

# The NAACP—Free at Last

By JUDK WANNISKI

There is no question about it. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People has torn free of the liberal-labor coalition that it joined in the early New Deal days. Is it too strong to suggest "Free at Last" as the NAACP's statement of liberation from the rigid dogma of the liberal coalition?

"Use it," said Benjamin Hooks, the NAACP's executive director, when I suggested it as the title of this piece when we discussed it over lunch in Manhattan a few days ago. "It's perfect."

"Yes, yes, it fits," said Margaret Bush Wilson, chairman of the NAACP's board, when I visited her in St. Louis last week. "That's how we feel."

The divorce has been brewing for quite a while, but the formal break came a month ago when the 69-year-old organization withdrew support from President Carter's energy policy on the grounds that it emphasized conservation instead of energy growth. Confusion followed amid conflicting reports on whether or not there was an explicit endorsement of oil and gas price deregulation (there was no specific stance either way).

What is clearly of paramount importance, though, is the fact that its dissent is part of a broader policy shift. The NAACP has thrown itself open to alternative ideas in a conscious reassessment of philosophy. No longer will it unquestioningly accept as its own the public policy gospel as developed by the labor liberals. The most sacred policies will be reexamined, including the minimum wage for an appraisal of their bearing on black welfare and economic growth.

Which is not to say either Mr. Hooks or Ms. Wilson expects a wholesale reversal of policies or a new coalition with "conservatives." Rather, the NAACP has simply decided it's going to make up its own mind on a range of public questions previously assumed to be beyond its purview as a civil-rights organization. "It isn't where we came out on the energy deregulation issue that's important," says Mr. Hooks, "but the dialog itself. This is what's caused these terrible shock waves—the horrible thought that the NAACP is actually confronting alternatives."

## Shocked and Disappointed

It probably should not have surprised the NAACP that in suing for divorce from the coalition it would provoke a range of angry wrath and sullen dismay among its old allies. But both Mr. Hooks and Ms. Wilson were disappointed, at times shocked, by the reaction.

The New York Times began by announcing on its business page that the NAACP had "allied itself with the oil industry." When The Washington Post caught up with the story it concentrated on the fact that several blacks on the NAACP's energy committee work for energy companies. ("Why is it," asks Ms. Wilson, "that we can have a legal committee composed entirely of lawyers, a health committee composed entirely of doctors, but we are not supposed to have any energy people on our energy committee?")

The New Republic was mildly scandalized: "What's good for Mobil and Exxon is good for the NAACP?" it wondered, ultimately propounding that: "In its new, pro-industry policy swerve, the country's largest civil rights organization has badly misplaced its confidence." The Village Voice was wonderfully apoplectic, raging that the NAACP had sold out to the oil tycoons, although "the price was not announced."

The Times then weighed in with a lead

editorial that actually debated the propriety of the NAACP's decision to think for itself ("Does Civil Rights Include Energy?"). The Times finally allowed that such action is okay, but warned that in doing so the NAACP leaves itself open to "exploitation and manipulation." Its energy position, alas, was "inadequately prepared, poorly reasoned and, finally, wrong for all Americans."

Then there was The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, outraged because Ms. Wilson is on the board of Monsanto Chemical (the editorial seemed unconcerned that Monsanto is a net buyer, not seller, of energy.)

The NAACP staff can't remember such hostility from the national press. A network television reporter called demanding

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to see the list of the NAACP's contributions from big oil. (Of \$6 million in annual contributions, less than \$500,000 is from companies of all kinds, less than \$50,000 is from companies big and small that could be considered "energy" firms.)

The experience has been educational and, if anything, has put a frost on any chance of reconciliation for the moment. Ms. Wilson is more or less amused at the implications that she's been bought, but she admits to irritation at the other reactions, which she found condescending. It is Ben Hooks, though, who really gets steamed up.

"There is a white elitist assumption that we don't have sense enough to know about things like energy and shouldn't say anything about them. But President Carter says energy is our No. 1 problem. Which tells us we have to look at it. Yet when we do we have these people telling us, 'You're out of place, George, get back in line.' Well, we may be wrong, but we have as much right to be wrong as anybody else."

Nor does he think the NAACP can be blamed for his bill of divorce. He told William Raspberry of The Washington Post that "the Jews left us on Bakke. Labor left us on seniority. The liberals left us on the environment. But when we say at least look at deregulation, they say we must have been bought by somebody."

Both are obviously enjoying this new freedom to wing it alone, able to speak out and energize what seemed to have become an almost moribund organization. Gloster Currant, who was Roy Wilkins' right-hand man during the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s, is nearing retirement and talks about the ideas of Mr. Hooks and Ms. Wilson as "the wave of the future," and says he doesn't quite understand it. But the staff at NAACP headquarters at 57th and Broadway seems bustling, full of new plans, delighted with all the attention it is suddenly getting. "We're having fun with all this," says Mr. Currant.

"It all comes down to economics," says Ms. Wilson, who was the prime mover in this renaissance. "We don't know much about it yet, but we're going to find out."

It was Ms. Wilson who decided last April to begin an energy project, when President Carter announced energy was the most pressing problem facing the nation. "At first all I got from the staff was blank stares. Like, what does energy have to do with civil rights? But I'd ask, what does survival have to do with civil rights?"

Mr. Hooks, who came to the NAACP five months ago from the Federal Communications Commission, is now earnestly planning to gather the internal resources to systematically confront economic issues. A high priority is an "economic advisory council" that would examine such issues as the minimum wage.

A broad range of views will be represented, says Mr. Hooks. He has asked Andrew Brimmer, the black economist who until recently was a member of the Federal Reserve, to sit on the council. Mr. Brimmer is a leading critic of the minimum wage as a contributing cause to black teenage unemployment. He has also asked Wendell W. Gunn, a Chase Manhattan vice president, who is also coincidentally on the economic advisory council of the Republican National Committee.

## A Parting of the Ways?

All this suggests a parting of the ways with the National Urban League and its leader, Vernon Jordan Jr. The Urban League stresses expansion of the public sector to enhance black economic welfare. "Except in the very short run," says Mr. Hooks, "only the private sector can provide the kinds of jobs we must have," and that's where the NAACP's emphasis will be.

The strain showed when the NAACP joined the New Detroit Coalition and Detroit Urban League in opposing the federal government's new fuel standards for light trucks and vans, on the grounds that this kind of government intervention will hurt black employment and won't save energy, immediately forcing the closing of a Detroit inner-city assembly plant that employs 3,000 blacks.

Vernon Jordan not only did not join in the opposition, although requested to do so by Francis Kornegay, president of his Detroit affiliate. He also called this newspaper and demanded a correction when it mistakenly reported that the Urban League as a whole was part of the Detroit coalition.

On this issue, too, the press reports tended to headline that the NAACP had allied itself with the auto industry, not—as the NAACP sees its position—as having broken with the government position.

Things will never be the same for the NAACP. But that doesn't necessarily mean they'll get better. Ms. Wilson says she feels the euphoria of free flight, having taken her organization out of its cozy nest. She does admit to an anxiety, though, sensing the ground may be coming up at her faster than she'd thought it would. She's worried about the NAACP's prestige and finances, and so must resist being drawn into reliance on business giving and hope the individuals who have been the mainstay of NAACP support will stay.

"It had to be done. We had to lift the level of discussion to a new level, to make a significant effort to discuss not simply what's right or what's wrong, but what is in our best interests. The public discussion generated by this has not been had by black people in years. It is healthy, essential and urgent."

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