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# Frank Wilkinson's Legacy

by Peter Dreier and Jan Breidenbach

The obituaries for Frank Wilkinson, who died January 2 at 91, primarily focused on his role as a leading opponent of McCarthyism and his fervent dedication to the first amendment. The years he spent fighting for our basic freedoms were catalyzed by his own experience in 1958, when he was one of the last people ordered to prison for defying HUAC. After prison, he formed what became the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation, and until his death, dedicated his energy and brilliance to our basic rights.

We lose a champion just at the time the assault on our civil liberties is increasing the Patriot Act, National Security Administration spying these are only the most egregious of the present Administration's attempt to undo all that Frank stood for.

Frank's dedication to civil liberties is worthy of a book-length memorial. However, it is worth reminding ourselves that he began his career as an activist for affordable housing. His crusade for the first amendment actually began when he was fired from the Los Angeles Housing Authority for his radical politics.

For Wilkinson's generation of idealists -- who came of age in the Depression of the 1930s -- public housing was part of a broad movement for social reform and economic justice. To the extent that public housing now bears the stigma of failure, it is due not to the progressive values that inspired Wilkinson and others, but to the political influence of right-wing forces who fought to undermine public housing from the beginning.

Los Angeles and other cities again face a severe shortage of affordable housing. Many of the same battles that Wilkinson fought 50 years ago -- over land use, government subsidies for the poor, racial integration, and not in my backyard opposition to low-cost housing -- confront the current generation of public officials and civic leaders.

Frank Wilkinson grew up in Beverly Hills, was a Republican when a student at UCLA and seriously considered becoming a Methodist minister. He joined the new Los Angeles Housing Authority in 1942 when it was an independent agency with the mission of ending slum housing in the city. Under the then-Mayor Fletcher Bowron, a reform-minded liberal Republican elected in

1938, The LA Housing Authority supported the idea of building decent housing for poor and low-income families and believed in racial integration in the city's developments.

After World War II, Bowron sought to expand the program, especially for the many veterans who faced a desperate housing shortage. He endorsed a plan to raze many homes in the tight-knit Chavez Ravine neighborhood replace them with a large public housing development to be designed by world-class architect Richard Nuetra that would include two dozen 13-story buildings and more than 160 two-story houses, as well as new playgrounds and schools. Bowron, Wilkinson and other reformers viewed the housing plan for Chavez Ravine as a way to improve living conditions poor Angelenos. Opposition to the plan came from immigrants to lived in the area, which was essentially, a rural setting of small shacks, unpaved roads and no city sewer system. Opposition was understandable, given that in spite of these conditions, the people there considered the hills their home. One of the incentives offered to the residents was the absolute promise that they would be the first ones to move into the new housing. In 1950, the plan was presented to them.

While Frank and the Housing Authority wanted to rebuild the neighborhood for the people who lived there, others in the City's businesses leaders and right-wing politicians agreed to bulldoze the area but for other reasons. Land so close to the city's downtown was worth more exploited for profit than the provision of affordable housing. Using McCarthyite Red Scare tactics, these forces combined to characterize the Chavez Ravine proposal -- and public housing in general -- as socialist planning. The attack focused on its leading advocate Frank Wilkinson portraying him as a dangerous Communist. Brought before the House Un-American Activities Committee, he refused to answer their questions on First Amendment grounds and was fired from his job, tried and sent to federal prison.

The same business leaders who opposed Wilkinson and public housing also ended Bowron's political career. They handpicked Congressman Norris Poulson to run against Bowron and orchestrated his mayoral victory in 1953. During his campaign, Poulson vowed to stop the Chavez Ravine plan and other examples of "un-American" spending. Under Poulson, the city bought back the Chavez Ravine site from the federal government at a cut-rate price.

Los Angeles allowed Chavez Ravine to languish as an almost abandoned slum until the mid-1950s, when City Councilman Kenneth Hahn gave the Brooklyn Dodgers owner Walter O'Malley a helicopter tour, pointing out the area's proximity to freeways and downtown. To get O'Malley to bring his team to Los Angeles, the City bulldozed the few remaining homes, forcibly evicting the last residents. No one was relocated into better housing, no decent housing was built for the poor who lived there. Deep ravines were filled in to make the flat playing field of Dodger Stadium.

The battle of Chavez Ravine has become a legend of urban planning, inspiring a play by the Culture Clash theater group, a recent album by guitarist Ry Cooder, and many books and academic articles.

The attack on Frank Wilkinson as a housing advocate for the poor was only one of many repeated in numerous ways across the country.

Until the Depression, most American opinion leaders believed that the private market, with a helping hand from private philanthropy, could meet the nation's housing needs. In the first three decades of the 20th century, a few unions and settlement house reformers built model housing developments for working class families, but without government subsidy. The nation's economic collapse provided reformers with a political opening to push their "radical" ideas that the federal government should subsidize "social housing" and help create a noncommercial sector free from profit and speculation. Like their European counterparts, they envisioned it for the middle-class as well as the poor.

These reformers - union activists, economists, planners, architects, social workers, and journalists - had faith in the positive role of government on people and communities. They believed that well-designed housing with adequate amenities ) could uplift the poor. They pushed for well-designed, mixed-income, noncommercial, government-subsidized housing projects, sponsored by unions, church groups, other non-profit organizations, and government agencies. During its first few years, the New Deal build a few model developments that reflected this vision. They included day care centers and playgrounds, involved residents in cultural and educational activities, and were physically attractive enough so that middle-class families wanted to live there.

But the reformers were soon outmaneuvered by the real estate industry. The industry -- worried that well-designed and affordable government-sponsored housing would compete with the private sector for middle-class consumers -- warned about the specter of "socialism." After WW2, recognizing the pent-up demand for housing and fearing competition from public housing, the industry mobilized a major campaign against the program. Especially with the federal housing act of 1949, the industry sabotaged the program by pressuring Congress to restrict its funding, give local governments discretion over whether and where to locate developments, and limit it to the very poor. Senators from the South made sure that local governments had the authority to keep public housing racially segregated.

With limited budgets, many projects were poorly constructed and/or badly designed - ugly warehouses for the poor - stigmatizing "government housing" as housing of last resort. Local housing authorities -- typically dominated by business and real estate representatives -- often located public housing developments in areas without adequate stores, transportation, or schools, and isolated from middle-class neighborhoods, contributing to the concentration of poor people in cities. The problems we now associate with public housing were not inevitable. They were due to political choices made in Congress and at the local level.

Public housing became identified with drug wars and crime, places where children are afraid to walk to school, and elderly tenants, for whom hallways and elevators are as dangerous as streets, are afraid to leave their apartments, portrayed more as a trap than a ladder. Eventually, only 1.3 million public housing units were built -- less than 1% of the nation's housing -- and this construction came to an end in the Nixon era. Other programs -- rental vouchers for poor tenants and smaller production funding -- have been implemented, but the United States effectively walked away from our responsibility to house everyone -- including the very poor -- when we

abandoned public housing.

Today, Washington provides housing assistance for less than one-quarter of the nation's poor. And while the number of poor people has increased since President George W. Bush took office, his administration is cutting housing subsidies for low-income families.

Some federal funds are still used to build new housing for the poor. Ironically, most of today's government-subsidized housing is built by nonprofit community development organizations. They are typically well-designed to fit into neighborhoods and small-scale compared with the massive public housing projects built in the 1950s and 1960s. A growing number of these developments are mixed-income and provide child care, job training, and education and art programs. In other words, they look similar to the kind of projects that early housing reformers and their political offspring, like Frank Wilkinson, envisioned. But without sufficient federal subsidies, these community groups lack the resources to seriously address housing shortage for the poor.

And to this day, right-wing politicians use stereotypes of public housing to attack the very idea of government activism. During his 1996 campaign, Republican presidential nominee Bob Dole said that public housing was "one of the last bastions of socialism in the world", calling the authorities "landlords of misery." More recently, after the Katrina hurricane, Congressman Richard Baker (R-LA) was overheard telling lobbyists, "We finally cleaned up public housing in New Orleans. We couldn't do it, but God did."

Having the federal government turn its back on housing for all has not made the crisis go away. The nation's cities must address a serious housing crisis, but without the federal government as a partner. In Los Angeles, where Frank lived his entire life, elected leaders and activists are trying to deal with the legacy of the federal neglect, including more than 80,000 homeless people and a housing market where even middle-class families can't afford to buy a home. Finding resources for a local housing trust fund, exploring policies such as inclusionary housing, granny flats and increased density, and pushing landlords to fix up slum buildings, progressive Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa is calling on local housing advocates and the spirit of Frank Wilkinson to come up with solutions to an overwhelming crisis.

After Wilkerson emerged from prison, he was not allowed back to work for public housing. Instead, he went on to become one of the nation's leading civil rights activists. Like his fight to protect the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech, Frank Wilkinson viewed decent, safe, affordable housing as a basic human right. He was an inspiration to tens of thousands of activists in this nation. In his memory, we recommit ourselves to dismantling the Patriot Act, as he fought to dismantle HUAC. And in his memory, we fight for a safe, decent and affordable place to call home for all.

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