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Laville, Helen

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HELEN LAVILLE

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“Women of Conscience” or “Women of Conviction”? The National Women’s Committee on Civil Rights

HELEN LAVILLE

This paper explores the history of the National Women’s Committee on Civil Rights (NWCCR). Called into being at the behest of President Kennedy, the NWCCR was an attempt to enlist the support of the organized women of America in the advancement of civil rights. The NWCCR had two main goals: first, to offer support for the passage of Kennedy’s civil rights legislation, and second, to encourage their branch membership to work in support of integration. However, whilst the majority of the NWCCR’s affiliated organizations had passed resolutions in favour of integration both throughout the United States and within their own organization, in practice they were reluctant to threaten the internal stability of their associations by insisting on either integrated membership or active support of civil rights in the local community. This article will argue that whilst the NWCCR were successful in organizing lobbying for the 1964 Civil Rights Act, they were unwilling to throw their weight behind efforts to encourage activism in local communities. Whilst key members of the NWCCR saw an important role for women in the implementation of civil rights at the community level, they were forced to conclude that the organizational structure and ethical inertia of the NWCCR did not make it a suitable medium for furthering racial justice.

On 9 July 1963, three hundred leaders of women’s organizations attended a conference at the White House to discuss President Kennedy’s civil rights programme. Kennedy, alongside Vice President Lyndon Johnson, hailed the women’s “tremendous potential for developing understanding and influencing public opinion.”¹ Fired with enthusiasm for the cause, the women formed the National Women’s Committee for Civil Rights (NWCCR) to further the goals of racial justice. Enthusiasm notwithstanding, the NWCCR was a short-lived organization whose achievements were, at best, nebulous.

Department of American and Canadian Studies, University of Birmingham. E-mail: h.laville@bham.ac.uk

¹ Report on White House Conference on Civil Rights with Women’s Organizations, 9 July 1963, NWCCR Papers, Records of the Women’s Bureau, Department of Labor, National Archives, Maryland (hereafter NWCCR Papers), box 19.

The committee's 1964 report claimed, "We made a difference," but admitted, "In the national effort to secure the enactment of the Civil Rights Bill ... our part was necessarily a small one. In the movement to secure racial justice, in which we have a deep commitment, we have been but one of many groups working."² NWCCR co-chair Mildred Harris noted that it was "difficult ... to measure results. We know that women are taking a more active part in civil rights, but whether or not activities ... would have taken place without the stimulation of the NWCCR it is impossible to say."³ Whilst the achievements of the NWCCR are difficult to quantify, analysis of their history is nonetheless worthwhile. Civil rights historiography has recently seen a burgeoning number of books on white women and the civil rights movement. Publications in the field include the biographies and autobiographies of white activists such as Anne Braden, Virginia Durr, Lillian Smith and Frances Freeborn Pauley.⁴ Historians such as Paul Mertz, Andrew Lewis and Elizabeth Jacoway have explored how white women organized in local contexts in response to specific crises within their city or state.⁵ A third

² "We Made a Difference," report of the NWCCR, July 1964, American Association of University Women Archives 1881–1976 (hereafter AAUW Records), reel 146.

³ NCWWR Steering Committee minutes, 9 July 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

⁴ See, for example, Virginia Foster Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle: The Autobiography of Virginia Foster Durr* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1990); Catherine Fosl, *Subversive Southerner: Anne Braden and the Struggle for Racial Justice in the Cold War South* (New York and London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002); Anne C. Loveland, *Lillian Smith: A Southerner Confronting the South: A Biography* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1986); Kathryn Nasstrom, *Everybody's Grandmother and Nobody's Fool: Frances Freeborn Pauley and the Struggle for Social Justice* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000); Essay collections include Gail S. Murray, ed., *Throwing off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Constance Curry, et al., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000). See also Lynne Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830–1970* (New York: Touchstone, 2001), for a consideration of both white and black activists. Sara Mitchell Parsons, *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights: The Memoir of a White Civil Rights Activist* (Tuscaloosa and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2000).

⁵ See, for example, Elizabeth Jacoway, "Down from the Pedestal: Gender and Regional Culture in a Ladylike Assault on the Southern Way of Life," *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 54, 3 (Autumn 1997), 345–52; Andrew Lewis, "Emergency Mothers: Basement Schools and the Preservation of Public Education in Charlottesville," in Matthew Lassiter and Andrew Lewis, eds., *The Moderate's Dilemma: Massive Resistance to School Desegregation in Virginia* (Charlottesville, University Press of Virginia, 1998); Paul E. Mertz, "Mind Changing Time "all over Georgia: HOPE and School Desegregation 1958–1961," *Georgia Historical Quarterly*, 77 (Spring 1993), 41–61.

category of work has examined the impact of civil rights legislation on pre-existing women’s organizations and voluntary associations.⁶

It is in this third category where one might expect the NWCCR to have had an impact. The NWCCR was an important effort to utilize the logistical, political and moral resources of existing women’s organizations on behalf of civil rights, and to move the momentum for civil rights away from public protests and government legislation, and towards community institutions and mobilization. Whilst the impetus for the NWCCR came from the federal government, it received no federal funding and was explicitly nongovernmental. This article will contextualize the efforts of the NWCCR, explaining the position of mainstream American women’s associations on integration within their own organizations before the establishment of the NWCCR. Whilst the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) had pursued a integrationist agenda since the mid-1930s, other mainstream women’s associations – such as the National Federation of Business and Professional Women’s Clubs (NFBPW), the League of Women Voters (LWV) and the American Association of University Women (AAUW) – had taken a much more ambivalent position, and as late as 1961 were still tolerating the existence of segregation within their southern branches. This article will argue that, whilst the national leadership of women’s organizations were ready to throw their weight behind efforts to secure the passage of federal legislation, they lacked the commitment and sense of urgency necessary to encourage, inspire or demand that their branch membership dedicate themselves to community activism in support of racial equality. Furthermore, southern branches resisted calls to action, either because their membership was actively pro-segregation, or because they felt that the espousal of the cause of integration would render their group politically ineffective in their own communities. Finally, this article will assess the assumptions of the NWCCR and subsequent organizations regarding the potential role of middle-class women’s movements in the struggle for racial justice.

⁶ The transformation of the Young Women’s Christian Association from a segregated organization to an integrated one has been explored by Susan Lynne and Helen Laville, whilst Christina Greene has investigated the response of women’s organizations in Durham, North Carolina to the civil rights movement. Susan Lynne, *Children of One Father: The Development of an Interracial Organization in the YWCA*,” chapter 2 of *idem*, *Progressive Women in Conservative Times: Racial Justice, Peace and Feminism, 1945 to the 1960s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992); Helen Laville, “‘If the Time Is Not Ripe, Then It Is Your Job to Ripen the Time!’ The Transformation of the YWCA from Segregated Association to Interracial Organization 1930–1965,” *Women’s History Review*, 15, 3 (July 2006), 359–83; Christina Greene, *Our Separate Ways: Women and the Black Freedom Movement in Durham, North Carolina* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

Before the end of the Second World War, women's associations within the US were generally segregated. Whilst racial segregation was rarely mentioned in national membership regulations, membership tended to reflect social, professional or residential segregation, with white women joining associations such as the LWV, the AAUW and the NFBPW, and African American women joining groups such as the National Association of Coloured Women's Clubs and the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). Segregation within organizations such as the LWV and the AAUW was implicit, rather than explicit, and some African American women did join these organizations, particularly in northern states, although in very small numbers. The YWCA was a significant exception to this pattern. The YWCA was initially segregated into African American and white branches, reflecting the residential patterns of the local branches. However, as segregation in the North became less rigid, and as national coordinating bodies within the YWCA increased the number of interracial contacts and friendships within the organization, the lines of racial segregation became less clear. In 1920 Lugenia Burns Hope led a campaign within the YWCA to overcome the control white women's branches exercised within the South over African American branches, pointing out that race was not mentioned in branch and national membership regulations. As a result of the activism of the many influential African American members, strong religious conviction and pressure from their national student body, the YWCA was a trailblazer for interracial organizing.

Other American women's organizations – with fewer African American members, a lack of underlying religious conviction and a desire to preserve national harmony – felt less pressure to alter their position on segregation. From the 1940s, however, the issue of racial segregation became far more pressing, as both African American women and liberal white members challenged segregation within women's associations. In January 1943 the New York State Federation of the NFBPW rejected the application for chartership from the Midtown Club, a racial integrated group. The Midtown group appealed to the Executive Committee of the National Federation, who forced the New York Federation to reverse their decision, explaining, "Whereas member clubs in some states have or have had negro members ... there are not and never have been any racial membership restriction [*sic*]." ⁷ Behind the ostensibly pro-integration actions taken by the National Executive, however, lay an irritation with "pressure groups" for

⁷ "National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Club issues Statement on Midtown Suit" (not dated), AAUW Records, reel 79.

forcing the issue. Whilst ruling in favour of the Midtown group, the National Executive blamed the crisis not on the New York State Federation but on the Midtown Club for interpreting their rejection as racially motivated: “The National Federation deplors the injection by the Midtown Club of the racial issue into its litigation and through statements issued to the public press and circulated to Federation members.”⁸ Louise Bache, executive secretary of the NFBPW, wrote confidentially to Kathryn McHale, president of the AAUW, to enquire “whether or not the AAUW is taking Negroes into the various clubs and if so what policy you have which makes this possible ... how did you ... implement the policy so that it was possible to introduce Negroes into the various clubs without creating disunity?”⁹ Dr. McHale replied that the sole qualification for entry into the AAUW was a degree from an approved institution. However, she explained that this was the national membership policy, acknowledging that branch membership was discretionary, and branches were not obligated to take all qualified people who applied. Bache replied to McHale, venting her frustration: “If we could only get pressure groups to be a little more patient and willing to wait until minority opinion can swell into majority, all would be well ... But I suppose war makes people restless and more militant.”¹⁰

McHale’s response to Bache reflected the degree to which the AAUW, alongside the LWV, had adopted a compromise position on racial integration. Both groups espoused racial integration at the national level, but in fact tolerated the existence of segregated branch membership within their own organizations. Whilst this may have reflected the lack of urgency with which the issue was viewed within these organizations, it also reflected the extent to which national leadership understood that racial integration was easier in some areas of the country than in others. In 1949, as the result of a challenge to segregated membership in Washington, DC, the AAUW debated segregation within their organization, passing a by-law stating that the sole basis of membership in both the national association and the local branch was a degree from an approved institution, with the *Journal of the AAUW* publishing a range of letters on the issue.¹¹ The segregation of some southern branches reflected the pro-segregation position of at least some of their members. Regina West wrote from Mississippi that “the fact is that the

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Letter from Louise Franklin Bache to Kathryn McHale, 28 Nov. 1942, AAUW Records, reel 78.

¹⁰ Letter from Louise Bache to Kathryn McHale 5 Feb 1943, AAUW Records, reel 79.

¹¹ For a full account see Janice Leone, “Integrating the American Association of University Women 1946–1949,” *Historian*, 51, 3 (1989), 423–45.

admission of Negro members to AAUW in Mississippi would [mean] the resignation of most white members ... they would gladly help the Negro women to organize a group of their own, but would not meet them in the same group."¹² Other groups, however, insisted that their segregated position was not an expression of their own preferences, but recognition of the local cultural, social and legal context. Lucy Westbrook, of Jackson, Mississippi argued that integration "would be very difficult, not because members themselves would not accept a Negro woman, but because customs and traditions are so strong in the community. It is stirring up of the feeling that we are afraid of, not the acceptance of a Negro woman."¹³ Other members pointed out that local segregation laws made integration difficult, if not impossible. Marion Spidle of Alabama explained, "I speak to the practical applications of Alabama laws and city ordinances ... it was impossible to hold state meetings of both Negroes and whites in Montgomery and in Birmingham ... We are eager to cooperate, but we cannot buck State laws."¹⁴ Katherine Vickery of Alabama explained the quandary of the southern branches: "If the National policy demands that we receive Negro women into our local branches as we are now organized, we will face the alternative of disobedience to State and local laws or the abandonment of the local branch by the national."¹⁵ The debate exposed differences over the extent to which organizations could insist that local branches in the South adhere to a national policy on racial integration. Certainly, some members argued that the AAUW had a responsibility to insist on a national position on integration. Mary Joy of the New Jersey association argued,

Our leaders know that the day of discrimination is passing in this country and feel a responsibility for the method of this change – whether it is to come in a peaceful, decent manner, or with bloodshed and ill-feeling. They believe educated women should take leadership on the side of peaceful adjustment in domestic racial matters.¹⁶

Ruth Roettinger, in South Carolina, concurred, arguing, "If admissions of graduates were to depend on the whims of the branches, we would become a federation of local clubs existing for sundry reasons but we would most certainly cease to be a powerful national organization."¹⁷ Regina West, however, writing from Mississippi, disagreed strongly, arguing that membership policy should be at the discretion of local branches: "There is a strong feeling that it is undemocratic to leave a branch no autonomy in such

¹² *Journal of the AAUW*, 42, 3 (Spring 1949), 134.

¹³ *Journal of the AAUW*, 43, 1 (Fall 1949), 27.

¹⁵ *Journal of the AAUW*, 42, 3 (Spring 1949), 135.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 134.

a matter.”¹⁸ In practice the AAUW made little attempt to enforce its national membership policy on local branches.

In 1956 the LWV underwent a similar crisis, and reached a similarly compromised, piecemeal resolution. Sara Mitchell Parsons, a member of the Atlanta branch of the LWV, recalled that the crisis was sparked by a new member who had recently moved to Atlanta from the North. During the 1956 annual meeting she took to the floor and questioned the chapter’s by-laws, which stated

that any *white* woman may apply for membership. Pointing out that this meant the Atlanta chapter did not conform to the National Leagues’ regulations she then moved that “the word ‘white’ be stricken from the by-laws of the Atlanta League of Women Voters”

A heated debate ensued, with one member insisting in a voice that was “emotional and high-pitched, ‘If we allow Negroes to join this proud organization we will kill it.’”¹⁹ When the state leadership issued a statement making it clear that all leagues across Georgia must abide by national policy on racial integration, eleven officeholders of the Atlanta League resigned. The departing members explained, “integration of our League at this time will raise so many problems that the effectiveness of the Atlanta League will be seriously impaired and we [could] no longer function in the political life of our community.”²⁰ As with the AAUW, the reiteration of a pro-integration position lacked conviction or enforcement mechanisms. In response to an enquiry by the Atlanta LWV about national policy on racial integration in 1959, national president Mrs. Phillips explained, “We have felt ... that while continuing to give State and local leagues the best counsel we can, we must depend upon them for on the spot appraisals. This undoubtedly means that League policy may seem – or perhaps be – inconsistent.”²¹ The more liberal members of the league were disappointed at the lack of leadership from the National Board. One member of the Atlanta League, Nan Pendergrast, later recalled, “I remember being disappointed ... because I had expected the National League to say, ‘You must integrate or get out of the League.’ But they didn’t do it. They left the decision to us to make.”²² Whilst the AAUW and the LWV may have formally disavowed a segregated membership policy, in practice they largely agreed on the need to be sensitive to local conditions

¹⁸ Ibid. ¹⁹ Parsons, *From Southern Wrongs to Civil Rights*, 21, original emphasis.
²⁰ *Atlanta Journal*, 5 April 1956.

²¹ Mrs. Phillips to Frances Pauley, 12 June 1959, Frances F. Pauley Collections, box 5, file 1, Robert Woodruff Library, Emory University.

²² Interview with Nan Pendergrast, conducted by Kathryn Nasstrom, Georgia Government Documentation Project, Series J. William Pullen Library, Atlanta, GA.

and circumstances. Having secured national policy statements on integration, few women's associations made any effort to enforce them. The YWCA was unique in the extent to which they insisted not only that racial integration and a commitment to racial justice be fostered at all levels and across all regions within their organization, but also that their members commit themselves to working for racial justice in their wider communities.²³ Other women's organizations lacked the YWCA's sense of ethical imperative and urgency. This lack of commitment was to be a major stumbling block for the work of the NWCCR.

The establishment of the NWCCR was part of a broader strategy within the Kennedy White House, directing the civil rights movement away from high-publicity confrontation-based protests to community-based efforts. This shift was to be partnered with a move from governmental to non-governmental activism, with the Kennedy administration seeking to encourage the participation of voluntary associations, businesses, professional institutions, churches and philanthropic organizations. The Voter Education Project was an example of this national-to-local, public-to-private strategy, with the government encouraging and facilitating the cooperation of private foundations in voting projects in the South. Kennedy's efforts to stimulate the involvement of private groups in civil rights activism included a series of meetings with lawyers, businessmen and clergy, who had a potential role to play in furthering the cause. At their first meeting, the women of the NWCCR were fired up with enthusiasm for their cause, if a little vague about turning their ideological zeal into concrete action. Suggestions ranged from the largely symbolic: "The possibility of a device such as a symbol to raise the status of women participating in civil rights efforts should be considered, similar to the sticker used in World War II in homes of servicemen"; to the vague: "Action to overcome unemployment and provide more housing"; to the devious: "Women should get their husbands who are on real estate boards to accept people for what they are without regard to color."²⁴ The one obvious area where the NWCCR could make a contribution was in lobbying for the passage of civil rights legislation. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who attended a meeting of the NWCCR Steering Committee in September 1963, "urged this group to do something specific to get support

²³ See Laville, "If the Time Is Not Ripe."

²⁴ Report on White House Conference on Civil Rights with Women's organizations, 9 July 1963, NWCCR Papers, box 19.

for the legislation ... he felt strongly that women were a key to success in the passage of the legislation.”²⁵ The Committee took part in the ‘Write for Rights’ campaign, encouraging individuals and organizations to write to members of Congress in support of the Civil Rights Act. The NWCCR stationed volunteers on every floor of the House during the debate and organized visits to the offices of congressmen. One woman reported, “I’ll stay as long as you need me. The kids, aged 14 and 16, are cooking dinner this week – that’s their contribution to civil rights. My husband is eating what they cook. That’s his contribution.”²⁶ In organizing their political skills in support of the bill, the leadership of the NWCCR were able to call upon the participation of the liberal East Coast members of their organizations. The fact that participation in the effort could be carried out far from the eyes of their neighbours and communities made the effort relatively risk-free. Efforts to ensure the peaceful implementation of civil rights within their home communities, particularly in the South, would prove much more difficult.

In their communications to member organizations, the NWCCR stressed the responsibility of women’s associations to create support within their communities: “If women, personally and collectively, can work to create opinion favourable for human rights in general and compliance with a strong civil rights bill in particular, they will render the kind of public service for which the NWCCR ... came into being.”²⁷ NWCCR newsletters urged local branches to assist in the peaceful desegregation of schools. A leaflet urged them to “Talk with the local Board of Education,” and to attempt to build alliances with African American community groups:

Talk with members of Negro organizations such as the National Association of Coloured Women’s Clubs, the National Council of Negro Women, the Urban League and the NAACP about the kind of citizen support which they think might be helpful. Consult with police officials and religious leaders. Talk to newspaper editors, radio and television editors.²⁸

²⁵ Subject meeting of the Steering Committee, NWCCR, 17 Sept. 1963, AAUW Archives, reel 146.

²⁶ “How Women in Washington Helped,” NWCCR newsletter, 1, 2, March 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

²⁷ Memo to related organizations and state and city groups from the NWCCR, 17 April 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

²⁸ Pamphlet produced by the National Women’s Committee for Civil Rights, 15 Aug. 1963, AAUW Records, reel 146.

Recalling the ugly images of the Little Rock crisis, which showed white women jeering African American students, or standing by doing nothing to help them, the NWCCR devised the Take a Hand programme:

If there is community hesitancy or doubt about desegregation on the first day of school, outstanding members of the organization ... could meet the Negro parents and their children and literally "Take a hand" of the Negro parents and the Negro child and walk with them into the school building.²⁹

Whilst a ringing denunciation of bigotry may have helped foster a sense of righteousness amongst the women of the NWCCR, it achieved little in terms of advancing the implementation of civil rights in the South. Robert Kennedy reminded the women of the NWCCR, "Women are needed to give leadership and guidance on a local level, not just statements."³⁰ Efforts to stimulate local branches towards pro-civil rights community work, however, proved problematic, with no evidence that programmes such as "Take a Hand" were adopted. Given the reluctance of the organizational leadership of the NWCCR's constituent groups to insist on a "top-down" position on racial justice within their own organizations, their efforts to stimulate pro-civil rights grassroots activism under the auspices of the NWCCR were, perhaps unsurprisingly, lukewarm and marked by ambivalence.

The inability of the NWCCR to rally women to the cause of racial justice reflected the ambivalence and essential conservatism of its member organizations. Both Kennedy's advisers and individuals within the NWCCR had perhaps an unrealistic expectation of the extent to which the reservoir of women's civic and community standing represented by these groups could be tapped in the cause of racial justice. The NWCCR was modelled on an earlier organization, the Fellowship of the Concerned (FOC), who also predicated their work on the recognition of the importance of women's civic and community standing. The FOC had been formed in 1949 during a meeting of the Southern Regional Council (SRC) under the gentle but charismatic leadership of Dorothy Tilly. The FOC ran programmes such as the Know Your Courts as Your Schools project, in which women were encouraged to attend court cases, since Tilly believed that "the presence of socially prominent women sitting in southern courtrooms would shame local authorities."³¹ Tilly's organization had specific connections to the NWCCR; Peggy Reach explicitly referred to it as a model for NWCCR actions, and

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Minutes of the Steering Committee, 17 Sept. 1963, NWCCR Papers, box 20.

³¹ Edith Holbrook Riehm, "Dorothy Tilly and the Fellowship of the Concerned," in Gail S. Murray, ed., *Throwing off the Cloak of Privilege: White Southern Women Activists in the Civil Rights Era* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004), 31.

Tilly herself offered advice and guidance to key NWCCR members. Despite these connections between the groups, however, there were substantial differences between the organizations which meant that the NWCCR could not simply embrace the FOC ethos and activism. The FOC was an interfaith and interracial organization, their membership gathered from strongly religious organizations, or from groups with pre-existing pro-integrationist views such as the SRC. The NWCCR was predominantly a white coalition group, made up of organizations with no previous history of a pro-integration viewpoint. Indeed, in many cases members had expressed an explicit antipathy to the cause. Recognizing the range of positions on racial equality within its affiliated organizations, the NWCCR had avoided any risk of overcommitting their membership to pro-integration work:

The NWCCR is a clearing house for information on civil rights for women’s organizations ... [with] no membership scheme or formal recognition plan for local and state groups ... Each related national organization speaks for itself on the Civil Rights issue and the NWCCR does not speak for them collectively or individually.³²

When Tompkins wrote to AAUW branch membership soliciting support for community work, she made it clear to NWCCR executive director Shirley Smith that the AAUW could not and would not demand participation from its members, explaining: “These women will not be approached on the basis of membership in AAUW, but rather as informed and potentially helpful lay women in assessing the situation for the NWCCR.”³³ Many of the leaders of the national organizations viewed their NWCCR membership as being based on their private, rather than organizational, position: “Members of the Steering Committee are acting as individuals who may or may not be in position to speak authoritatively for their organizations. Their recommendations to related organizations do not obligate their own organization.”³⁴ This lack of commitment was further fostered by the lack of significant African American participation in the NWCCR. The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) offered financial support to the NWCCR, paying for secretarial support. The participation of the NCNW led to complacency amongst the rest of the committee that they were in fact “interracial,” however numerically slight the membership of African American women might be. In March 1964 Smith expressed her surprise that there were no African American women at a recent meeting of the

³² NWCCR Steering Committee Minutes, 13 Jan. 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 20.

³³ Letter from Pauline Tompkins, AAUW, to Shirley Smith, executive director NWCCR, 25 Sept. 1963, AAUW Records, reel 146.

³⁴ NWCCR Steering Committee Minutes, 13 Jan. 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 20.

group: "I suggested that an extra effort be made on the next meeting to fill this vital gap ... It appeared to me that only the National Council of Negro Women were invited and when Mrs. Burnes could not come, that was it!"³⁵ At their very first meeting the NWCCR had voted "to ask the President to appoint a Negro Woman to serve as co-chairman ... as a symbolic recognition of the concept of equality which is the committee's motivation."³⁶ This "symbolic gesture" painfully illustrated the lack of pre-existing interracial relationships within the NWCCR.

Accompanying this ambivalence at national level, branch support of the NWCCR in the South proved difficult to enlist. At the request of NWCCR executive director Shirley Smith, Pauline Tompkins (president of the AAUW) wrote to a number of women across the South asking if they would convene a group of influential women in their communities to approach local restaurateurs, hotel managers and others on behalf of compliance with the Civil Rights Bill.³⁷ Eleanor Reid, president of the Little Rock AAUW, was enthusiastic about the idea, reporting on a series of seminars held by the Little Rock branch on compliance, and plans for the production of a report countering arguments against the bill.³⁸ In many other instances, however, Tompkins was unable to find women who were willing to get involved. As with the debate over membership policy in 1949, branch membership argued that attempts by the AAUW to confront the issue of racial justice would result in disaster. Many of the members were connected with education and felt that their jobs would be at risk if they spoke out in favour of desegregation. Mrs. Coker of Jackson, Mississippi explained, "At this time I am under contract to teach in the Jackson Public School system and it would be virtually impossible to act in both of these areas at once. Quite simply I would be fired forthwith."³⁹ Lucy Howarth from Tennessee argued, "If anyone closely identified with the AAUW should become prominently identified with such a committee as you suggest, I think it would cause the dissolution of this branch."⁴⁰ Katherine Vickery wrote to Tompkins explaining her failure to rally Alabamian women to the cause, explaining, "I did not know the attitude of many of our members, hence I asked only those whom I knew to

³⁵ Memo to Mrs. Harris, Mrs. Horton and Mrs. Peterson, from Shirley Smith, 6 March 1964, NWCCR papers.

³⁶ Peggy Reach, NCCW, to the NWCCR Study Committee, 3 Aug. 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

³⁷ Letter from Pauline Tompkins, AAUW, to Shirley Smith, executive director NWCCR, 25 Sept. 1963, AAUW Records, reel 146.

³⁸ Letter from Eleanor Reid to Dr. Tompkins, 27 June 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

³⁹ Letter from Frances Coker to Dr. Tompkins, 10 June 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

⁴⁰ Letter from Lucy Haworth to Dr. Tompkins, 7 July 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

be very sympathetic to the cause of civil rights as defined by the Congress.” Even within this select group, Vickery was unable to find anyone to join a pro-civil rights group, and concluded, “Feeling is such in this area that I hope moves of the nature you suggest will not be made in the name of the AAUW.”⁴¹ As with its earlier attempt to discuss integration, the AAUW found that many of its southern branches were not ready to face the issue of integration. Whether from absolute opposition to integration, or from fear of the consequences of espousing a pro-integration position in a hostile community, the majority of the southern branches resisted the NWCCR’s call to action.

As the climate in many southern states become increasingly tense, the NWCCR was forced to examine its role in community activism. Two key members were determined to push the committee into a more active role: Shirley Smith and special consultant Polly Cowan. Significantly, neither Cowan nor Smith came to the NWCCR with a background in women’s voluntary associations. Cowan was a wealthy and successful businesswoman, a television and radio producer turned social activist who had been a hard-working and dedicated volunteer for the committee, and had made frequent financial contributions to the group.⁴² Smith’s background was in public service as assistant public affairs officer for the Department of State and the US Information Agency. Moreover, she had been an advocate and participant in the direct-action civil rights movement as a Freedom Rider. She took one year’s leave of absence from her job as director of special projects for the African-American Institute in order to work for the NWCCR. The *Washington Post* reported that the “attractive 36-year-old blonde” was taking a 50 percent reduction in salary in order to manage the committee’s activities.⁴³ As the issue of compliance with civil rights legislation in the South became more pressing throughout 1964, the division between individuals such as Cowan and Smith, who saw the NWCCR as a civil rights organization, and those lacking such strong ideological zeal became wider. In particular, the debates between Cowan and Smith, and NWCCR co-chair Mildred Horton, demonstrated their vastly different understanding of the work of the NWCCR. Horton and Patricia Harris had been appointed as co-chairs of the

⁴¹ Letter from Katherine Vickery to Dr. Tompkins, 11 June 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

⁴² In her letter recommending that Cowan be made a consultant to the group, Smith noted that Mrs. Cowan was “our second most important non-organizational donor. Mrs. Cowan’s gift of \$250 made it possible for me to go to Selma.” Memo to Mrs. Peterson, Mrs. Horton and Mrs. Harris from Shirley Smith, 3 Dec. 1963, NWCCR Papers, file 19.

⁴³ “And her new field is Civil Rights.” *Washington Post*, 19 Sept. 1963.

NWCCR at the suggestion of President Kennedy. In both cases the appointment reflected a history of government service and academic position; Mrs. Horton had been the first head of the Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service (WAVES) during the Second World War, before returning to her position as the president of Wellesley College. Patricia Harris had served in the Department of Justice, alongside Robert Kennedy, before taking up a position as dean of women at Howard University. Whilst Horton and Harris may have been very committed to the cause of civil rights, they had little experience either with women's associations or with the kind of direct-action organization that Smith and Cowan were determined to build.

In the early months of 1964 Smith and Cowan became increasingly urgent about the need for the NWCCR to take a more active role in the worsening situation in the South. Smith wrote to Mrs. Horton in February 1964, reporting a conversation she had had with Paul Anthony of the SRC. Smith reported Anthony's "grave concern" about the impact of the Civil Rights Bill in the South.⁴⁴ Smith, travelling to Atlanta at the expense of the SRC, became convinced of the need for the NWCCR to take a more activist approach:

My trip ... convinces me of the real need to bring national women leaders together to discuss a united effort for law and order after the passage of the bill. There is a real feeling that if we can't succeed in developing a public consensus for compliance with the bill in the major cities of the south, that it will be necessary to integrate every hamburger stand and filling station with a court order.⁴⁵

Cowan shared Smith's urgency, offering further funding for the Committee, explaining, "I will send the \$1,000 as a life-line so that the office can be kept going while the organizational plans are re-vamped. I cannot sit on this money while the Committee dies."⁴⁶ Mrs. Horton recognized that Cowan's suggestion demanded a change in direction for the NWCCR and an intensification of their work, explaining to her,

When the Steering Committee was established, it seemed valuable to maintain a clearing house – temporarily – to disseminate the information and inspiration of the meeting with President Kennedy but there was pressure to keep it small, inexpensive, undemanding ... Right now the National Women's Committee must decide that we either (a) go out of business as a committee and attach the functions now performed from our office to other offices or (b) do what you propose and go into high gear as an operating committee.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Letter from Shirley Smith to Mrs. Horton, 14 Feb. 1964, NWCCR papers, box 19.

⁴⁵ Letter from Mrs. Horton to Shirley Smith, 3 March 1964, NWCCR papers, box 19.

⁴⁶ Letter from Polly Cowan to Mrs. Horton, 24 March 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 19.

⁴⁷ Letter from Mrs. Horton to Polly Cowan, 24 March 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 19.

In a note to Harris and Smith, Horton made clear her own disinclination to expand the work of the NWCCR, explaining, “I think I made it very plain that I was not at all sure that our Steering Committee would want to carry on,”⁴⁸ explaining that the original conception of the committee had been “a non-operative but wholly coordinating group.”⁴⁹ The passage of the Civil Rights Bill through the Senate on 30 March 1964, together with the demands of Cowan and Smith, prompted the NWCCR to question its future role. Smith, determined to channel her contributions through more active organizations, resigned from the committee in March. Meeting on 8 April 1964, the Steering Committee recorded, “It was felt that the Committee had fulfilled the function for which it was organized last July.”⁵⁰ Finance had always been a problem for the committee, who relied largely on private donations to sustain their operations.⁵¹ The group discussed the idea of expanding their operations by applying for funds from charitable foundations to support a range of possible programmes.⁵² However, the membership lacked the commitment to proceed with any such expansion in their role. In August 1965 the new NWCCR executive director, Julie Wilson, explained that with the committee’s mailing lists turned over to the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the committee was no longer justified in keeping their own office open, and she tendered her resignation.

The failure of the NWCCR to encourage local activism amongst its constituent membership reflects the history of compromise within its constituent organizations, who had long tolerated segregation within their branches out of respect for the “local situation.” Letters from southern branches of the AAUW argued that compliance with the national position would jeopardize the existence of both the southern branches and the national organization itself. Given this choice, most of the NWCCR prioritized the stability of their own organizations over the civil rights struggle, a decision made possible by the very loose and non-coercive structure of the NWCCR. This compromise position was possible because of the lack of urgency within the NWCCR. Smith shrewdly identified the lack of a sense of personal involvement in the civil rights issue amongst the leadership of the NWCCR as

⁴⁸ Memo to Mrs. Peterson, Patricia Harris and Shirley Smith from Mrs. Horton, not dated, NWCCR Papers, box 19.

⁴⁹ Letter from Mrs. Horton to Shirley Smith, 19 March 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 19.

⁵⁰ Minutes of the Steering Committee, 8 April 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 21.

⁵¹ Polly Cowan in particular was a strong contributor to the group, contributing \$1,250 in 1963 and 1964. The National Council of Negro Women paid for the salary of an assistant to the NWCCR.

⁵² Proposal for a Foundation grant from the Taconic Foundation, not dated, AAUW Archives, reel 146.

a significant weakness. Smith opined, “the original idea of being a clearing-house for calls for action and an information center for National women’s organizations, appears to have been the wrong target for stimulating the most effective involvement of women in support of the President’s Civil Rights bill,” and suggested, “civil rights have to become a personal matter to the white women leaders before they can identify effectively with their Negro counterparts.”⁵³ The records of the NWCCR demonstrate the vast gulf between those who saw racial justice as an unequivocal moral imperative and those who were less committed to the cause. In December 1964 Smith drafted what she called a “Women of Conscience” letter intended to rally the membership of the NWCCR to greater effort. Mrs. Horton’s unwillingness to endorse Smith’s moral certainty regarding the civil rights movement is illustrated in her discomfort at the use of the phrase “women of conscience.” Horton explained,

I question the wisdom of the phrase “women of conscience” to imply that other people do not have a conscience if they disagree with us. It seems to me to engender possible ill-will ... What would you think of the phrase “women of conviction,” which implies that they are willing to take some action, but does not impugn the conscience of people with whom we disagree?⁵⁴

As a result of their experiences in the South, Cowan and Smith were convinced of the extent to which segregation in the South had discouraged interracial cooperation, leaving southern women unable to intervene in the civil rights crisis. The failure of the NWCCR, in Cowan’s view, was caused by the inability of southern white women to act. Noting that the women she had visited were “anything but stupid,” Cowan concluded that they were “paralysed,” and argued, “with such fear in a town and such a freezing of power to act, the mere giving of suggestions of things which might be done and answering a few questions connected with their fears helps them think of more solutions.”⁵⁵ Despite the fact that the women explicitly told Cowan, “no one wanted any outside help,” Cowan concluded that the failure of the NWCCR to inspire southern women to activism could be corrected with direct intervention from the North.⁵⁶ Disillusioned with the inertia of the NWCCR, but still convinced of the potential for women to further the cause of civil rights within the South, Cowan moved on to form the Wednesdays in

⁵³ Memo: Review of Committee Operations, by Shirley Smith, 8 April 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 24.

⁵⁴ Letter from Mrs. Horton to Miss Smith, 24 March 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 19.

⁵⁵ Report of the Selma Meeting, 22 Nov. 1963, NWCCR papers, box 19. ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

Mississippi (WIMs) project under the auspices of the NCNW. Despite the evidence from letters and interviews throughout the history of the NWCCR that women’s voluntary associations felt that they lacked the political strength to challenge resistance to racial integration, the underlying assumption behind the establishment of this new project, as with the NWCCR, was that that white middle-class women, through their civic and community organizations and social standing, could significantly aid the cause of civil rights in the South.

Both the NWCCR and Cowan espoused an unexamined, and arguably unrealistic, idea of the extent to which white women’s social and civic standing could be converted into political activism. Both Cowan and many within the NWCCR assumed that southern white middle-class women were silent supporters of integration, whose previous lack of action on behalf of racial justice reflected a want of effort rather than a want of will. This assumption is contradicted by the records of the NWCCR, which reveal, if obliquely, a number of positions on racial integration ranging from enthusiastic support to equally heartfelt opposition. Certainly it is clear that the efforts of the committee to stimulate community action on behalf of racial justice were not able to draw upon the consensus which had underwritten their efforts at lobbying in support of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Moreover, even had southern women’s organizations been undivided advocates of integration, the northern leaders of the NWCCR overestimated the extent to which women’s civic associations would be able to challenge the status quo within their communities. Kennedy’s assertion at a White House meeting that women’s associations had “a tremendous potential for developing understanding and influencing public opinion” was embraced by the NWCCR, and by activists such as Cowan and Smith, who seemed convinced that organized white women in the South had the power to change the social and political attitudes of their communities. This belief flew in the face of the evidence from women in the South, the majority of whom made very plain their sense of helplessness and their belief in their inability to affect change. Underlying the communication of the women approached by the NWCCR was frequently not hostility to the idea of integration, but fear at being identified with the project and the risk that such identification carried. The letters generated by the AAUW speak of women’s fears as to their safety, the safety of their families and their economic standing. Many white women’s associations in the South clearly did not believe that that they had the power to persuade their communities to embrace racial integration, had they but the courage and the conviction to try. Katherine Vickery of Alabama explained to Tompkins, “It is the purpose of those of us in the region to ride out this

storm and maintain an active and representative AAUW if possible.”⁵⁷ Lalia Boone, of Gainesville, Florida AAUW, explained that one of the women she had approached had explained, “she could not afford to jeopardize her husband’s position or run the risk of finding her home in ashes. Though this is an extreme case it is not at all unrealistic in her community.”⁵⁸ Cowan and Smith met a similar response during their visit to two women in Selma in October 1963. One of the women told Cowan that she had gone to the mayor and asked what she could do to help and had been told, “go home and lock your door until it’s over. Nothing is going to make us change around here.”⁵⁹

In his groundbreaking work on massive resistance, George Lewis describes the numerous problems for historians seeking to explore the responses of white southerners to the civil rights movement.⁶⁰ Lewis notes the temptation to dismiss resistance to integration as simply “racist,” and thus not in need of further explanation. Even where historians have recognized the need to explore the many social, economic, political and cultural factors behind resistance, they have been hampered by the lack of material on the topic. Unlike the plethora of memoirs, accounts and autobiographies on the part of civil rights activists, segregationists have been less willing to defend or account for their actions. The records of the NWCCR testify to outright resistance to integration, as some women were clearly staunch advocates of racial segregation. However, equally significantly, the records of the LWV and the AAUW and the efforts of the NWCCR vividly illustrate what Cowan referred to as southern women’s “paralysis,” and offer an invaluable opportunity to shed light onto that most difficult of historical tasks: explaining failure to act. Whilst there is an impulse to explain and document action, failure to act is frequently explained by inertia, in this case the innate resistive force of established civic organizations. Yet Cowan, and many others within the NWCCR, clearly felt that the paralysis of women’s organizations in the South did require explanation. Arguing for an expanded role for the NWCCR in 1964, Polly Cowan expressed her own incomprehension at the failure of women to identify themselves with the cause of racial justice, asking, “Where is everybody out there? One look at this morning’s headlines: ‘Negro Woman slain in Jacksonville Riot’ should have brought a bale of money and a flood of volunteers to the Committee office.

⁵⁷ Letter from Katherine Vickery to Dr. Tompkins, 11 June 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

⁵⁸ Laila Boone to Pauline Tompkins, 14 Aug. 1964, AAUW Records, reel 146.

⁵⁹ Report on a Trip to Selma, by Polly Cowan, NWCCR papers, box 19.

⁶⁰ George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006).

Is it fear or apathy that causes this paralysis?”⁶¹ The letters and interviews in the records of the NWCCR are an invaluable resource in understanding both the fear and the apathy behind the “paralysis” of southern women. Explaining the actions of those who avoided taking a position, the many who, like the Alabama AAUW, sought to “ride out the storm,” or who followed the advice of the Selma mayor to go home and lock their doors, has often been hampered by a lack of material. Despite efforts from national leadership, presidential encouragement and personal appeals from passionate advocates such as Cowan and Smith, the southern branch membership of the NWCCR, in the main, chose inaction. The responses of women in the South to integration and racial justice contained in the records of the NWCCR provide a powerful and important record of the complexities of the response of white women to the civil rights revolution.

⁶¹ Letter from Polly Cowan to Mrs. Horton, 24 March 1964, NWCCR Papers, box 19.