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### Memorial

## Frank Wilkinson, 1915-2006

### He "Outlived Those Bastards"

By [Chico Berlet](#)

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Civil liberties activist Frank Wilkinson had a presence that filled a room in life and it did so again after his death January 2, 2006 at the age of 91. It was standing room only at the Holman United Methodist Church in Los Angeles where I joined some 700 other people at a memorial and celebration of Frank's life. I worked with Wilkinson for over 30 years, and many in the audience had that same honor. We shared memories of Frank with his family, his wife of nearly 40 years, Donna, the assorted children from two marriages, nearly a score of grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren.

Wilkinson did not start out as a civil liberties activist, but as a housing activist engaged in the struggle for civil rights; first with a Los Angeles Catholic coalition seeking better housing for the poor, and then with the Los Angeles Housing Authority (LAHA). As an activist, Wilkinson had pestered the LAHA to build better housing in better locations, and to create integrated communities (this was in 1942)—decades before the law and society caught up with these ideas. Over the next few years Wilkinson did just that, against the advice of his friends in the Communist Party who thought Los Angeles was not ready for integration.

This was, after all, the Los Angeles of rising bigotry and violence against Mexican Americans, especially young men called "pachucos." These were rebellious youth who wore baggy pants, "Zoot Suits," or other flashy apparel, and who refused to be servile in public.

Despite this history of bigotry, Wilkinson had a dream of building decent integrated public housing for the poor. In the 1940s and early 1950s there was a thriving poor and working class community near downtown Los Angeles. It was in the hilly terrain of Chávez Ravine that three villages—La Loma, Bishop, and Palo Verde—were home to over 1,000 people, including many Mexican Americans. It was nicknamed the "Poor Man's Shangri-La."

Wilkinson had the job of convincing residents that if they supported a public housing project in Chávez Ravine, they would get first choice of the new rental units, a promise guaranteed in writing by LAHA. Some resisted, but others agreed. Support grew. The LAHA scheduled hearings in 1952 for taking 35 acres through eminent domain. It was to be an integrated community. "It meant bringing black and brown people and Asian people out of ghettos of various kinds and have them living with Anglo people in Chavez Ravine," Wilkinson later told a newspaper.

Wilkinson had collared his friend Richard Nputra, a Los Angeles architect with an international reputation, to design the public housing units for a variety of income levels with singlefamily homes alongside lowrise and highrise apartments. There would be parks, playgrounds, and adequate parking for the projected 3,500 residents. Space was left for building elementary schools and shopping centers. This was prime real estate just north of downtown—and that was the problem. Powerful political and real estate interests began to organize against the plan. A diversionary scapegoat was needed. The Committee Against Socialist Housing was formed.

In the midst of the "red scare," Wilkinson was testifying about rat infestation when an attorney for a developer asked him to name all the organizations he had belonged to since high school. Wilkinson knew what they were after, but he tried to bluff his way through by talking about being in Youth for Herbert Hoover and other organizations. The attorney, however, had been fed information from an FBI dossier provided to the LA chief of police.

Wilkinson refused to answer further questions about his political memberships and he was

The FBI learned of an assassination attempt targeting Wilkin son and did not warn him or his family. The FBI instead staked out the Wilkinson house waiting to see what happened.

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promptly fired. Wilkinson then was called before a California state committee investigating subversion. A group of schoolteachers wrote to support him and they too were fired. Meanwhile, the *Los Angeles Times* carried screaming headlines demanding a "red probe" of the LA Housing Authority. The City Council, which had unanimously supported the Chávez Ravine housing project, suddenly killed the plan—with rumors of bribes from real estate interests.

It was hard on the family, especially the children. Frank's son Tony told us at the memorial: "We knew our phone was tapped. We knew about the phone calls of silence...we knew about the parked cars with men in suits." The FBI learned of an assassination attempt targeting Wilkin son and did not warn him or his family. The FBI instead staked out the Wilkinson house waiting to see what happened. Tony said this was part of a pattern. "Later, we heard the explosion of the firebomb on our front stairs. We saw the painted swastika. We knew about the death threats; one that was signed warned Wilkinson to 'make your final preparations....' The response from LA county sheriff was: 'That's not a threat, that's just good advice'."

Wilkinson eventually found work as the night custodian of a store owned by a sympathetic ally who insisted the job would last only as long as it was kept a secret.

Wilkinson, in 1953, became a leader of the Citizens Committee to Preserve American Freedoms, which defended those called before Congressional investigative committees. A few years later he was subpoenaed to appear before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee (HUAC). He claimed a First Amendment right to refuse to testify. In 1961, in a 54 vote, the Supreme Court rejected the First Amendment defense. Wilkinson would be one of the last victims of the McCarthy era to be sent to jail for refusing to testify.

After nine months, Wilkinson emerged from prison to resume work with the National Committee to Abolish HUAC, which he had helped found in 1960. When HUAC was finally abolished in 1975, the anti HUAC group morphed into the National Committee Against Repressive Legislation (NCARL). In the mid 1980s, Wilkinson helped found the First Amendment Foundation.

For decades, Wilkinson crisscrossed the United States speaking to audiences ranging from grammar schools to Rotary Clubs to college classrooms. As he did so, the FBI spied on Wilkinson and sought to disrupt his organizing and have his speeches cancelled. Wilkinson sued, forcing the FBI to disgorge 132,000 pages of files on his activities. (The story is told in *First Amendment Felon* by Robert Sherrill.)

In his audio CD containing a song cycle on the history of Chávez Ravine, Ry Cooder includes a lament about Wilkinson titled "Don't Call Me Red." Cooder spoke at the memorial event and afterwards talked about how he transformed serious historic research into a work of art. Cooder was especially delighted with a particular Wilkinson comment, which he incorporated into the song. Wilkinson gleefully told Cooder: "I outlived those bastards after all."

Frank Wilkinson spent over 50 years defending dissent and the First Amendment. It was on our minds as we gathered to celebrate his life. Speaker after speaker told us what we already knew in our hearts: it was our turn to stand up. And we knew that collectively, as a movement tirelessly working to extending civil rights and civil liberties, we will always outlive "those bastards."

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