

THE NAACP CRUSADE AGAINST LYNCHING, 1909-1950. By Robert L. Zangrando. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980. Pp. ix, 309. \$27.50.

The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909-1950 ("Crusade") by Robert L. Zangrando, chronicles the rise of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People ("NAACP") through its forty year struggle against lynching.

A gruesome instrument of social control, lynching exposed white America's contempt for black people and its disregard for duly constituted legal procedures. The mob exercised a ruthless, indiscriminate sovereignty over all black lives, and racism was never more blatantly displayed than when a gang of lynchers roused themselves to fury against a defenseless victim whose ultimate crime was being black in a white world. (p. 210).

Zangrando poignantly describes the years of violence amid the frustration of a national campaign. He further examines the NAACP's progress and preparation in these early years for its later victories in civil rights reform.

Springfield, Illinois produced Abraham Lincoln, the American president who accomplished more for blacks than any other. The NAACP, too, grew out of events in Springfield. During one very hot summer in 1908 a white mob ripped through the streets of Springfield. Two thousand blacks were forced to flee their homes. Hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of private property was damaged. Two blacks were lynched and the national militia was called to restore order. From this tragedy, according to Zangrando, sprang the NAACP a year later in 1909.

For hundreds of years blacks had suffered the indignity of senseless mob violence; *Crusade* insightfully reminds us that the horror of lynching has not so long past. In the decades preceding the Springfield riot, mobs attacked and lynched blacks with frightening regularity. These mobs attacked responding to the victims' claimed participation in homicides, felonious assaults, rapes, attempted rapes, robberies, and insults to white people. However, as Zangrando explains, the primary motive behind these attacks was usually pure racism. Until very recently, blacks throughout America lived in constant fear of their personal security.

Zangrando's *Crusade* presents a scholarly, detailed account of the progress of the NAACP's anti-lynching campaign in light of the continuous tragedy of lynching. The nature of mob violence is spontaneous "justice." However, Zangrando notes in his introductory chapters that the NAACP found no spontaneity or justice in lynching where 72% of the 4,743 individuals reported lynched from 1882 through 1968 were black. Once centered in the southern states, lynching lost its regional character by the turn of the century. From 1890 to 1920 outbreaks of mob violence resulting in lynching occurred in New York, Ohio, the District of Columbia, and Illinois, as well as in North Carolina, Louisiana, Texas, Georgia, Tennessee, Nebraska, Arkansas, and Oklahoma. The incidents, as the author discusses, though increasingly widespread, had striking similarities.

In riot situations, local or state law enforcement agencies occasionally abetted white mobs by a tardy response to the crisis, by a tendency to harass and punish blacks whether or not they actually fought their attackers, or by outright participation against black residents. Like lynching, riots often originated in rumor and false accusations against members of the

black community. Riots showed a bitter determination among whites to employ force as an instrument of social control. And while some few prosecutions did occur, those were exceptions. Overwhelmingly, white rioters, like their lynching counterparts, expected and enjoyed immunity from the law. (p. 8).

Thus, Zangrando also examines the pervasiveness of mob violence throughout the first half of the twentieth century.

Zangrando also discusses the causes of lynching's continued popularity in the 1900's. He suggests that the Great Depression may have been an underlying cause of mob violence and the resurgence of violent factions, such as the Ku Klux Klan. Scholarly commentators frequently analyze at length the anxiety and frustration of coping with severe economic hardships while struggling to maintain the social status quo; *Crusade* briefly discusses the periods most scholarly works on lynching and the race issue cover. Zangrando thereby adds continuity and depth to his analysis. Although *Crusade* concisely summarizes this theory and data, this topic replows familiar ground, adding little originality to former examinations.

Crusade delves into the anti-lynching movement from its roots. In the 1880's black frustration toward lynching manifested itself as unorganized, retaliatory self-defense. By 1890 an orderly anti-lynching campaign had developed. After the Springfield riot in 1908 two movements, building since the post-Reconstruction period, joined forces to establish a national organization to campaign against the capriciousness and brutality of lynching. In 1909, a modern effort to thwart lynching was born with the founding of the NAACP. Two groups formed the NAACP. One was a group of interracial reformists composed of middle class intellectuals dissatisfied with Booker T. Washington's accommodationism. The other was the angry and beleaguered black population in desperate need of relief from racist oppression. The NAACP's anti-lynching campaign began in earnest less than ten years later. This campaign is where *Crusade* focuses.

The NAACP's campaign was directed at producing federal anti-lynching legislation. In this regard, the first chore was to re-educate legislators. At the outset, many proponents of lynching in state and federal legislatures rationalized lynching as a necessary means to protect white womanhood. Thus, rape, attempted rape, and assault were most prominent among justifications for lynching. However, Zangrando notes that advocates for anti-lynching legislation from Frederick Douglass to Walter White and Roy Wilkins fought persistently to demonstrate that protecting white virtue often had nothing to do with lynchings. Legislators were slow to learn and even slower to accept the brutality and injustice in the mob violence they had supported and encouraged for so long. Thus, the NAACP arose to challenge ignorance at the highest levels.

Crusade traces the efforts of the newly created NAACP while it lobbied the United States' Congress. The House of Representatives passed NAACP sponsored anti-lynching bills five separate times from 1923 through 1950. The Senate failed each time to approve the measures. Despite the Senate's failure to approve any anti-lynching measure, each campaign initiated by the NAACP brought greater recognition of the problems. Legislators were increasingly forced to respond to the issues and compromise their inflexible

positions. Furthermore, the American public became more aware of the realities of lynching through the NAACP efforts.

Chapters three through nine focus on the anti-lynching campaign in Congress during this period. In the early period, 1919 to 1923, the NAACP placed all of its strength behind a bill first introduced by Leonidas Dyer (R-Missouri) in 1919. The Dyer Bill became the prototype for later bills and until 1923 formed the cornerstone of the NAACP's lobbying effort. As Zangrando reveals:

Designed to invoke the Fourteenth Amendment, the bill would guard 'citizens of the United States against lynching in default of state action, which had denied victims the equal protection of the laws. Delinquent officials who allowed a lynching to occur or failed to prosecute lynchers were subject to imprisonment for up to five years and fines of up to \$5,000, while the county in which the crime occurred would have to pay from \$5,000 to \$10,000 to the victim's heirs. Members of lynch mobs and those sympathetic to lynching were barred from serving on federal juries trying cases under the act. (p. 43). (Citations omitted).

These elements were present in each of the subsequent bills presented to Congress. Throughout the years of campaigning, the NAACP struggled to maintain the quality and integrity of the Dyer Bill. *Crusade* notes that the proponents of lynching frequently introduced "anti-lynching legislation" which was nothing more than a subterfuge to replace acceptable and effective legislation with insubstantial boilerplate. These sham measures purposefully omitted the provisions holding abetting public officials liable and extended application only where the victim was taken from a public officer. According to Zangrando, these changes undercut the effective enforcement of anti-lynching legislation. In most cases, victims were never arrested or detained by police. Moreover, police could easily release their prisoners while cooperating with the mobs.

The Republican party professed its support for the anti-lynching effort. However, Republican legislators failed at every opportunity to confront and overcome the Democratic filibusters in the Senate that arose to defeat each measure. Early on the NAACP's strongest supporters were often inexperienced newly elected Congressmen. These men were idealistic and well intentioned, but lacked the seniority and persuasion to generate significant support among their colleagues. In fact, Zangrando notes, one fledgling representative in a floor debate deferred to one of his elder colleagues, expecting him to join in the favorable discussion of anti-lynching legislation. Instead, control was lost and the debate ended. From experiences like this the NAACP learned that their hopes rested with seasoned and persuasive legislators.

As time passed, the NAACP looked increasingly towards northern Democrats to support the anti-lynching effort. In the period 1934 through 1936, the Costigan-Wagner Bill was offered. Senators Robert Wagner (D-New York) and Edward Costigan (D-Colorado), enraged by the shocking reversion to primitive brutality, introduced their bill to defeat mob rule and to guarantee that constituted authority would dispense equal justice to every race, creed, and individual. Both men were committed to liberal and humanitarian reforms.

Zangrando expresses the urgency of this period and the difficulty of the

NAACP's task while also examining the impact of the political and social climate on the legislators that they sought to persuade. Public opinion polls revealed the general public's disapproval of lynching, yet those same polls indicated the continuing vitality of its favor in southern states.

The Costigan-Wagner Bill gave way to the Gavagan Bill in 1937. Democrat Joseph Gavagan of New York introduced this bill at the urging of the NAACP. This time, however, southern obstructionists found an unwitting ally in the House's only black member when Arthur Mitchell (D-Chicago) introduced a weaker version. *Crusade* shows the agility of the NAACP in overcoming this and other barriers to its progress.

NAACP representatives' efforts expanded throughout the period of Zangrando's study. They repeatedly testified before state and federal investigative committees, presenting the evidence gathered from their independent investigations. They also waged battles in the courtroom for blacks in eminent danger of the mobs' wrath. They petitioned Presidents to take some executive action in condemnation of lynching, yet at every stage of political and legal incursion they found limited success and met consistent evasion. As a result of their persistent efforts, however, Congress passed the Dyer Bill in 1922. Finding no Senate supporters, the Dyer Bill died later that year, the victim of a lengthy southern Democratic filibuster.

Zangrando details a similar result for the subsequent five campaigns through 1950. Each drive, however, attracted more Democratic support and thus brought the Senate closer to approval. In addition, after its initial drive, the NAACP leadership realized that the anti-lynching program could be utilized for other tasks.

Throughout the succeeding years, 1923 through 1933, the NAACP changed its focus. During that period, lynching had dropped off and with the demise of the Dyer Bill, the political climate of the 1920's proved less hospitable to civil rights legislation. Zangrando examines this unusual trend and details the development of the NAACP beyond lynching issues. Its leaders, among them James Weldon Johnson and W.E.B. DuBois, redirected the NAACP effort toward a mobilization of the black community as a viable political entity. The anti-lynching campaigns were thus used to rally the black community into pressing state governments into drafting appropriate legislation. As a result, Pennsylvania and New Jersey passed measures similar to the Dyer Bill in 1923.

In 1933, with a dramatic resurgence in lynching over the past year, the NAACP returned its primary emphasis to federal anti-lynching legislation. "Its renewal of an intensive campaign for a federal law against lynching seemed sudden, but the reasons behind this decision in 1933-1934 stemmed from a mixture of necessity, apprehension and hope." (p. 97). *Crusade* consistently develops the varying intensity of the lynching horror and the pragmatic artifices of the NAACP developed in response.

Thus, *Crusade* examines the lessons learned and the experiences gained through the NAACP campaigns. It notes that although the campaigns failed in a normal sense, the entire effort was a victory paving the way for more victories to come. Zangrando details the recognition by the NAACP of the utility of radio promotion in the 1930's and the 1940's and of the intricacies of lobbying members of Congress. Further, he examines the efforts of those

friendly to the NAACP, in particular Eleanor Roosevelt, on its behalf in presenting the anti-lynching position to the President. Although no American president ever publicly supported anti-lynching legislation, and as an indirect result a federal law was never passed, the impact of these friends added much to the integrity and credibility of the NAACP and its campaign. *Crusade* insightfully recounts the significance of these contributions. In addition, it provides a positive viewpoint from which the later work of the NAACP's goal of civil rights reform can be understood and appreciated.

The NAACP's efforts to lobby Congress prepared it technically, intellectually, and emotionally for its later battles. As a result, according to Zangrando, the NAACP spearheaded the great formal victories in equality and voter's rights for blacks. As *Crusade* states:

The drive against mobbism had multiple results. It was the Association's earliest and most sustained attempt to bring the federal government back into the field of civil rights enforcement. Lynching became the wedge by which the NAACP insinuated itself into the public conscience among philanthropists, and opened lines of communication with other liberal-reformist groups that eventually joined it in a mid-century, civil rights coalition of unprecedented proportions. Lynching provided a readily acceptable issue around which to mobilize the black community, North and South. Once brought together against mob action, black people were better able thereafter to pursue other common objectives. (p. 18).

Crusade thus places the NAACP in historical perspective which illuminates the organizations significant contributions.

Crusade's major flaw lies in its conclusion. The final chapter falls flat in contrast to the powerful portrayal of the events, issues and personalities of the preceding chapters. It suggests that the NAACP, and with it the American public, has changed toward apathy and neglect in its concern for minority rights. This is probably correct. However, instead of consistently following the positive development of his historical treatment, Zangrando retreats unexpectedly to a hopeless outlook. He says that the struggle lies with "Parties Yet Unknown," as the chapter's title suggests.

Despite the superficial final paragraph, *The NAACP Crusade against Lynching, 1909-1950* by Robert L. Zangrando, is well written and deals fairly and accurately with its subject matter. Whatever the book lacks in sensitivity, it makes up for in detail and clarity.

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