

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY
IN THE UNITED STATES:
A Symposium on Civil Rights

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The University of Texas at Austin*

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CONTENTS

Monday, December 11, 1972

General Introduction	1
Introduction of Chief Justice Warren Patricia Roberts Harris <i>Attorney Partner, Fried, Frank, Harris, Shriver, and Kampelman</i>	8
Equal Opportunity: The Constitution and the Law Earl Warren <i>Chief Justice of the United States, Retired</i>	16
The Challenge of the Seventies Vernon E. Jordan, Jr. <i>Executive Director, National Urban League</i>	30
The Unfinished Agenda Hubert H. Humphrey <i>United States Senator, Minnesota</i>	40
Panel Discussion Hubert H. Humphrey, <i>Moderator</i> <i>United States Senator, Minnesota</i> Frankie Muse Freeman <i>Commissioner, United States Commission on Civil Rights</i> Reynaldo G. Garza <i>United States District Judge, Southern District of Texas</i>	

Richard G. Hatcher <i>Mayor, Gary, Indiana</i>	
Barbara Jordan <i>Member, Senate of the State of Texas; United States Representative, 18th District of Texas</i>	
Jerre S. Williams <i>Professor of Law, The University of Texas at Austin</i>	56
The Record of the 1960's	
Roy Wilkins <i>Executive Director, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People</i>	86
Special Remarks	
Mrs. Lyndon B. Johnson	98
<i>Tuesday, December 12, 1972</i>	
Equal Opportunity as a Societal Problem	
Robin M. Williams, Jr. <i>Professor of Sociology, Cornell University</i>	104
Introduction of Mr. Bond	
Melvin P. Sikes <i>Professor of Educational Psychology, The University of Texas at Austin</i>	114
Politics of Unequal Opportunity	
Julian Bond <i>Member, Georgia General Assembly</i>	118
Panel Discussion	
Burke Marshall, <i>Moderator</i> <i>Deputy Dean, Yale University Law School</i>	
Julian Bond <i>Member, Georgia General Assembly</i>	

Yvonne Brathwaite Burke
Member, Legislature of the State of California;
United States Representative, 37th District of
California

Henry B. Gonzalez
United States Representative
20th District of Texas

Clarence M. Mitchell, Jr.
Director, Washington Bureau, National Association
for the Advancement of Colored People

Robin M. Williams, Jr.
Professor of Sociology, Cornell University

Vicente T. Ximenes
Former Commissioner, Equal Employment
Opportunity Commission

132

Remarks

The Honorable Lyndon B. Johnson

162

REMARKS

THE HONORABLE LYNDON B. JOHNSON

Mr. Middleton, esteemed Former Chief Justice and Mrs. Warren, and all you wonderful people who have come here to try to make life better for your fellow men.

I sat in an adjoining room and watched the Panel this morning and got great satisfaction and compensation, in my own way, in feeling that all is not lost, all has not been in vain. All we have to do is reorganize, reevaluate. We can't overcome all the injustices or make this a perfect world overnight. But we are on our way, and we are going to do just that before it's over.

I don't speak very often or very long. My doctor admonished me not to speak at all this morning, but I'm going to because I have some things I want to say to you. I have a touch of sentimentality about me which has cost me a great deal in my 40 years in public life. I say to all you women—Mrs. Rostow and Barbara Jordan, Yvonne Burke, Mrs. Krim, and so many of you that I can't list you all—that it's natural for me to get a certain amount of glory by seeing the advances you are making. And I guess it's just human for us to admire and be fond of the other sex. But when I listened to Burke Marshall and Henry Gonzalez, Clarence Mitchell and Julian Bond—whom I don't know so well but admire a great deal—I said to myself that I love these men more than a man ought to love another man. And that's my way of saying to you what great honor you do me by your presence and participation in these proceedings.

Of all the records that are housed in this Library—31,000,000 papers covering a 40-year period of public life—it is the record of this work that we've been discussing the last two days which has brought us here that holds the most of myself within it and holds for me the most intimate meanings. In our system of government, honorable men honestly differ in their perceptions of government and what it's really all about. And today I can speak only of my own perception. I'm so proud I live in a government where I can do that.

THE HONORABLE LYNDON B. JOHNSON

I believe that the essence of government lies with unceasing concern for the welfare and dignity and decency and innate integrity of life for every individual. I don't like to say this and wish I didn't have to add these words to make it clear, but I will—regardless of color, creed, ancestry, sex, or age. Before I go any further, I want to interject that I'm so happy Mrs. Whitney Young is here. Her husband gave me great inspiration and along with some of his colleagues advanced this Nation centuries in a decade. He is somewhere doing his good work today in behalf of his fellow man.

I do not want to say that I've always seen this matter, in terms of the special plight of the black man, as clearly as I came to see it in the course of my life and experience and responsibility. Now, let me make it plain that when I say "black," as I do a good many times in this statement, I also mean "brown" and "yellow" and "red" and all other people who suffer discrimination because of their color or their heritage. Every group meets its own special problems, of course, but the problem of equal justice applies to us all.

On the second floor of this Library, in a special exhibit designed especially for this occasion, you will see the original Emancipation Proclamation by which our great President Abraham Lincoln ordered that the slaves should be freed of their bondage. A decade ago, in the year 1963, we observed the 100th anniversary of the signing of that Proclamation. On Memorial Day of that fateful year, I was called upon as Vice President to speak at Gettysburg Cemetery where, a century before, words had been spoken which all of us have long remembered. On that occasion, I said this:

Until justice is blind to color, until education is unaware of race, until opportunity is unconcerned with the color of men's skins, emancipation will be a proclamation but not a fact. To the extent that the proclamation of emancipation is not fulfilled in fact, to that extent we shall have fallen short of assuring freedom to the free.

When I spoke those words as Vice President, I could not know that the future would present me shortly with the opportunity and the responsibility to contribute more toward fulfilling the fact of emancipation. Even if I could have known what lay ahead, I'm

REMARKS

not sure now that I could have believed at that time that the progress which has been won in these past ten years would be a fact. Black Americans are voting now where they were not voting at all ten years ago.

But let me say, quickly, that not enough are voting. Little more than half of all eligible Americans voted in the last national election. I don't know how many of those who didn't vote were black. But I do know this. We have to come up with some kind of plan or incentive to perfect our democracy by seeing that more of our people do vote. And I certainly mean to include more of all our black people. I don't know how to do it, and I don't want to get to it from the hip with compulsory voting. But we require our young men by law to register for the draft. We require all of our children to go to school. We require people to have a social security number under great loss of privilege. I have no doubt that this would be a better country and a purer democracy if 95 percent of our people voted, and the five percent that didn't had an exemption because of illness or whatever it might be. This would be a better land.

Black Americans are working now where they were not working ten years ago. Black Americans, brown Americans—Americans of every color and every condition—are eating now, shopping now, going to the bathroom now, riding now, spending nights now, obtaining credit now, giving now, attending classes now, going and coming in dignity where and as they were never able to do in years before.

I walked out of this room yesterday and looked at the sea of faces and thought how proud Thurgood Marshall must be. I first met him when he came here, on behalf of Heman Sweatt, so a black boy could come to The University of Texas. And to look at this audience and this beautiful University auditorium and see the groups who are participating today must make him feel and must make the groups who supported him feel that all has not been in vain.

Now that I have said that, I want to say this. I didn't want this Symposium to spend two days talking about what we have done. The progress has been much too small; we haven't done nearly enough. I'm kind of ashamed of myself that I had six years and couldn't do more than I did. I'm sure all of you feel the same way about it.

I often tell the story that was reported about Churchill when the Women's Lib Movement—maybe the Prohibition Movement, a little ahead of our women over here—went to him after the war and said that they were shocked to hear that if all the alcohol he consumed during the war, the brandy that he had drunk, were emptied in the room it would come up to about here. And they indicated a certain distance from the floor. Churchill looked on with some satisfaction and amusement, instead of letting his temper rise, and he was reported to have replied, "My dear ladies, so little have I done, so much have I yet to do."

So let no one delude himself that his work is done. By unconcern, by neglect, by complacent beliefs that our labors in the fields of human rights are completed, we of today can seed our future with storms that would rage over the lives of our children and our children's children. Yesterday it was commonly said that the black problem was a Southern problem. Today it is commonly said that the black problem is an urban problem, a problem of the inner-city. But as I see it, the black problem today, as it was yesterday and yesteryear, is not a problem of regions or states or cities or neighborhoods. It is a problem, a concern and responsibility of this whole Nation. Moreover, and we cannot obscure this blunt fact, the black problem remains what it has always been, the simple problem of being black in a white society. That is the problem which our efforts have not yet addressed.

To be black, I believe, to one who is black or brown, is to be proud, is to be worthy, is to be honorable. But to be black in a white society is not to stand on level and equal ground. While the races may stand side by side, whites stand on history's mountain and blacks stand in history's hollow. We must overcome unequal history before we overcome unequal opportunity. That is not, nor will it ever be, an easy goal for us to achieve.

Individuals and groups who have struggled long to gain advantages for themselves do not readily yield the gains of their struggles or their achievements so that others may have advantages or opportunities. But that is just the point, now and always. There is no surrender, there is no loss involved. No advantage is safe, no gain is secure in this society unless those advantages and those gains are opened up to all alike.

Where we have been concerned in the past for groups as groups, now we must become more concerned with individuals as

REMARKS

individuals. As we have lifted from groups the burdens of unequal law and custom, the next thrust of our efforts must be to lift from individuals those burdens of unequal history.

Not a white American in all this land would fail to be outraged if an opposing team tried to insert a twelfth man in the line-up to stop a black fullback on the football field. Yet off the field, away from the stadium, outside the reach of the television cameras and the watching eyes of millions of their fellow men, every black American in this land, man or woman, plays out life running against the twelfth man of a history he did not make and a fate he did not choose.

In this challenge, our churches, our schools, our unions, our professions, our trades, our military, our private employers, and our government have a great duty from which they cannot turn. It is the duty of sustaining the momentum of this society's effort to equalize the history of some of our people so that we may open opportunity equally for all of our people.

Some may respond to these suggestions with exclamations of shock and dismay. Such proposals, they will say, ask that special consideration be given to black Americans rather than giving equal consideration to all Americans. I can only hear such protest through ears attuned by a lifetime of listening to the language of evasion.

All that I hear now I have heard before for 40 long years, in many forms and many forums. Give them the vote? I saw a murder almost committed because I said that in '37. Most people said, unthinkable! Give them the right to sit wherever they wish on the bus? Impossible! Give them the privilege of staying at the same hotel, using the same restroom, eating at the same counter, joining the same club, attending the same classroom? Never! Never!

Well, this cry of "never" I've heard since I was a little boy, all my life. And what we commemorate on this great day is some of the work which has helped in some of the areas to make never now. And I do not speak falsely. Most of that never would have been done without men like Burke Marshall, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Chief Justice Warren, Vernon Jordan, Julian Bond and all who are here today. It just never would have been done.

This is precisely the work which we must continue. This is the whole important part of this meeting. Not what we have done, what we can do. So little have we done. So much we must do. It's time to leave aside the legalisms and euphemisms and eloquent evasions. It's time we get down to the business of trying to stand black and white on level ground.

For myself, I believe it's time for all of us in government and out to face up to the challenge. We must review and reevaluate what we've done and what we're doing. In specific areas we must set new goals, new objectives, and new standards. Not merely what we can do to try to keep things quiet, but what we must do to make things better.

Now how much are we giving for that in this meeting? How much are we going to give in the days ahead? How are we going to employ that time? Who is going to bring our groups together? Who is going to select that leadership? And what is that leadership going to do?

Specifically, I believe we must direct our thought and our effort to many, many fields. I don't have a great staff, and little I can contribute in the way of leadership. But if I can leave the thought with those of you who do make up a great staff and who served as my staff, I want to suggest a few thoughts. Just some of the things to be put on your agenda:

1. Are the federal government and the state governments, the foundations, the churches, the universities, doing what they can and all that they should to assure enough scholarships for young blacks in every field?

The answer is no, very little. And it gets back to the same thing. Heman Sweatt can come to this University now, but as Henry Gonzalez said on the Panel this morning, what good does it do for him to sit at the counter and order a hamburger if he doesn't have fifty cents to buy it? And most of them just don't have it. And that's why they're not here. It's not that their mother or father doesn't want them here. It's not that they don't have an ambition to be here. They just can't do it. And we've got to level out that ground some.

2. Are our professions such as law, medicine, accounting, engineering, dentistry, architecture taking the initiative, sounding

REMARKS

the call to make certain that their educational programs are so planned and so conducted that blacks are being prepared for the leadership courses and are given the support that they must have if they are to complete the courses and to have genuine opportunities to establish themselves in positions of leadership, professional careers, and things of that matter after their college days?

3. Are our trade unions and all those concerned with vocational occupations doing the same to open up apprenticeships and training programs, so that the blacks and the groups I spoke of have a fair chance at entering and a fair chance of succeeding in these fields that are so vital to the future of our Nation and our country at this very moment?

4. Are our employers, who have already made a start toward opening jobs to the blacks, doing what they can and should in order to make certain that blacks qualify for advancement on the promotion ladder, and that the promotion ladder itself reaches out for the blacks as it does for the others in our society?

We cannot take care of the goals to which we've committed ourselves simply by adopting a black star system. It is good and it is heartening, it is satisfying to see individual blacks succeeding as stars in the fields of politics, athletics, entertainment, and other activities where they have high visibility, like the members of Clarence Mitchell's family. I felt almost as good as in my own election—not quite as good—when Barbara and Yvonne were elected this year, because I thought we were moving forward. But we must not allow the visibility of a few to diminish the efforts to satisfy our real responsibility to the still unseen millions who are faced with that basic problem of being black in a white society.

Our objective must be to assure that all Americans play by the same rules. And that all Americans play against the same odds. Who among us would claim that that's true today? I feel this is the first work of any society which aspires to greatness. So let's be on with it.

We know there's injustice. We know there's intolerance. We know there's discrimination and hate and suspicion. And we know there's division among us. But there is a larger truth. We have proved that great progress is possible. We know how much still remains to be done. And if our efforts continue and if our will is



President Johnson makes his closing remarks.

Photo by Frank Wolfe, LBJ Library.

REMARKS

strong and if our hearts are right and if courage remains our constant companion, then, my fellow Americans, I am confident we shall overcome.

These remarks of the President's were to have closed the Symposium, but as the President left the podium the Reverend A. Kendall Smith of New York City asked for and received the President's permission to read a telegram. The telegram read as follows:

This Symposium is interesting and the opportunity to honor you and to recall the great strides of the 1960's is worthy and justifiable. However, the hour is late, the needs of the black nation overdue and urgent. Racism under the Administration of Richard Nixon has increased. This gathering of great Americans must not leave Austin without an organized, on-going structure dedicated to reconvening and to combatting injustice in America, as was done by your Administration. Black people still honor your record and commitment to civil rights.

To adjourn today makes this Symposium no more than an empty ritual honoring one man, while the soul and conscience of America must be healed of the cancer of racism. For this Symposium not to expand and deal with a new definition of equality is to refuse the sun of a new day, and prevents a rendezvous with the future.

We demand the extension of today's agenda.

Respectfully, the Reverend A. Kendall Smith, Council of Churches, City of New York, Task Force on Racism; Roy Innis, National Chairman, Congress of Racial Equality.

President Johnson, in response to this unscheduled event, moved again to the podium and made the impromptu remarks that follow.

President Lyndon B. Johnson:

I want to repeat a brief statement I made to others last evening. I did not think that it would concern all those who attended here.

I have served with many Presidents, and I think I have a viewpoint that no other person in this room has about the Presidency. Out in my little town, Court Week is very exciting. All the boys leave town to avoid the Grand Jury and all the citizens go

to Court to hear the proceedings. The town drunk, hungover, came up to the hotel one morning as the old judge was leaving and said, "Would you give a poor man a dime for a cup of coffee?" And the judge said, "Hell, no; get out of the way. I wouldn't give a tramp anything."

The poor fellow with the hangover walked off dejectedly, and just as he got to the end of the porch the judge said, "Come back. If you'd like to have a quarter for a pick-me-up, I'd be glad to help you." And he handed the old fellow a quarter. The drunk looked up at him startled, but with great appreciation in his eyes and said, "Judge, you've been there, haven't you?"

When Mr. Innis asked that he speak to this group or there would be disruption,* I told the group I believed he ought to be free to speak his piece as he saw it even though we had not planned it that way. You can't plan for everyone. It wasn't that we feared disruption: I've faced that all my life.

A great many people were invited here to participate who couldn't come. No one really knows how thorough we tried to make this and how we tried to include everyone who has a spark of interest whether I agree with him or not. I said I think Mr. Innis should speak. And when the Reverend Smith told me he wanted to deliver a prayer, I agreed to that too, even though we had other plans of our own. The great thing about being an American is that you are uninhibited by chains and by baseball bats and by suppression most of the time. And I think we ought to allow other people the freedom that we reserve for ourselves. So, we've done that. And that explains what has happened. And I'm proud that we have done it.

It's mighty easy for any group that has suffered as cruelly as most of you have and as long as you have to feel an insecurity and a sense of injustice that is so compelling at times that you may overlook some other things. I went to Washington in President Hoover's day and I felt it then, because I'd worked for a dollar a day from sunup to sundown. I saw the Bonus Marchers driven down from Pennsylvania Avenue to the Anacostia Flats, and it troubled me to see the man on the white horse treating them like

*Mr. Innis later explained to the members of the LBJ Library staff that any threat of a disruption by him was a misunderstanding of his intentions.

REMARKS

we handled our goats and sheep, I saw the days of the Depression when little children had to go to garbage cans and pull grapefruit out and hull it with their teeth because they didn't have food. And I lived through the Roosevelt Era and the Truman Era and the Eisenhower Era and the Kennedy Era. I knew all of those men, and I knew them reasonably well. And all of them left office wiser than they entered it. *But I believe that all of them were honorable*, and I see this from the perspective of a former President. I believe every man elevated to that high office where he can go no farther wants to do what he thinks is right. And it's a lot easier to want to do what's right than to know what's right. That's the big problem. Most Presidents—and I speak of myself particularly—went through a learning process. We knew more when we left Washington than when we went there. Some of you men were patient and understanding and tolerant of me as you feel people have not been tolerant of you. When I stumbled you helped me, and when I erred you strengthened me.

I'm not speaking with any political thought in mind. I'm speaking of our future in this country. It's certainly appropriate for you leaders—and God knows some of the best ones are in this room—to reason with President Nixon and his Cabinet and with the leadership of the House and the Senate—with Speaker Albert and Senator Mansfield and Senator Scott and Congressman Ford. And I hope they will all reason with you. I speak from experience. No one in this room has said more ugly things about me than Clarence Mitchell, but there's no man in this room that I respect more. Either he has learned a lot in forty years or I have learned a lot. In any event, we finally saw some things that we could do together, and we did them.

Now I want you to go back, all of you, and counsel together—the way Burke Marshall used to in the Kennedy days and later in the Johnson days, in that soft, kind way; just cool and push off wrath, indulge, tolerate, and finally come out with a program with objectives, with organization—like the Civil Rights Congress, or Civil Rights group, or whatever name it was given. I used to meet with thirty-five of them; and they knew more about me when they left than they did when they came, and I knew a lot more about the problems of the world.

THE HONORABLE LYNDON B. JOHNSON

I would hope that some foundation or group would bring together the outstanding people that you have here and in other places of leadership; that those with experience could lend some wisdom; that you could select specific small groups, not only to look at what we've done, but to move ahead. I've heard how we're going to wipe out our poverty program, how we're going to destroy our educational program, how we're going to cripple our medical program, and dilute our enforcement, and a lot of our Civil Rights programs. I hope that's not true. I don't believe it is true.

But if it is true, the horsepower is in this room to bring it to the attention of the American people, and they should hear it. And to bring it to the attention of the Congress, and it's their duty to listen. And to bring it to the attention of the Cabinet. And to bring it to the attention of the President himself.

I've sat through lots of meetings of an hour or more hearing things I didn't want to hear about myself or my Administration. I can't remember many of them, though, that weren't helpful. And I'm sure that the Cabinet and the Congress and the President would see you, because I know the President wants to do what's right. He doesn't want to leave the Presidency feeling that he's been unfair or unjust to his fellow man.

But knowing what's right is important. I look back at some of the things I did when I was President, and I wish I'd known a little more than I did know when I made the decisions. Every decision comes to a President's attention with so many unknowns, and he has limited access to groups. It's important that you talk to the Speaker, talk to the leadership, talk to the committeemen, and talk to the groups in the Congress who are sympathetic with you, and talk to the Cabinet. Not demanding, not threatening, not planting bombs or telling them you're going to camp in the restroom. You might have to do that sometime. I had a lot do that with me. I went in the White House and shortly after I was there, they wouldn't let me get up the stairs to my room. But I talked to them, listened to them, and I was better for it. I don't think that's the way Clarence Mitchell, or Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Vernon Jordan, or Julian Bond would handle it. I don't think they would blow up the Capitol if they weren't heard. But they can be heard! That's the point. They should be heard! That's the point.

REMARKS

So, set your priorities. See that what we've done we don't lose. Then see how we're going to get black credit in this country. I asked Andy Brimmer about that yesterday and he said, "Maybe we ought to have every bank preserve a record of every loan application and forward those applications once a year to the Secretary of the Treasury. We could examine them and see where credit had been refused because of discrimination, or unjustifiably. And maybe we could prevail upon those people who have charters to do something about such cases while they still have their charters!"

Well, I don't know whether that's right or not, but that's what you ought to know or find out. We talk about black scholarships: I met with Dr. Spurr here and Mrs. Johnson is on the Board of Regents, and we're going to try to get the money to go into all these schools and say to black boys and girls and brown boys and girls, "You haven't had a fair shake of the dice; it doesn't do you any good to be able to go to all these fine schools. You haven't got the money, but we'll get you a scholarship." We'll try to equalize things some.

There are so many things down the road that we must do. So, organize. I've had the best lobbyists in the world hang onto my arm and try to twist it. But there's none of them I'd rate any better than some there on that front row.

And you can see in a meeting how they reason. So, let's go back to that Biblical adage that I've referred to so often. Let's try to get our folks reasoning together and reasoning with the Congress, with the Cabinet. We've got a lot of new members. Reason with the leadership and with the President. There's not a thing in the world wrong—as a matter of fact, there's everything right—about a group saying, "Mr. President, we would like you to set aside an hour to let us talk." And you don't need to start off by saying he's terrible, because he doesn't think he's terrible. None of us did, although we might have been. Start talking about how you believe that he wants to do what's right and how you believe *this* is right, and you'll be surprised how many men who want to do what's right will try to help you.

While I can't provide much go-go at this period of my life, I can provide a lot of hope and dream and encouragement, and I'll sell a few calves now and then and contribute.

THE HONORABLE LYNDON B. JOHNSON

Let's watch what's been done and see that it's preserved, but let's say we have just begun, and let's go on. Until every boy and girl born into this land, whatever state, whatever color, can stand on the same level ground, our job will not be done!

Now, then, one more thing. We wouldn't have this auditorium and these wonderful facilities except for one man more than any other man I know—Arthur Krim of New York—who spent about four or five years of his life making it possible for us to have this opportunity we have had today, because of his love for his fellow humans. Arthur, I want you to turn around and look at them.

With these words the President left the podium for the last time, and the Civil Rights Symposium came to a close.