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Legal Staff Quits NAACP Over Firing

By Leroy J. Aarons and
Carol Craft

Washington Post Staff Writers

NEW YORK, Oct. 28—The entire legal staff of the NAACP resigned today over the dismissal of an associate counsel who wrote a magazine article critical of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The resigners included NAACP general counsel Robert L. Carter, an NAACP lawyer for 24 years, who has been involved in many of the organization's landmark cases.

In a letter of resignation to Roy Wilkins, NAACP executive director, Carter said, "I cannot in good conscience plead for fair procedures, the elimination of discrimination and the right of freedom for black Americans as counsel for the Association when the NAACP leadership is so hypocritical and lacking in integrity as to feel free to disregard those standards in the conduct of its own affairs."

The immediate issue in the mass resignation — involving seven lawyers and seven clerical staff members—was the failure of the NAACP board of directors to reconsider the case of Lewis M. Steel, the writer of the article, who was dismissed by directors at a board meeting Oct. 14.

The dismissal came a day after Steel's article, "Nine Men in Black Who Think White," appeared in the New York Times Sunday Magazine. He was identified in the article as associate counsel of the NAACP.

Steel, who is white, charged in the article that the Supreme Court in the last 15 years had "struck down only the symbols of racism while condoning or

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overlooking the ingrained practices which have meant the survival of white supremacy in the United States.

The directors, meeting in the Park-Sheraton Hotel here, found the article "an indefensible rejection of much of the Association's major effort over the past 60 years" and, according to an NAACP release, voted unanimously to fire Steel.

But William H. Booth, a board member who is New York City Human Rights Commissioner, claimed today that the board action had been taken while he and several other members were at lunch. He added that several attempts to get the board to reconsider were rejected or ignored.

'Tragic Absurdity'

Carter charged at a press conference today that the board had acted without giving Steel a hearing.

"The irony and tragic absurdity of this entire situation is that the board insists that its lawyers conform to its kind of orthodoxy," he said.

"If Steel can't write an article critical of the Supreme Court, particularly if he hasn't violated the procedures of the Association, the Association can't be serious about having people move in new directions. It can't be prepared to take on new cases."

The mass resignations seemed also to be a general rebellion by young legal staff members against what they felt was the conservatism of the Association. The NAACP has been under attack by a militant faction of its membership over the conservatism issue.

Some of the resigning lawyers said that the Steel case was just one example of interference by the board, Wilkins

and members of the "staff hierarchy" in efforts of the legal department to take on controversial causes.

Robert F. Van Lierop, one of the resigning lawyers, said the "staff hierarchy" had prevented the legal department from representing John F. Hatchett, a black New York schoolteacher who was dismissed after taking his class to a Malcolm X memorial program. (Hatchett has since become the focus of controversy here over an allegedly anti-Semitic magazine article.)

Wilkins, questioned on this, retorted, "I haven't heard anything about their involvement in the Hatchett case."

'Play Ostrich'

Another of the lawyers, Joan Franklin, said: "You might term certain of us militants" in contrast to "those who would rather play ostrich."

Wilkins said he would discuss the resignations with Bishop Stephen G. Spottswood of Washington, the NAACP board chairman, who he said had just returned from abroad over the weekend. Wilkins said Spottswood's absence was one reason it was impossible for the board to reconsider Steel's dismissal.

Wilkins was asked if he would ask the board to reconsider. "I said I'll probably talk with him," he repeated.

Carter said his resignation would be effective Dec. 1. The others gave no specific date but said they would finish out current cases.

Steel has been involved in several important cases in his five years with the NAACP, including *Ethridge vs. Rhodes* in Ohio, which established the principle that a Federal construction program can be halted where there is evidence of discrimination in hiring.