

Document 119
Papers as President: Official File

March 16, 1936

My dear Mr. White:

I have spoken to the President about your letter of February 28 concerning the Costigan-Wagner Bill. He says, in view of the fact that he is only asking three things of Congress, he does not see how he could specify this particular bill. Of course he is quite willing that it should be pushed by Congress itself, and I feel quite sure he will give it any help he can.

Very sincerely yours,

Mr. Walter White
Nat'l. Ass'n. for the Adv. of C. P.
69 Fifth Avenue, N.Y.C.

DD

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February 28, 1936

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Dear Mrs. Roosevelt:

I tried to reach you by telephone while in Washington this week but was unable to do so because of your absence from the city. I was told at the White House that you were to be away for the week. As the matter which I wished to discuss with you is so pressing and grave, I am writing you instead of waiting until I can discuss it with you personally.

I am very much disturbed by some of the things I learned at Washington this week. I well realize that in an election year controversial issues are uncomfortable for members of the Congress, especially those who are to stand for reelection. But there seems to be timidity on the part of a good many people on the matter of lynching or any other issue affecting the Negro to an extraordinary degree, which, added to the hostility of certain southern senators to any form of action against lynching, makes the outlook distinctly discouraging. I don't as a rule pay much attention to rumors, especially in Washington; but several persons told me that an order had gone out this week from the Democratic National Committee advising Democratic senators and congressmen to avoid all controversial issues. This report, naturally, did not add any hope for action on lynching.

Here is the situation with regard to the Van Nuys Resolution: The Senate Committee on Audit and Control is deadlocked, Senators Byrnes and Bachman opposing the resolution, and Senators Tydings and Townsend favoring it. Senator Van Nuys told me that he had discussed the matter with Senator Byrnes and that he (Senator Van Nuys) had hope of working out a means of getting the resolution reported favorably to the Senate and at the same time permitting Senator Byrnes to go on record, for home consumption, as being opposed to the resolution.

On January 2 the President told me that he wished some sort of action by this Congress on lynching. Apparently,

27th ANNUAL CONFERENCE, BALTIMORE, MD., JUNE 30th - JULY 5th, 1936

ENDORSED BY THE NATIONAL INFORMATION BUREAU, 215 FOURTH AVENUE, NEW YORK
How do your Senators and Congressmen stand on the Costigan-Wagner Anti-Lynching Bill?

there is little hope of getting the Costigan-Wagner Bill up for debate and vote. Attorney General Cummings, with whom I talked again on Wednesday, has made a very careful study of the Supreme Court's decision in the Gooch case (Arthur Gooch vs. United States of America, #559), and he is of the opinion that Mr. Justice McReynolds in writing the decision sufficiently stressed possible pecuniary advantage to the kidnapper to make it doubtful that the kidnappers of Claude Neal could be punished under the Lindbergh Kidnapping Law.

Thus we face a situation where there is little likelihood of action on the Costigan-Wagner Bill, no possibility of action by the Department of Justice against the kidnappers of Claude Neal, and either the killing in committee of the Van Nuys Resolution or its being held up so long and the amount of money for the investigation cut so drastically as to make it useless.

I am not making a plea for the N.A.A.C.P. or for myself personally, but here is the plight in which this debacle puts us:

In the first place, some of our most faithful friends in working for the Costigan-Wagner Bill question our support of the Van Nuys Resolution. For example, a very important official of the Y.W.C.A. believes that the N.A.A.C.P. and I have made a very serious tactical blunder in supporting the Van Nuys Resolution instead of the Costigan-Wagner Bill. She writes, "The general resentment on the part of states about federal 'snoopers' is much that to promote this resolution may jeopardize our campaign for the anti-lynching bill. I regard the Van Nuys Resolution as a sort of alibi for our friends in the Senate, unconscious as they may be. Some day when I see you I will tell you what is happening to some of them this election year."

You can well imagine what will be the reaction of this individual and others like her, concerning whose sincerity and friendship there can be no question whatever, if there is further delay on the Van Nuys Resolution or if it is killed or emasculated. These friends at least will not be denunciatory in their attitude should this happen. The name cannot be said of our enemies and critics.

Just a fortnight ago more than a thousand persons paid their own expenses to attend a "National Negro Congress" in Chicago. The N.A.A.C.P. refused to participate in or to endorse this Congress, first, because we were not given sufficient information about its sponsorship, program or purposes, and, second, because there were too many rumors that it was being pushed in some respects by Communists and in others by Republicans. But at this Congress statements were made especially critical of the N.A.A.C.P., to the effect that we had been promising action against lynching and failed to show any results. I do not know yet who the sponsors were of the meeting in Chicago, but the spirit of unrest and revolt which it represented is not in the main an artificially stimulated one but is

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt - 2

instead an expression of a widespread dissatisfaction which cannot and should not be ignored.

Investigation since I last saw you has established that there were twenty-five authenticated lynchings during 1935, nineteen of them after the filibuster; there are six additional cases being investigated; there were eleven cases where the mob spirit ran so high that troops with drawn bayonets, machine guns, tear gas bombs and the like were necessary to protect prisoners while they were being tried; and there were fifty-five cases, involving a total of eighty-five persons, where lynchings were narrowly averted by the augmenting of guards, removal of prisoners and the like. Students of the lynching situation like Dr. Arthur Raper of the Interracial Commission and Judge Orville Parks of Georgia declare that an averted lynching of this sort is fundamentally as serious as a consummated lynching, in that it shows the presence of potential lynching. If this point of view be accepted, one will realize how very serious the situation is growing when there were one hundred and twenty-seven cases in a single year of actual or potential lynching. This will amply explain the rapidly growing and very widespread feeling regarding inaction on the Costigan-Wagner Bill or the Van Nuys Resolution. Now that warm weather is coming when people can gather out of doors I look for a resumption of lynchings.

Please forgive me for writing at such length and in such a gloomy vein. But I have returned from Washington more discouraged than I have ever before. I think it is a very serious mistake to assume that it will be safer politically to pass the buck and dodge the issue simply because this is an election year. Such a course may conceivably cost in November far more than will be gained by letting the Costigan-Wagner Bill and the Van Nuys Resolution be strangled to death.

If you will do so, I would be glad if you would share these facts with the President. Should either you or he wish me to do so, I shall be glad to talk them over with you at your convenience.

Ever sincerely,

Walter White
Secretary

Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt
The White House
Washington, D. C.

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