

Breaking through the 'invisible prison': the National Federation of the Blind and the right to organize, 1959

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Abstract

In 1959, the US-based National Federation of the Blind (NFB) attempted to enact civil rights legislation for the blind and challenged the institutional authority of professional services for the blind¹. The organization sought to create a change in national policy and the discourses of blindness. The NFB seized hold of an opening window of political opportunity during the civil rights movement. However, the broader cultural environment was not ready to extend the rights of full citizenship to people who are blind.

While the NFB's attempt to enact civil rights legislation for the blind at the national level was not successful, several states enacted legislation guaranteeing the right of the blind to organize on their behalf. Further, these actions began a shift in the language and discourse of blindness in the US. The NFB successfully began to redefine blindness based on the real capabilities of blind people, countering the assumption that blindness is disabling.

Introduction

The National Federation of the Blind (NFB) is a US-based organization of blind people composed of over seven hundred local chapters that became a pioneer of rights-based legislation for disability-centered organizations. In 1959, the NFB sought to enact civil rights legislation for the blind. From its beginning, NFB members have been trained to lobby for progressive policies for the blind. One of its early endeavors was a campaign that led to a hearing on proposed legislation, the Kennedy-Baring bill (HR 14), brought to the table by then

¹ This article uses the language preferred by the National Federation of the Blind rather than "people-first" language to honor the practices and ongoing social action of the organization. People-first language argues that the use of "people who are blind/visually impaired" rather than the use of "blind people" or "the blind" places the person ahead of the disability. The NFB, however, continues to maintain the position that blindness is nothing of which to be ashamed and prefer to be identified as "the blind" and "blind people." During the 1993 NFB convention, the organization passed a resolution against people-first language stating, "BE IT RESOLVED by the National Federation of the Blind in Convention assembled in the city of Dallas, Texas, this 9th day of July, 1993, that the following statement of policy be adopted: We believe that it is respectable to be blind, and although we have no particular pride in the fact of our blindness, neither do we have any shame in it. To the extent that euphemisms are used to convey any other concept or image, we deplore such use. We can make our own way in the world on equal terms with others, and we intend to do it" (Jernigan 2009, n.p.). Also see Vaughan (2009) for further discussion. Samples of recent presidential speeches and current issues of the *Braille Monitor* can be accessed on the Website of the National Federation of the Blind.

senator John F. Kennedy and representative Walter Baring. The purpose of the bill was to “protect the right of the blind to self-expression through organizations of the blind” (US Congress 1959: 2). Administrators of services for the blind were interfering with NFB organizing in several states. Though HR 14 did not make it past the subcommittee of the House Committee on Education and Labor, “the organized blind movement came to be granted a kind of tacit legitimacy by the agencies of the blindness system” (Matson 1990: 93).

A study of the organized blind movement in 1959 has implications for understanding the history of disability-based rights and the boundaries of contentious politics. Social movement scholars Tilly and Tarrow (2007) describe contentious politics as the convergence of contention, collective action and politics. Contentious action involves making claims that will have an impact on others’ interests. Contentious politics is employed when individuals come together to raise claims that will hold others, groups or government officials accountable, especially in the field of politics.

Analyses of the disability rights movement assume that disability-centered groups were not active in contentious politics until the 1970s when people who are deaf and people with physical or mental impairments began to stage protests that eventually led to the adoption of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act and the 1990 Americans with Disabilities Act (Barnartt and Scotch 2001; Groch 2001; Shapiro 1993). However, this paper raises awareness of the early contentious politics engaged by the NFB, by analyzing the institutional, cultural, and political contexts in which the NFB pushed for civil rights for the blind and asserted an identity based on an understanding of blindness as nothing more than an inconvenience.

In its efforts to enact civil rights legislation for the blind, the NFB was located within a particular institutional context referred to as the “blindness system” (Vaughan 1993). The blindness system was composed of agencies focused on rehabilitation and services. This system placed limitations on the extent to which blind persons were able to exercise autonomy. Asserting professional status, blindness agencies controlled public perceptions of the meaning and limitations of blindness throughout the early-to-mid twentieth century. As a result, the NFB asserted an identity based on the notion that blindness is nothing more than an “inconvenience” and fought to gain control over the training and services which were provided for the blind at the time. The NFB challenged the authority of professionals in the blindness system and governmental legislation for the blind. The 1959 actions of the NFB can thus be defined as contentious politics, thereby setting the stage for future disability-centered protests.

Research methods

In order to track and analyse the changing strategy of the NFB, primary and secondary historical documents were organized, coded, and analyzed using qualitative research software.

The initial stages of research focused only on the 1959 issues of the NFB's *Braille Monitor*. The *Monitor*, the NFB's monthly publication, is one of the main sources for exploring the historical foundation of the NFB. It is rich with stories that give a sense of the organized blind movement, locally and nationally. The philosophy of the movement is embodied in this publication (Colvert 2000; Lane 2002). The cultural heritage of an organization is often passed on through stories and narratives, sustaining a collective sense of an organization's culture (Coffey and Atkinson 1996). The narratives told in the *Monitor* not only express movement identity and philosophy, they also illuminate the late-1950s context by describing the actions of blindness agencies and broader cultural understandings of the meaning of blindness.

I next worked outward to collect primary and secondary material that made reference to the NFB's actions by conducting a comprehensive media and literature search which uncovered a handful of news media stories, government documents, and secondary historical and sociological accounts of the NFB's actions. This material deepened the analysis as source material either supportive, in opposition to, or indifferent to the efforts of the organized blind.

This paper is a piece of a larger project which looks more deeply into the NFB's identity and organizational strategies in the political and cultural context of the United States in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Institutional context: the 'blindness system'

The NFB was formed by blind leaders from seven US states in 1940. They designated the organization as one *of* the blind, not *for* the blind. This rhetorical distinction was meant to assert an identity based on individual and organizational autonomy in a context of extensive poverty and little control in the lives of blind people. The poverty and unemployment rates for the blind in the US far exceeded those rates on the national level. Some blind workers were paid as little as five cents per hour (Matson 1990). Though countless were capable of "normal" professions, based on a history of negative attitudes toward the blind, organizations and schools for the blind maintained that their occupations should focus on menial tasks. In a testimony before a US House Subcommittee on Education and Labor in 1959, the NFB founder Dr. Jacobus tenBroek said the "traditional system" of work for the blind was characterized by,

- (1) concern for vested interests distinct from the interests of the blind, (2) a philosophy of custodialism that impedes the efforts of the blind to attain self-support and economic independence, (3) defeatism and conservatism, both of which would continue the customs and limitations of the past from which the blind are striving to emancipate themselves. (US Congress 1959: 504)

Dr. tenBroek's argument served as the foundation for opposition between the NFB and "blindness system" organizations throughout the NFB's early history. Early on, the NFB particularly targeted the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB), the American Association of Workers for the Blind (AAWB), and the American Association of Instructors for the Blind (AAIB).

The professionalization of work for the blind meant increased bureaucratic control over the lives of blind people and the images of blindness portrayed to the public (Vaughan 1993). Helping professionals claimed work for the blind as a specialized activity, thereby gaining a monopoly on knowledge about blindness. The "facts" portrayed by the blindness system began to be accepted by the public as the reality of blindness by virtue of the legitimacy ascribed to professionals. Edelman (1984) argues that the lay public's acceptance of the perspective of professionals is "politically crucial" because it "confers power upon professionals and legitimizes their norms for society generally" (53). Professionals come to be relied upon by policy makers. Consequently, those not designated as *professional* are taken less seriously, if listened to at all, in the policy-making process.

The American Association of Instructors for the Blind was created in 1853 and formally organized in 1871. It was a "cohesive" and "exclusive" group, with a membership limited to educators of the blind (Ferguson 2001: 67). They formulated educational policies and legislation. The public looked to the AAIB for "counsel and leadership" on matters concerning the blind (ibid.). The American Association of Workers for the Blind can be traced to 1895 with the establishment of the Missouri National College Association for the Blind. This was a group of graduates from the Missouri School for the Blind who were interested in higher education opportunities for the blind. In 1896, they admitted graduates from other schools for the blind and became the American Blind People's Higher Education and General Improvement Association (ABPHE and GIA). Their organization was originally established as a group *of* the blind, not *for* the blind (Ferguson 2001: 67; Matson 1990: 6). By 1905, they had changed their name to the American Association of Workers for the Blind and opened their membership to anyone in work for the blind. At this point, they were no longer an organization *of* the blind.

The reasons for this change are contested. Koestler (1976: 15) wrote that "By 1905, the group was ready to admit the failure of its efforts to interest federal or state officials in financing" programs that advocated colleges for the blind and government scholarship programs. According to Koestler, the ABPHE and GIA simply changed their philosophy by targeting "general improvement" for the blind and went from a restricted membership to an open-membership (Koestler 1976: 15). Importantly, Koestler's work is copyrighted by the professional organization, the AFB. Ferguson (2001) and Matson (1990), whose work was published by the NFB, tell a story of a co-optation.

Ferguson wrote that there was opposition to the ABPHE and GIA within the blindness system. Richard French, principal of the California School for the Blind criticized the ABPHE and GIA, writing that it "...at first confined its

membership to the blind and declared war, covert and overt on the [AAIB], then [became] a purely institutional organization” (Ferguson 2001: 68). Even after changing their name and philosophy in 1905, French wrote that the AAWB still “constituted itself the merciless but not altogether undiscerning critic of all that was representative of the older institutionalism” (ibid.). Matson (1990: 6) wrote that the ABPHE and GIA changed their name, philosophy and membership standards when in 1903, several school administrators appeared at their convention, uninvited, and proceeded to rule the floor. As these authors assert, one of the earliest American organizations of the blind was successfully co-opted by members of the blindness system.

By 28 June 1921 the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) was established at a biennial convention of the AAWB in Vinton, Iowa. Prior to the meeting, the president of the AAWB had already set forth a proposal for the formation of the AFB and had gathered support from numerous professionals in the blindness field including members of the AAIB (Ferguson 2001: 70). H. Randolph Latimer, the AAWB president, “representing a powerful group of professionals, was not interested in having conference participants discuss the issue [which had previously been the rule]. He was only looking for the group to put their stamp of approval on the proposal” (Ferguson 2001: 70). According to Ferguson (2001: 76-7),

What seems evident is that the rise of the [AFB] reflected the climate of the time [i.e. a faith in bureaucracy]. Furthermore, the residential school directors, although still entrenched as the power elite, surely must have seen the breaches forming in the wall [There was a trend at the time to incorporate blind children into public schools]. It appears that the AFB was to be a means by which the elite could broaden their influence and keep the reins of control in their hands. Thus, there were more than purely altruistic motives when the AAIB supported the establishment of a national organization for the blind.

There were many hurdles faced by the blind in the 1920s. Koestler (1976) suggested that these circumstances led to the formation of the AFB. The AFB raised several questions including: how best to educate the blind; how to create and circulate Braille books; through what means could blind literacy best be increased; how could the blind be helped to earn a living wage; how could technological devices be developed and circulated to aid the blind; and how could attitudes – both of the public and of the blind – be changed (Koestler 1976: 8-10). Koestler (1976) saw the AFB as “a pivotal national body that could serve as a storehouse of available knowledge, a coordinator of existing efforts, a generator of new ideas and directions, and a voice that could make itself heard in the corridors of power” (10).

The first president of the AFB, Moses Charles Migel, was a millionaire silk manufacturer. From 1921 to 1945, he poured a large sum of money into the AFB and ran it like a business (Ferguson 2001: 78-9). With access to such extensive resources, the AFB was able to make progress in “research, resources, [and]

services” for the blind, but not in “representation” (Matson 1990: 7). Some of the AFB’s research served only to reinforce negative stereotypes about the blind. For example, in 1931, Charles Cutsforth, a psychologist working with AFB funding, argued,

...if a blind person manifests the position that blindness is merely an inconvenience, one can be assured he or she is disturbed. On the other hand, if they give up and retreat they are abnormal. The conclusion is that blind people are not and cannot be normal. (Quoted in Ferguson 2001: 82)

Prior to 1940, the AFB and the AAWB, from Matson’s (1990) perspective, “resembled nothing so much as a colonial regime of the nineteenth-century variety imposed, with benevolent purpose and some constructive effort, upon a dependent and inarticulate people” (7). Similarly, Ferguson (2001) argued that in the AFB policies and research initiatives, “...there were no efforts to champion programs to help the blind to be independent, fully equal and participating members of society” (81). Enmeshed in an institutional context of professional services for the blind, the organized blind movement sought to grab hold of civil rights through legislative means. From the perspective of the NFB in 1959, this was the only means to break free from external control over individual and collective life.

Campaigning for support and the logic behind HR 14

The 1959 hearings on HR14 were the climax of a two-year campaign for the right of the blind to organize and to be consulted on policy decisions. By the end of 1956, according to tenBroek, it was clear that attacks on the NFB by agencies were “concerted and orchestrated” (Matson 1990: 62). In a number of reported cases, blind workers in state-run employment programs were being fired or threatened with dismissal if they joined the NFB. Confidential records of NFB members receiving public aid were opened and exploited by state agencies in the offending states. Citing these examples, the NFB believed the right of the blind to organize, to speak, and to be heard was being violated (Matson 1990: 73-4).

This sentiment reached beyond the leadership and into the hearts of local constituents. This kind of harassment led one NFB member to comment, “If armed men terrorize a community and put voters in such fear that they do not dare go to the polls, one would scarcely argue that they have the right to vote...” (Taylor 1959: 5). Dr. tenBroek argued that the need for self-expression is “indispensable to life” and consequently he considered self-expression a “natural right” (tenBroek 1959: 2). He further believed that the blindness system created an “invisible prison” for the blind, arguing that many blindness workers operated on the principal of “paternalistic custodialism.” The combination of these perspectives and evidence of open and covert repression of

blind people's freedom of association provided the foundation for the development of HR 14.

Responding to these concerns, Senator John F. Kennedy and Representative Walter Baring introduced the first right to organize bills in 1957. Kennedy said that his bill was "designed simply to prevent the thoughtless, needless and unjust rejection of the views of the blind and their organizations when policies vitally affecting them are formulated" (quoted in Card 1959b: 52). In support, Congressman Thomas J. Lane of Massachusetts submitted a statement to the *Congressional Record* discussing the success of consulting with the organized blind, as had been done in Massachusetts. Congressman Lane wrote,

In some parts of the United States, the right of the blind to join this organization has been questioned. Officials of agencies created for the sole purpose of serving the blind, and financed in part by Federal funds have used their position to intimidate, coerce and threaten blind persons who have joined the [NFB]. (from the *Congressional Record*, quoted in the Card 1959b: 3)

Between the fall of 1957 and the spring of 1959, local and national-level NFB members campaigned vigorously for support of HR 14. In Washington, DC, national-level NFB activists John Taylor and John Nagle attempted to interview as many senators and representatives as possible. They requested help from state and local affiliates of the NFB, stressing the importance of letter writing and petitions. Kennedy publicly announced his support of HR 14 on 16 February 1959. The *New York Times* noted that Kennedy and thirty-one other Senators were sponsoring this legislation and that the right of the blind to "promote their own viewpoints in dealing with Government agencies" was being denied (UPI 1959: 19). State-based rights to organize bills were being introduced up until the time of the hearings in March, 1959.

NFB historian Floyd Matson provided extensive coverage of the hearings on HR 14. He wrote that the advent of the hearings was "One of the two or three most significant events in the entire history of work for the blind in this country and an episode of crucial importance for the organized blind themselves" (Matson 1959: 1). The hearings not only addressed the right to organize bills; several bills were introduced by opponents of HR 14 calling for a "national advisory commission to study the problems of blindness" (Matson 1959: 4). The NFB argued that the two types of bills were not incompatible and therefore should not have been proposed as mutually exclusive.

The hearings were held in early March 1959. Over five days, those present were shifted from room to room, often in cramped conditions. Matson (1959) wrote, "...far from dampening the spirits of the participants, these quick changes and crowded conditions served rather to create an atmosphere of intimacy and to underline the plain determination of the committee to give full scope to the hearings regardless of any inconvenience" (4). During the hearings, tenBroek

delivered the main body of the testimony and submitted an extensive, written volume of information on the status of the blind in 1959.

Twenty-five members of the NFB testified in support of HR 14. Eleven members of Congress gave testimony at the hearings and more than a dozen submitted written testimonies. Organizational support included: the Jewish Braille Institute, the Associated Blind of New York, the Blind Professional Association, the National Association of the Physically Handicapped, Inc. Gloria Swanson also appeared to give testimony. Those who testified made a “visibly profound and sympathetic” impression upon the committee (Matson 1959: 6).

The NFB argued that because the Constitution of the United States is not a self-executing document, legislation is often required to enforce general provisions in the First and Fourteenth Amendments. While the right to organize is guaranteed by the Constitution, the blind were faced with attacks by state officials when they sought to join the NFB. These attacks created the need to seek redress through national legislation. HR 14 opponents actually denied that any such intimidation had occurred. One person testifying against HR 14 said, “We have not, however, found anything to resemble a unified movement designed to inhibit the growth and development of organizations of blind persons” (US Congress 1959: 246).

The executive director of the Texas State Commission for the Blind wrote a letter to the president of the Houston Chapter of the Texas Federation of the Blind. This letter was to be read at the opening of a meeting held by the Houston Chapter, which was considering formal affiliation with the NFB. The director wrote, “We do not need any national organization to tell Texas how to run its program... If you want to wreck the work for the blind in this state, then you follow the recommendations [of the NFB]” (US Congress 1959: 585). While this letter did not openly deny blind persons the right to join the NFB, the state agency took a clear stand against NFB organizing in Texas. Blind people from Texas testified that state officials threatened to fire operators of vending stands, a typical occupation for the blind in that state, if they joined the NFB. Twenty-nine blind people in Amarillo were threatened with loss of their pensions and talking books for considering NFB affiliation. The Texas Commission for the Blind told a number of blind individuals, “You do not have a right as ordinary citizens to associate with people from out of State” (US Congress 1959: 202).

In Colorado, the director of the state agency for the blind submitted a letter to the Governor of Colorado condemning the NFB. Seventeen workers in a blind sheltered workshop were forced to sign his letter. The president of the Colorado Federation of the Blind said that even though these workers signed the letter, several of them secretly continued their affiliation with the Colorado Federation. They said they would have been dismissed from their jobs had they not signed the letter (US Congress 1959: 587). A number of similar instances were reported during the hearings as having occurred in North Carolina, Florida, Arkansas, Mississippi, Kentucky and West Virginia.

The NFB also argued that,

The right of representative citizen groups to be consulted in the formulation and execution of policies affecting their interests is securely established in democratic theory and administrative practice... [the] organized blind [ask to] be included in the process of systematic consultation. (Matson 1959: 10)

They emphasized that the right to consultation did not exclude other groups, such as agencies *for* the blind or other organizations *of* the blind. However, the *Monitor* quoted a statement made by an AFB representative that was printed in the AFB's *Legislative Bulletin*. The representative said that "The AFB continues to regard HR 14 and similar proposed legislation as extraneous issues which would serve to compound existing problems rather than to resolve them..." (Card 1959: 51). The AFB believed problems would be compounded because they understood HR 14 to be exclusionary despite the NFB's emphasis on inclusion. The opposition continued to stick to their opinion that HR 14 was exclusionary even after hearing testimonies from NFB members. Dr. tenBroek said,

The blind individually and through their organizations are seeking, above all else, a means to social and economic integration on a basis of equality with other persons. For blind individuals, this means simply that they are seeking a way to earn a living, to become taxpayers rather than tax-users, to be independent of charity and public assistance. *Blind aid programs and rehabilitation services are essential to this goal. If this goal of the organized blind is to be achieved, it will only be with the help of assistance and rehabilitation services* [emphasis added]. (US Congress 1959: 455)

In the end, the Elliott subcommittee decided to conduct a sweeping study of services for the blind. The *Monitor* noted,

In view of the May 22nd announcement, we must also face up to the possibility that the Subcommittee may very well postpone any recommendation with respect to our 'Right to Organize' bills until its own investigation has been completed which will probably mean a delay until the next session. (Card 1959: 2)

The right to organize bill was not reintroduced at the national level. Lowenfeld (1975) wrote that even though HR 14 was not passed, it "served as a warning to those guilty of obstructing the blind person's right to organize and be heard" (238). "Little Kennedy Bills" were proposed in a number of states and passed by several (Matson 1990: 93). The first state to adopt a right to organize bill was Pennsylvania, despite being opposed by the state agency every step of the way. Matson (1990) wrote the objectives of HR 14,

...came to be at least partially achieved in practice where they were not formally granted by law. Like the trade union movement a generation before, the organized blind movement came to be granted a kind of tacit legitimacy by the agencies of the blindness system. (93)

Discussion

Part of understanding the ongoing process of a social movement is considering the response of the opposition (McAdam [1982] 1999: 52-3). Non-institutional means, like protests and boycotts, tend to be more threatening to the opposition, generating a greater response than institutional means, like lobbying and pushing for legislation (McAdam [1982] 1999: 57). HR 14 opponents clearly felt threatened by the bill and mustered their forces against the NFB. While Barnartt and Scotch (2001: xxi) argue the actions of the NFB do not fall into the realm of contentious politics because its main tactic has been lobbying, context and opposition responses must be considered when describing particular actions as contentious. The historical and cultural location of the NFB's push for the right to organize places its actions squarely within the realm of contentious politics because its claims were viewed as threatening to the interests of professionals in the blindness system.

According to agency logic, blind people were considered second-class citizens without the same rights as "ordinary citizens." Agencies for the blind expected the blind and the public to treat them as professionals with knowledge to which other groups were not privy. Agencies for the blind considered the NFB's claim for the right to organize and the right to consultation a direct threat to their rights to professional knowledge. They therefore reacted against HR 14 with vigor. The reaction of the opposition defines the NFB's action as contentious given blind people's location within the blindness system. Because they had vested interests in maintaining control of the blindness system, agencies appealed to the Constitution and states' rights to thwart the civil rights bill of the blind. As Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) assert, "What counts as disruptive will thus depend on the rules of 'doing business' in any given institution" (92).

Cultural context

Johnson ([1983] 1999: 26) claimed that the main thrust of legislation for disabled groups prior to the 1973 Vocational Rehabilitation Act (PL 93-112) was not concerned with civil rights, but with vocational rehabilitation for GIs. Similarly, Barnartt and Scotch (2001: 35) wrote that it has been difficult for disabled groups to apply a civil rights frame to their own movements because access to equal facilities could only be gained through modifications to those facilities. The NFB, however, has maintained the position that blind people do not require environmental alterations, making the civil rights frame more easily

adapted to the organized blind movement. Their emphasis on “sameness” with the dominant population is according to Bernstein (1997) the deployment of a particular identity strategy that has the ability to tackle both cultural and instrumental goals. While claiming likeness with another oppressed group who sought likeness with the dominant US population, the NFB attempted to mobilize its strong organizational base and its ties to important political figures.

According to Kenneth Jernigan (1991), former NFB president, the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act focus on the issue of *accommodation* for people with disabilities. The NFB, instead, works to uphold the Civil Rights Act of 1964 which states that race, sex, national origin or religion should not stand in the way of equal opportunity. For example, blind people reported to the NFB that they were required to sit in handicap seating on public buses. Regarding this claim, Jernigan (1991) asserted, “Some may regard disputes about seating as quibbling, but Rosa Parks and others brought the entire civil rights movement to a national focus by exactly this type of issue” (n.p.).

When the rights of the blind to organize and speak for their interests were being denied and challenged, the NFB proposed a solution to the problem that was consistent with civil rights activity at the time. According to Ferguson (2001: 113), the blind were dealing with some of the same issues and struggles as blacks in the US. Jernigan (n.d.: 27 and 29) captured this idea when he wrote,

One could say, for instance, that a black man living in the United States in 1920 (or, perhaps even much later) might have been rich or poor, old or young, Methodist or atheist, intelligent or stupid, and that he, therefore, really had nothing in common with other blacks; but beyond all of these differences was the fact of society’s attitudes toward him and his own attitude toward himself – attitudes which he had absorbed from the larger society. Overshadowing almost every other factor in his life (whether economic, social, or intellectual) was the fact of his blackness and the reactions to it...As it is with the blacks, so it is with the blind.

Unfortunately, the cultural climate at the time was not ready to receive the demand for equal rights from the blind. For example, despite the variety of supporters, the *New York Times* described HR 14 as a battle between *tenBroek* and agencies serving the blind. The opening line of one article stated, “Agencies serving the blind marshaled their forces today against a blind California college professor who demands that the blind lead the blind” (Furman 1959: 26). Dr. tenBroek’s position as a college professor in California was mentioned prior to his presidency of the NFB. The NFB was only cited once in this *Times* article. Three-quarters of the article was devoted to describing the opposition’s position on HR 14. The article attacked tenBroek’s character and emphasized that the bill was “unnecessary and self-serving” (Furman 1959: 26). That HR 14 was an initiative driven by the organized blind movement was not considered. The bill was referred to as *tenBroek’s* bill and the NFB as *his* organization. A de-

emphasis upon the organized blind movement made HR 14 appear to be simply the opinion of one man.

Political context

Just as the institutional and cultural contexts encouraged and limited the NFB's push for civil rights legislation for the blind, the political context similarly provided a contradictory landscape; seemingly open to such legislation, but closed off by national-level political maneuvering. With the 1957 death of Republican Senator Joseph McCarthy, who had led an anti-liberalism, anti-communism crusade (Diggins 1988),

...there was a sense of relief, a rediscovery of old values, a healing, and a resurgence of liberalism...[leading] to reform and to advances in the cause of individual civil rights, in the courts, in the political make-up of Congress and in the views of many of the citizenry. (Treanor 1993: 28-30)

Growing liberalism was evidenced by the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act. The Senate pushed a strong civil rights bill, but President Eisenhower supported only the minor provisions. In his January 9th State of the Union address, Eisenhower said that he would support a bill reinforcing freedom from discrimination in employment, voting and public legislation, but his primary message was balancing the budget (Gordon 1966: 32). However, the 1957 bill did little to address "job discrimination, access to public accommodations, and school desegregation" (Diggins 1988: 284). When asked in 1957 if he would urge Republicans to break a "Southern filibuster which was blocking a civil rights proposal," Eisenhower replied that it was not his place to interfere with the decisions of Congress (Gordon 1966: 38-9). Though the 1957 Civil Rights Act was mild, Patterson (1996) pointed out that the bill gave some people hope. The NFB was inspired by this rising tide of support for civil rights and began to get to work on its own civil rights proposal.

In 1958, the nation began to move out of a recession, which bolstered popular support of the President, strengthening his political power to limit the interests of the Democratically-controlled Congress, one of which was to further civil rights legislation. Gordon (1966) suggested "the basic conservatism of the President, reinforced by prevailing conservatism in the country, was as important in enabling Eisenhower to dominate the Democratic Congress, as was his personal power to mold public opinion" (88). If the Democratic Congress was able to accomplish very little as the *Times* and Gordon (1966) argued, the legislative void would have surely had an effect upon the NFB's right to organize bills.

The 1957-1959 political contexts illuminate compounding factors faced by the organized blind. Not only did they encounter agency opposition, they pushed for civil rights legislation in an unsympathetic political climate. Armstrong and

Bernstein (2008: 76) point out that when a group confronts domination by multiple institutions, the challenge becomes especially difficult. Unfortunately, after 1959 the NFB was consumed by internal strife and would not recover for a few years². Had they been able to reintroduce their right to organize bill, as it seems they were planning, perhaps it could have been passed during the Kennedy or Johnson administrations, when the civil rights movement was reaching a climax.

Conclusion

In attempting to enact civil rights legislation for the blind, the NFB challenged the institutional authority of the blindness system and sought to create a change in policy that was meant to represent blind people as “normal” citizens. They seized hold of what looked like an opening window of political opportunity historically situated in the civil rights movement. The NFB’s actions were therefore cut off by the power of blindness agencies to influence state actors and the public. Despite support from other local agencies *of* the blind and from several members of Congress, the broader cultural discourse favored professionalism and scientific knowledge. This position was exemplified by the Committee’s decision to instead fund a study on the condition of blind people in the US conducted by agencies *for* the blind.

One of the NFB’s major weapons against the blindness system, however, was the recognition that the custodial care of agencies was largely a result of being able to sustain negative images about blindness. The NFB therefore began a new discourse on blindness. They sought to redefine blindness based on the real capabilities of blind people to counter the assumption that blindness is disabling. The NFB understood what Foucault (1984) asserted years later when he wrote that “discourse is not simply that which translates struggles or systems of domination but is the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (110). It is important, therefore, to include this early engagement of contentious politics within the broader framework of disability-centered movements. Though failed, the NFB’s actions were an attempt to drive a wedge between elements of an interlocking system of oppression by engaging a new discourse on blindness and by seeking the right to be consulted on policies and practices affecting their own lives.

² A faction within the NFB developed during this time period resulting in a splinter group which came to be the American Council of the Blind. Much of the conflict centered around movement philosophy, tactics, and personality conflicts. The NFB’s identity claims are especially evident during this conflict. Despite floundering for a few years, both the NFB and the ACB became strong organizations of the blind with slightly different philosophies and tactics (Lane 2002).

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