

Equality is not negotiable

From the Editors

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Few American leaders could have made a better impression than did Roy Wilkins, executive director of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Martin Luther King, Jr., president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, when they appeared on N.B.C.'s "Meet the Press" program the Sunday night prior to the march on Washington. They handled the most difficult questions with authority, confidence and poise. Such a display of earnestness and personal integrity, wide-ranging knowledge of all the issues involved in the Negro's struggle for justice, and complete emotional control must have convinced tens of thousands of dubious white Americans that the leadership of the social revolution is in competent and reliable hands. One question which was put to Wilkins and King in several versions should never have been raised—not because it embarrassed them but because it revealed a total misunderstanding of the nature of the Negro's struggle and the dimensions of the social revolution. In substance this question and its paraphrases asked whether Negro leadership would moderate its drive for justice if all or substantial parts of the President's civil rights bill were adopted by Congress. This is a way of saying to the Negro community: "Will you go away and leave us white people alone for a time if we give you part of your rights? How much do we have to pay you for a respite in which you stop asking for more and give us time to make a comfortable adjustment to the concessions we have already made?"

Patiently, calmly Wilkins and King replied that Negroes are prepared for disappointment and will be grateful for whatever justice the Congress offers them in new legislation, but at the same time they repeatedly insisted that Negroes cannot and will not soften their demand for full freedom and justice. They refused to promise any easing of the pressures which an aroused Negro community now exerts against dominant white America. Their hewing to the line of the Negro's claim for full freedom and full justice was not only politically but also philosophically wise. Freedom is total or nothing. An equality which is negotiable is by definition inequality. If the Negro has to compromise some of his rights to secure other rights, he surrenders his dignity as a man and as a citizen and in effect deserts the ground on which that dignity stands. In his struggle for justice, freedom and equality the

Negro may time and again have to accept part, but he should never cease demanding all; he may have to think "Then," but every word and deed must say "Now!"