

ROBERT PENN WARREN - MR. ROY WILKINS Tape 3 April 7, 1964

Warren: This is Tape 3 of a conversation with Mr. Roy Wilkins. Proceed. All right - you were saying a moment ago, between tapes, that you recognize this problem of the white - the white man's problem of attitude - how can he make himself acceptable, or the fact that the Negro - or some Negroes can find no attitude acceptable. What can be done to pass the - test, was test the word you used? -

Wilkins: Yes, yes.

Warren: Let's go back to that a moment.

Wilkins: Yes, I don't know whether I would choose the word acceptable, because it implies - it seems to me - that the Negro is imposing a test on white people for a particular reason, and that he must conform to certain criteria in order to be accepted, but -

Warren: But, don't some Negroes do that? From their statements in the press and elsewhere.

Wilkins: Well, some do, some do, and - but, of course, I feel, Mr. Warren, we ought to recognize that in the present state of Negro-white relations, and the scramble that's going on to get on record and to be understood and to be uncompromising and to be militant and to be demanding and to be all the things that are now regarded as the things that you have to be - people say a lot of things in public about white people have to conform

to this - white people must give up - white people must recognize - white people must, must, must, must. This is a sure way to get on television and to get quoted and to cause tremors in some quarters - or, at least, if not tremors, head-scratching and soul-searching. But I believe, as I said, on the other tape, that the Negro must recognize that there must be some sincere white people interested in the liberal cause and in the cause of freedom, irrespective of whether race is involved or not. They have given too much blood and made too many sacrifices for the right of freedom of religion - for the right of a trial by jury, for the right to vote and to have the kind of government that will represent their views, for freedom of the press and for all the things that they hold dear. They have fought for these things and bled for them and died for them, and if they now step forward and say, "We want to include in our beliefs also the belief in Negro equality, or equality of opportunity for the Negro, or placing the tent of the Constitution over our Negro citizens" - if they now step forward and want to do this, I think we ought to examine sincerely whether they are opportunists - or phonies, or pretenders, or Trojan horses, or whether they are sincere, and I don't go with this idea of dismissing all white people as being insincere, or trying to climb on the band wagon - or trying to make a point - or trying to make a profit - or trying to use you - or this - some of them are, freely admitted, but there

sincere ones and we can use them, just as all fighters for the extension of human liberty can use all hands. Now, as to this other thing about ingratiating themselves and about the difficulty of adjusting themselves to - or, their apparent haste to ingratiate themselves in the new movement, here again I think we have to use caution, because in one breath we are saying one of the great troubles in the race question is the lack of communication. They don't know about us, we say. We know about them, we're so sure, but they don't know about us. Now, when they come over and try to find out about us, why don't we teach them, instead of saying to them, "We look on you with suspicion. You're just trying to ingratiate yourselves. You don't know how to get into the Negro world. You're awkward and you - we look down on you - we laugh at you." Is this the way, when you say the prime obstacle has been lack of communication and people come who want to communicate? Wait until you find out whether they don't want to communicate.

Warren: Is there some implicit resentment on the part of Negroes at the assumption that a certain percentage of the whites who want to identify somehow come as what Lenin called, "with the pathology of the left" - they're coming with some compulsive neurotic reason - some insecurity of their own - something that drives them, so that it is not a free act.

Wilkins: I think so.

Warren: You think there's something in that?

Wilkins: I think there is.

Warren: Suspicion?

Wilkins: I think so. I can't define it - I can't -

Warren: You sense what I mean?

Wilkins: Yes, indeed. I think there are people with axes to grind, other than the axes -

Warren: There are emotional axes, not money-making, or condescension, but something -

Wilkins: Right. They may have ideological axes. They may feel that what's wrong with the world is that we need a new system, and that if I can recruit the Negroes in their extremity, -

Warren: There's the Communists. I'm talking about the man now, who comes with an emotional need of some pathological order you see, that must be gratified by this -

Wilkins: Yes, there are some of those too. There are some of those, but they all show up in time, and it's easy to identify them sooner or later. The Negro can spot the genuine article. I'm only saying that he ought not to meet all newcomers with this blanket suspicion, or blanket condemnation. It's easy enough to sort out the emotionally disturbed, let's say, or the political leftists, or the political centers, or whoever they are later on. But, I feel that if he has a chance to do evangelism, he ought to

do it. He has a lot to talk about and his cause is identified with the best ideals of America, so that they're good for the white people as well as for the Negro, and he ought to preach this.

Warren: Suppose, Mr. Wilkins, to morrow morning we woke up and found that the Civil Rights - a good Civil Rights bill, one that would be satisfactory, had been passed and that there were fire enforcement agencies in operation and fair employment was enforced, the laws about fair employment and a reasonable, even a willing acceptance in general of this, and we had our schools all integrated - what remains? Quite a long way -

Wilkins: That's a long way.

Warren: What remains? After that?

Wilkins: What remains, of course, is for the Negro to become and the white people too, in the sense that their Negro development has been neglected - but what principally remains is for the Negro to make himself with this opportunity, with these barriers down, with the help of new legislation, to speed on the process of self-development and self-discipline, so that he becomes a contributing, a more contributing member of society than he is now. He now contributes, of course, but he assumes broader duties than merely duty within the Negro community. He assumes, if he is a successful business man, he assumes what a successful business man assumes for a community development and responsibility, and he becomes concerned with hospitals and health

and traffic and profits and manufacturers and banks and all of the things that go to make for community and state and national development, aside from being a Negro. Now this takes time, Mr. Warren, to develop this, because when you come out of a ghetto, not only a physical housing ghetto, but a ghetto intellectual and ideological - and you've been excluded from the mainstream of American life, it takes a while to find out how to function, outside of the ghetto. I recall years ago, when I was in Kansas City, in the campaign for the Community Chest, the sales argument in the Negro community had to be what we Negroes get out of the Community Chest. This was the way you could sell it in the Negro community. You had to point to the various agencies and institutions and how you got something from the Community Chest, in order to get five, ten, fifteen or twenty-five dollars from them. Now, in the day that you're talking about, it will not be sold to Negroes - the Community Chest, or community project - will not be sold on the basis of what you get out of it, hopefully. But - what can you do for it and for the community?

Warren: A sense of community identification in a full way.

Wilkins: Yes. There are Negroes who now already have that identification in many communities. You find them assuming their roles and sometimes suffering derisive comments from their brothers on how they have removed themselves from racial life, let's say.

Warren: This is not uncommon, is it?

Wilkins: No, it's not uncommon. And, it's - but it's not as widespread as it ought to be. By that I mean, I want to see more of them assume more of their community obligations. I think, for example, the South is - one of the things the South has neglected is to estimate what this Negro can contribute to the South. He's there - he has talent. Why should he have to migrate from the South to exercise this talent in Chicago, or in Pittsburgh?

Warren: That's true of a lot of the white population, too, you know.

Wilkins: Exactly so. They have come away. That's true.

Warren: It's exported black and white talent of all kinds.

Wilkins: Well, they have come away largely because of economic - some of them - because of economic opportunities. They can get - bigger your/salaries in Philadelphia and Washington and New York than they can in Meridian or Dothan or in Panama City, Florida, let's say, or in Tyler, Texas. And, some few of them have come away because they couldn't stand the climate. But, the Negroes have been driven away, not only by the drawing of better salaries, but mostly by the treatment. Now, the South could save this talent and help to build the South - it needs the Negroes. It needs their manpower; it needs their life, their laughter, their warmth. It needs their indigenous identification with the South. They can be a tremendous asset to the South and in fact, they are

now, they contribute, however, through a screen. Through white people. But, they could contribute for themselves.

Warren: Some weeks ago I was talking among others, along the way, to Mr. Evers, Charles Evers. And, I asked him why he stayed in Mississippi. He said, "I think things are going to work out here fairly soon". I don't know what fairly soon is, but - he said, "We'll have a settlement here that's satisfactory, probably before you can get it in some other parts of the country."

Wilkins: Well, this is a -

Warren: See, they analyze the Mississippi character.

Wilkins: Yes. This, Mr. Warren, is -

Warren: I wouldn't want to make book on it.

Wilkins: No. This is the echo of a hope that has existed in many areas in the South. Years ago a man said to me, "The first breakthrough in the South will be in Texas, because Texas is more Western than Southern and it's more individual and as soon as they're convinced that this thing is no good, they're going to throw it over. Well, I don't know. It took Texas a long time to wake up, and they've made some progress there - but breakthroughs have been made in Atlanta, as we just mentioned. Breakthroughs have been made in North Carolina. The University of North Carolina has quietly taken on a good many Negro students, without any fanfare. The University of Arkansas, interestingly

enough, without any law suit, without any bitterness, without any tension, admitted Negro students to medicine and law and opened up the University to them. And, you haven't heard a peep out of Fayetteville, Arkansas, since who laid the rail. Nobody has said boo about desegregation, mobs, fights, argumants, committees, petitions, picketting, demonstrations, marching - never hear it. The University of Arkansas has gone quietly ahead. Now, for Mr. Evers to say that he hopes that this will take place in Mississippi he thinks, is the kind of thing that we all hope; I wonder how it can happen as I look at Mississippi's resources. I don't doubt that there are white people in Mississippi, who would like to see some changes take place, but I see a massive political machine in Mississippi.

Warren: There's one.

Wilkins: Built upon, strictly upon white supremacy and keeping the Negro down.

Warren: James Baldwin writes in his most recent book that the best testimony, the testimony of those who are actively engaged in the Civil Rights struggle in the South, is to the effect that the Southern mob does not represent the will of the Southern majority. This is Baldwin's statement.

Wilkins: I agree with him.

Warren: You agree with him on that.

Wilkins: I agree with him. I think the greatest trouble in

the South, the biggest obstacle in the South is not the so-called white rank and file man, who demonstrates occasionally against the Negro, but is the Southern political oligarchy. They're the ones that have the stake in this thing, and it's not only a stake of control over the Negro population as such. That's only incidental - and I think if the white population ever woke up in the South to the fact that the political oligarchy has used the Negro scare in order to perpetuate control over the entire Southern hegemony, I think we'd see a real revolution there, if they ever recognized this.

Warren: As one Negro - a Negro college president said to me a few weeks ago - he was talking, he'd been talking to a certain politician who said, "Look, I can't do that now," but said, "If you can get two hundred thousand votes, I'll do anything you say."

Wilkins: He's right. That's right. Now they - that's true. Now, the spokesman in the Congress against the Civil Rights bill now - the Senators, among the nineteen Senators who are committed to vote against the bill, no matter what happens, no matter what arguments are made for it, and no - among those nineteen, there must be a substantial number - I won't venture any number, who really couldn't care less if this bill passed, who really honestly would like to see it, or something like it passed. But, they don't dare.

Warren: Some Southern politicians have said this privately.
"Well, get me off the hook then."

Wilkins: Yes. Mr. Fulbright, Senator Fulbright, speaking
at the University of North Carolina, during April, early April,
was asked after his talk there by the students, "Why didn't you
extend your attack upon myths in foreign relations to the myths
in racial policy? Why don't you attack those? Don't you
know that there are myths?" And he admitted that, more or less,
that he did, but he said, very succinctly, "If I attacked those,
I wouldn't be here tonight." He meant as a senator, of course,

Warren: He signed the Southern white, Southern Senators'
round robin ...he was for

Wilkins: Yes, the manifesto, yes, he signed it. He's done
everything that a good Southern white senator is supposed to
do. He's done everything. He's voted right as far as the
segregation is concerned, and he has kept quiet on various things
and he has spoken out when he had to against the Negro.

Warren: How do you interpret this, morally speaking, and other-
wise - on Preston Fulbright's behavior?

Wilkins: Well, personally, Mr. Fulbright has been a great dis-
appointment to me because he is a living argument against those
who say that if a man has culture and education and contact and
travel, he can't be the same as the man who doesn't have those
things.

Warren: Now I asked Mr. Nevins, Allan Nevins; I've known him some years, right after this book, this - he signed this thing - "What do you make of this?" He said, "He couldn't do otherwise. He had no right to do otherwise. It would have been self-indulgent. He can't afford to commit suicide and put an inferior man in this position. He's needed." Now, Mr. Nevins' views on the race question and so forth - you know what they are - he's not - this is a complicated remark, it seemed to me, coming from him.

Wilkins: Yes, it is. But, you see, I feel that a Rhodes scholar and a university president and a man of the scholarship and breadth of vision of Mr. Fulbright, and I take nothing from him in those areas - a man who knows the world and who knows - who knows that this little peanut policy of racial oppression can't stand. He knows that. He knows it's demeaning. He knows it's irritating. And he - if he had a free choice - if he were a free man, he may not get out - he might not get out and crusade against it, but he certainly wouldn't have no part in sustaining it.

Warren: You think he should have committed political suicide and been an example then on the issue?

Wilkins: I don't know that he should have done that, Mr. Warren, but I do know this -

Warren: It would have been political suicide if he had -

Wilkins: It would have been political - if he had come out, and

yet, somebody has got to commit political suicide in order to drive home this thing, but, nevertheless, I don't know whether I want him to make that sacrifice or not.

Warren: That's Mr. Nevins' point you see.

Wilkins: Yes, I don't know whether I want him - but, I do think this: I think he might be more of a spokesman for what is euphoniously called the moderate point of view in the Senate than he has been. I think, if a man feels that he has to maintain himself despite all the crudities that he has to subscribe to, or has to maintain himself by subscribing to those crudities, and he really actually doesn't believe them - then he owes it to himself to do some - there are men in the Senate from the South who have said a little word here and a little word there -

Warren: Tennessee -

Wilkins: Exactly. Now like Tennessee, Ralph Yarborough in Texas, and you've had some remarks from some of the other senators, not - they've been oblique, they've been tendencial, but for those who read between the lines, or as I say - read upside down and you have to read upside down when you read the Southern white politicians' remarks on the race problem, you can see that what they're trying to say. Mr. Fulbright hasn't done even that.

Warren: How do you define the "moderate position" (in quotes) in the South. How do you define a moderate?

Wilkins: I don't know that I -

Warren: You just used the word -

Wilkins: Yes I did, and I don't know that - I think that I was falling into the popular colloquialism. I suppose a moderate in the South is a man who is for change - who recognizes that things cannot go on as they have been, but who isn't for as much change as Roy Wilkins of the N. A. A. C. P., let's say.

Warren: But strangely enough, he's sometimes called a moderate, too.

Wilkins: Yes, I know I've been called a moderate, but I always reply to that that the N. A. A. C. P. and our position here has sponsored the most radical idea in the twentieth century - that is, the idea of eliminating racial segregation from American life. The idea of reclaiming from the Constitution that affirmation of status which is contained in the thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth amendment. So that - I'm not concerned particularly with these labels that the latter-day crusaders bring upon us. I remember the days when we were the only voice crying in the wilderness, and when these same Negroes, or their like -

Warren: You still - they - the N. A. A. C. P. still carries the greatest weight of opprobrium in certain quarters than anything you could name.

Wilkins: Oh, we get more cussing out than anybody else, and -

Warren: Yes, in Greenwood, Mississippi, for example.

Wilkins: Oh, indeed, not only in Greenwood, but in any state legislature in the South, except -

Warren: It's known - this point - you have -

Wilkins: It is known, and we are considered to be the embodiment of the people who want to change our - overthrow segregation, and rightly so, because we have been - I say to you that the Negroes who now, their prototypes in our day, would not join the N. A. A. C. P., would not come with us because we were judged to be too dangerous, too radical and so forth and so on. I think there's more to this question of the Negro than just fighting to level the barriers and you have to bring some statesmanship, or some thought, whether it's statesmanship or not to the problems that accrue along with the fight.

Warren: Yes. You know the quotation attributed to you - "N. A. A. C. P." - "They" - that is the S. N. E. C. corps "furnish the noise. The N. A. A. C. P. pays the bills." Bail, and so forth.

Wilkins: Yes, when I made that -

Warren: Yes - "Here today and gone tomorrow."

Wilkins: Yes, this was a speech in Alexandria, Virginia. And, when that speech was made this was an accurate statement. We had just finished bailing out some of the S. N. E. C. kids in McComb, Mississippi, who went off on the independent tangent of

their own, without consulting us, without plans, or without anything and then when they got in the six-thousand dollar bail bond trouble why they screamed for old N. A. A. C. P. to come down and help them out, and it applied particularly, and I tried to do this in Alexandria - it applied to our unfortunate experience with some members of C. O. R. E. in Louisville, Kentucky, where we were on a joint demonstration, which was billed, however, as a C. O. R. E. demonstration. I wish I knew the secret of C. O. R. E.'s ability to get newspaper publicity. I'd like to hire whoever they have over there to come over and work for us. We had a demonstration in Louisville, Kentucky, in which two hundred and sixty-seven people were arrested, and two hundred and fifty-five of them were N. A. A. C. P. youngsters, youth people. That's another thing that sticks in our craw. Most of our young people have been involved in all these matters and - but the credit has gone to other organizations. But, anyway, only twelve people out of this so-called joint demonstration were identified with C. O. R. E., and yet when all the shooting was over and all the heeting and hollering was done, we not only got none of the credit, but were left with the legal bill of some five or six thousand dollars. Now, since that time, the picture has changed to some degree. When I made that speech, it was accurate and well-founded and it was based upon not all of our unilateral experiences with C. O. R. E. or with S. N. I. C.,

because others have been happier, but these two things did stick in my craw, and it's a little tough to find yourself vilified and sneered at as a kind of a knitting old lady, over in a corner, while the revolution is being carried on by us strong men, and yet called upon to bear the financial burden. And, so I was speaking to my Alexandria chapter for their edification and education.

Warren: I've heard the same thing said elsewhere by other people - for instance, I think she is the president of the local chapter in Bridgeport. Dr. King rallied there a few weeks ago, while waiting for him to return from Hartford, with a lot of speeches inbetween. Unless I'm mistaken, she was - the lady who was speaking, and - the N. A. A. C. P. was in tonight, was here in '23 and in '33 and '43 and '53 and is here in '63 and you know, this same - same notion of - what about Lomax's analysis of the N. A. A. C. P. in his book? The one vote.

Wilkins: Strange to say, I haven't read it. Mr. -

Warren: It's probably predictable - I think -

Wilkins: Yes, well, I know Mr. Lomax's position if you can call it that, but I'm afraid I'm unable to agree with Mr. Lomax on any except very minor aspects of this whole business. I regard Mr. Lomax simply and solely as a recorder, as a writer, as an observer of the passing scene, who has made a very good thing out of it financially. He's written articles, written

books, he's lectured. He has so many lectures, he has to go through a lecture agency and charge a regular fee and he says sensational things and challenging things and frightening things to titillate his audiences, and, in so doing, he has made several references to the N. A. A. C. P., and his analysis of our role is totally and completely inadequate because it is based on his own personal, subjective estimate and not upon records. He has never been here and consulted any records that we have and I'm afraid that I would have to discount sharply his estimate of the N. A. A. C. P.'s role.

Warren: I was thinking of his analysis of the structural organization, of the organization of the N. A. A. C. P. and its relation to main authority, to Federal authority, the lack of a democratic organization, is one of the charges he brings against it, of course.

Wilkins: Oh, well, this of course, is absolutely -

Warren: One of the many of course.

Wilkins: This is absolutely nonsensical. The only organization that has a democratic structure - and this is the N. A. A. C. P. As a matter of fact, I think sometimes we have too much. We are the only organization that elects our board of directors, and we elect them through an elaborate mechanism that stems directly from our convention, which is represented by our membership

and our branches, and for - I don't know what anybody could say about the N. A. A. C. P. and the democratic process, because no other organization I know - I won't name any - no other organization I know has the elective process and the popular referendum and convention that we have in the N. A. A. C. P. Nothing is rigged at all in it.

Warren: If my memory tricks me, I'm sorry. That is not the impression I carry away from his book. I haven't read it in quite a little while, but he turns to analyze the structure, professes to analyze the structure - and comes up with this notion of some device of control you see.

Wilkins: Yes, yes. I know, and in one breath he says, "The N. A. A. C. P. is controlled from the top and deminated" - and in the next breath he says, "The Negro revolution is carried on by the N. A. A. C. P. branches, and irrespective of what New York wants."

Warren: This contradiction is there.

Wilkins: Yes, and not only that, but he goes on further to say that the ideas for the Negro revolution, as he calls it, and that was his title, have come up from the ranks of the N. A. A. C. P. instead of from the top, and that it has been accomplished in spite of the opposition or control - and as in quotes - of the New York clique, or whatever he calls it. This is also ridiculous and

any casual examination of our records and - would show that through the recommendations, through the resolutions adopted at our annual convention, this is the most democratic - and as a matter of fact, the N. A. A. C. P. so-called national leadership has been pleading - yes -

Warren: Sorry - end of third tape. Conversation with Mr. Roy Wilkins. Proceed on Tape 4.