americanized, that he adopted the white American's view of Africa, and if you ask a Negro, whether he was in Georgia, or whether he was in Michigan, the upper Michigan peninsula, about Africa, he would talk about savages and elephants and snakes and lions and that sort of thing. Not so today. Not so today. You find the American Negroes have very great pride in Africa, and they have been to Africa. They have travelled there - and they have met Africans here, many more than just the students who came before. They knew - I knew, for example, the Governor-General of Nigeria, when he was here as a college student, and I knew the President of Ghana, Nkrumah, when he was here as a college student. I knew the man who is now dead - the President of the African National Congress, who, when he was a student at the College of Agriculture at the University of Minnesota, back in the 1920's, so that we knew Africans and we knew that they were not savages, and we knew that they had a history. And this latest - these last five or ten years in which the Congo has been dramatized and the difference between the British colonies and French colonies and Belgian colonies, and now the Portugese Angola - this has all driven the Negro to very great pride in Africa. I don't think there is any ambivalence here. He wants to be a good American, but he's by no means ashamed of Africa. He's very proud of it.

Warren: You remember Richard Wright, reporting his visit to

Africa?

Wilkins: I don't believe I read that report, no.

Warren: It's a very strange report. I had it here somewhere. I won't bother to hunt it now. The substance is this - that he found that he couldn't communicate - going there with one attitude and finding it impossible to communicate or even sympathize with, as he - the Africans he met even, you see, ordinarily. Drove him back on - within himself, some - a deep problem of communication.

Wilkins: I recall a discussion of this, yes. I recall a discussion of this. I think the American Negroes and the Africans are now in a period when they are discovering each other. I think some of the romanticism has probably rubbed off, and I think more genuine estimations are taking the place of this romantic attachment.

Warren: The honeymoon is over then?

Wilkins: Yes, the honeymoon is over, and they're analyzing American Negroes as people, and I think we're analyzing Africans as people - and they're analyzing us in the light of their experiences and we're analyzing them in the light of our experiences. For example, I find no sympathy for President Nkrumah's excursions in government in Ghana, even while I might admit that in this transition period, it may be necessary for Africans to have a form of one-party control, or dictatorship, or that sort of thing in order to make the transition - because you just can't

run a government one day as colonials - intensely deprived and being looked after, and the next day they are lords of the manor, and I could - even while I sympathize with that point of view, I can't go as far as Mr. Nkrumah, who wants to control the judges, to remove the police and to have everybody bow down to him, to arrest people and hold them in jail for five years and ten years. This is the thing we're condemning in South Africa - and he's doing exactly the same thing in Ghana.      What difference is there between a white dictatorship and a black dictatorship? If you look at it from the man in jail, who doesn't know what he's being accused of.

Warren:      It entails - in terms of principle.

Wilkins:      Exactly, exactly.      So I think, to get back to your question - I'm sorry I'm so discursive -

Warren:      Yes, please, please.

Wilkins:      Richard Wright is probably true - it was probably true - his experience, and I think American Negroes are beginning to re-adjust their views of African Negroes - genuine admiration for men of genuine ability, and not just admiring them because they are Africans.      And, I think the Africans are beginning to see that American Negroes have their men of genuine ability and their people of warmth and laughter and friendship and culture, and they have some charlatans and some fast dealers and some corner-cutters - and we've found that they have corner-cutters and

fast dealers, too. And, I'm hoping, and I believe that the situation is improving - the understanding between us. You know, there was a time when Africans hardly concealed their contempt of American Negroes because they said "you're a second-class citizen in your own country - and we're free - and we run our country and you don't run your country. You don't even run your state. And, they can kick you around, and they lynch you and so on and so forth." Well, American Negroes acknowledged that a lot of this is true, but they turn around and say to the Africans, "What are you doing with your country, now that you have it?" I think we're all going to come out on top, so to speak, but right now is a difficult period and I think Richard Wright was having trouble communicating.

Warren: And he had the candor to analyze the situation.

Wilkins: Yes -

Warren: Rather than to give a romantic version of it.

Wilkins: Exactly.

Warren: Let me read a quotation to you, sir, about Negro history.

"The whole tendency of the Negro history and movement - not as history, but as propaganda, has been to encourage the average Negro to escape reality. The actual achievements and the actual failures of the present although the movement consciously tends to build race pride, it may also cause Negroes, unconsciously, to

recognize that group pride is built partly on delusion and, therefore, may result in a devaluation of themselves for being forced to resort to self-deception." This, by the way, is by Arnold Rose, Myrdahl's collaborator, you know, at -

Wilkins: Yes, I know. At the University of Minnesota.

Warren: Yes, yes.

Wilkins: Well, I've had some disagreement with Dr. Rose's conclusions/some time - some of his conclusions, I don't mean all of them - and I - it strikes me that this particular quotation is a little far-fetched. It's - it bends over triply backwards in order to say that the emphasis on Negro history, while it may - it's aimed at enhancing pride of race, may eventually result in self-deprecation because it was necessary - and here he makes an assumption - it was necessary to delude oneself as to one's historical accomplishments in order to build one's pride.

Warren: Let's put this principle over into the South - the American white South. We can see it has worked there very clearly, can't we?

Wilkins: Yes -

Warren: The Southern mythology - the old South has certainly been - this myth a great psychic liability to a great many Southerners.

Wilkins: Yes, I think so, but I would say - I don't believe that the Negro history, as it's taught - and it's certainly in its rudimen-

tary stages, and I don't believe that it is on a par with the playhouse that the Southern white people constructed for themselves in order to rationalize their position in American life after 1865.

Warren:      Or the New Englanders either.

Wilkins:      Yes - exactly. The same thing goes. I think the Negroes' attempt to construct a history is not really for the purpose of perpetuating a stance that he has, or justifying a hold that he maintains in or over someone, or of casting reflection on those who may have, in his estimation, held him back. It has been solely and simply for two purposes - I see it. One, Dr. Rose has mentioned - the instilling of race pride, where there was none. And, second, for information - information - information. I recall here now, Mr. Warren, the fact that only two years ago, three years ago now, we found in Michigan Negro high school counsellors, not white high school counsellors, who were telling their Negro high school students that they ought not to study chemistry because there was no future for a Negro chemist. This was in the State of Michigan in 1961.

Warren:      Excuse - this is the end of Tape 1 of the conversation with Mr. Roy Wilkins. Proceed on Tape 2.