

Records as President, White House Central Files: Official File

June 24, 1958

MEMORANDUM FOR THE FILES

Subject: Meeting of Negro Leaders with the President - June 23, 1958

The President met with: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., President,
Southern Christian Leadership Conference

A. Philip Randolph, International
President, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car
Porters

Roy Wilkins, President, NAACP

Lester B. Granger, Executive Secretary,
National Urban League

Also present were Attorney General Rogers, Frederic E. Morrow and
myself.

After introductions, Mr. Randolph, as the spokesman, laid
before the President the attached statement. He prefaced the written
statement by commending the President strongly for the many efforts
he has made to advance the political and economic status of the American
Negro. He said that they would not be present at the meeting if they did
not have the firm conviction that the President was a man of courage and
integrity who had shown leadership and brought about accomplishment in
this field. He spoke strongly and favorably about the President's action
in the Little Rock episode. He then proceeded, beginning on page 4, to
read the nine recommendations contained in the statement, including the
closing paragraphs. Following this, he asked Dr. King to speak.

Dr. King said he wanted to comment about the first three of the
recommendations and that, as a minister, he felt these recommendations
were designed to help mobilize the emotions of the spirit which, in turn,
would aid in the fight for abolishment of segregation. He said that a
Presidential pronouncement as called for in the first recommendation
would give a moral boost to the Nation. Speaking of the second

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recommendation, which calls for a White House conference, he is convinced, he said, as a southern Negro, that the social, political and economic reprisals which exist today in the South prevent the goodwill of white Southerners from being expressed. He felt such a conference would provide the forum for expressions of such goodwill. In urging action on the third recommendation, he said that wider dissemination of government information on this subject would provide the factual basis needed to educate further the communities and localities throughout the South and the Nation. He felt that without action along the lines of these three recommendations there would be a continuation of delaying tactics. He agrees that morals cannot be legislated (only education and religion can do this, he said) and that internal attitudes are hard to change, but that action is possible to attempt to control the external effects of such attitudes.

Mr. Wilkins emphasized the President's own record in the field of improvement of Negro rights, recalling the fact that Armed Services integration is now about complete, and that the President was responsible for the passage of the Civil Rights Bill last year. He then spoke on behalf of recommendation No. 4 and urged that the Administration seek again the inclusion of Part III which had been deleted during the heat of the debate last Fall. This is needed in order that more legal authority be provided the Attorney General. He said that the Justice Department was "inhibited, so it is reported" because they lack this necessary statutory authority. Wilkins then said he was "dismayed, distressed and angered" by the Lemley court decision of last Saturday. He said that the picture had been best described by a porter in New York City as he was leaving to come to Washington. The porter said that the decision has "given them a map," meaning that this decision has explained to the segregationists how best to proceed to defeat school integration. He then spoke of the necessity of protecting the right to vote, explaining that in one community in the South where a college was located, Negro faculty members with Masters and Doctors degrees were unable to qualify to vote because of the rigid tests administered by local registrars. He felt that when more Negroes were able to vote in the South this would bring about peaceable change and adjustment. He said that the right to vote was the "most effective and bloodless way" to solve this whole problem. He said that it was natural for a colored person who felt aggrieved in a local community to want to turn to Washington, the White House and the President for aid. He then related to the President an incident which occurred during the President's visit to Oklahoma City last Fall in which eight high school science scholarship winners were presented to the President. One of them was a colored girl, he said, for whom this would never have been possible if integration had not taken place in that city in recent years.

Mr. Granger recalled to the President that, in his lifetime, he has seen three different phases of Negro activity in the field of civil rights: during his World War I days, during the time of the depression, and today. He said he had not known a period when the bitterness of the Negro showed "more signs of congealing" than today. Mr. Granger continued, saying the Negro had been led to believe that there was hope and that progress was being made when, suddenly, it appears stopped. He said this was the reason for the reaction by the Negroes at last month's Summit meeting to the President's remarks, and because of which he assumed the President might be disappointed. He referred to Agnes Meyer's recent article in the Atlantic Monthly, calling her a person of "goodwill, even though not always of good judgment." He said that in this article she had "misquoted" (meaning misstated, I believe) the New York City School Board efforts. He said this type of article only brings about more confusion by well-meaning white people. He commended the kind of leadership exhibited by Dr. King in the South, who, he said, "kept alive a free spirit."

The Attorney General commented that the reason, in his mind, for any bitterness which might exist, is the very fact that progress is being made today, pointing out that in prior years speeches were made but progress did not follow, and so hope never really built up. Now, with the progress of the past recent years, some of the hopes have become realized; occasional setbacks or delays should be regarded only as temporary. Mr. Rogers said that we are defending the laws by aggressive court action whenever and wherever it appears that the legal facts are sufficient to bring them to a successful conclusion. He emphasized that it would be extremely unwise and damaging to institute court action in every individual complaint situation. He then said that he thought the statement lacked a written preface of the type which Mr. Randolph had just made orally (commending the accomplishments of this Administration) and gave no appearance of appreciation for the gains of recent years. He also recalled Mr. Wilkins' willingness to abandon Part III of the proposed Civil Rights Bill during the heat of last year's debate.

The President then spoke, saying that he was extremely dismayed to hear that after 5 1/2 years of effort and action in this field these gentlemen were saying that bitterness on the part of the Negro people was at its height. He wondered if farther constructive action in this field would not only result in more bitterness.

Mr. Granger, seconded by Mr. Randolph and Mr. Wilkins, hastily assured the President that the bitterness they referred to was not directed to the President or the Administration but only to the communities in which apparent though slow progress was being made and then stopped; that the bitterness consisted of individual reactions to obstacles met.

The President spoke forcefully about the need for diligent and careful perusal by the Federal Government of any actions in this field. He did not comment in any way on the Judge Lemley decision or the Little Rock affair. He said he did not propose to comment - and knew they did not expect him to - on the recommendations which he had before him, but said that he would obviously be glad to consider them. He then said that there might be at first blush some value in convoking a White House conference, but added that he was doubtful if it would be productive of anything.

Mr. Randolph answered this last observation by saying he thought the President might give it a high moral tone, to which the President replied there was only so much any President could do in opening such a meeting. Mr. Rogers agreed with the President and said this could only serve as a sounding board for the reaffirmation of previously announced positions by spokesman (acknowledged and otherwise) in this area. Mr. Rogers emphasized again that the President had directed him to take aggressive actions in all matters affecting the Federal authority. The President agreed and then emphasized the importance of voting rights.

The meeting concluded with the President indicating his appreciation of meeting with the group.

In the press conference which followed the meeting, it appeared to me that the positions taken by the four leaders were basically very honest and favorable recitals of what had occurred at the meeting. The news accounts speak for themselves, but I took note of one significant question asked by Louis Lautier (only Negro member of the National Press Club Association) of Mr. Wilkins: he asked what had occurred in the meeting which had changed his attitude. He repeated this to mean Mr. Wilkins' attitude toward the President from the position taken a month ago by him. Mr. Wilkins was very indignant and didn't really respond to the question. Efforts were made to bait Wilkins in the press conference inasmuch as he seems to be the most militant of the group, but I would say that he held himself under control.

Rocco C. Siciliano