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Commemorating the Voting Rights Act of 1965

Michael Blackwell Reverend
University of Northern Iowa

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Commemorating the Voting Rights Act of 1965

Part of the journal section “Forum: Constitution Day 2015: The Voting Rights Act of 1965”

Rev. Dr. Michael Blackwell “Commemorating the Voting Rights Act of 1965”

1. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 was the pinnacle of the ten-year struggle to liberate African Americans from the shackles of slavery and Jim Crow segregation. Although the 15th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution gave black men the right to vote way back in 1870, coupled with the 19th Amendment that gave women, including black women, the right in 1920, racism still abounded at election offices across the country—particularly, but not exclusively, among the Southern states. American Negroes, if you will, had been struggling for free access to the polls for decades, when major organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) redoubled their efforts in the 1950s and 1960s to register blacks to vote. They met up with sturdy, vitriolic, and savage opposition, with many losing their lives in the process: Medgar Evers, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, Jimmie Lee Jackson, Rev. James Reeb, Viola Liuzzo, and numberless others whose names we dishonor by our forgetfulness.

2. One of the architects of Freedom Summer of 1964 in the state of Mississippi, Bob Moses, could not summon the wherewithal to speak about the horrors of white mob violence, hatred, and humiliation for many, many years; and Fannie Lou Hamer, a leader in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, walked with a limp for the rest of her life after being injured while seeking to register people to vote. John Lewis, mercilessly beaten on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on what historically is coined as Bloody Sunday, still suffers from his wounds as he represents Georgians in the House of Representatives on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

3. The first March on Washington during the classic Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s is not the one we celebrate year after year when Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his notable “I Have a Dream” speech on August 28, 1963. Oh, no! It was what is a little remembered event commemorating the three-year anniversary of the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*. It was called the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in 1957. Following on the heels of the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott, the organizers of the event selected Dr. King, “the moral leader of our nation” as A. Philip Randolph called him, to be the keynote speaker. Also in front of the Lincoln Memorial, six years before the renowned March on

Washington for Jobs and Freedom and eight years before the Selma-to-Montgomery March, King gave a marvelous address called, of all things, “Give Us the Ballot!” So you see, the struggle for the right to vote—despite laws already amending the Constitution to ensure that right—was a longstanding fight since the end of the Civil War in 1865. It took one hundred years from that War Between the States to obtain a right that should have been arrogated at birth to all American citizens regardless of race, creed, color, and ethnicity—and never taken away!

4. The landmark legislation of fifty years ago that we celebrate today was not something that President Lyndon Baines Johnson just thought up willy-nilly in the winter and spring of 1965! Oh, no! He was a reluctant bystander. It was precisely because of the valiant social action, marching, demonstrating, rallying, advocating, defying and persisting of African Americans and allies of every hue and cry to make our participatory democracy what it should have been but never was for certain categories of people. As the great bard of the Harlem Renaissance and beyond, Langston Hughes, said in his poem, “Let America Be America Again”:

Oh, yes, I say it plain:
America never was America to me;
And yet I swear this oath,
America will be!

5. Today, we are charged with being in solidarity with that battle cry for a true republic and with continuing the fight for all to participate in the body politic. Let’s face it, we live in a new century in which the right to vote is being attacked in many and sundry ways. Yes, the grandfather clauses and outrageous questioning are gone; however, long lines, photo identification requirements, and the paying of fines, and other poll taxes, are deliberate, intentional, and pernicious ways to limit people from having the franchise. I am of the opinion that the right to vote should never be taken away, regardless of one’s station, status, or involvement in the criminal justice system. Never! After all, shouldn’t even the incarcerated, still paying taxes, still concerned about their parents, siblings, children, grandkids, friends, and so forth back in the community be able to affect who is elected to represent them as well as oneself? It is clear to me that the denial of the right to vote goes against the letter and spirit of the 14th Amendment of 1868, which forbids any state or locality from depriving individuals of the right to life, liberty, and property. Denying anybody the right to vote is a breach of due process and equal protection under law—rights that are guaranteed by clauses in this amendment.

6. We have to summon the courage to fight against demagogues who still seek to continue the goals of the halcyon days of the Confederacy, and who characterize people of color and those of low socioeconomic levels as reprobates, rapists, dope addicts, and unclean. We cannot stand idly by while those with money and power excoriate and defame others’ humanity because of who they are, how they self-identify, and with whom they want to partner. We cannot become mealy-mouthed and expressionless when people are being locked up for nonviolent crimes and denied fundamental human rights. We cannot just shrug our shoulders when people are not given a livable wage, a decent, affordable place to live, social outlets that are linguistically appropriate and culturally competent. We cannot remain passive when formerly thriving areas of our community are allowed to languish barren and unused, and our educational systems still hold to

the belief and policy that certain people cannot achieve academically and relegate them unwarrantedly to remedial and special classes. And we cannot internalize dehumanization to the point where we lash out against each other, engage in reckless, antinomian, and misanthropic behaviors that disintegrate communities and dismantle families. Oh, no! We've got to grow a spine and develop new young leaders who aren't afraid to be proactive bulwarks against injustice and solid rocks for full participation by every citizen and citizen-to-be in the structures, processes, policies, and services of our society! Yes, we've got to be able to say, as was said many years ago by Howard Thurman:

I'm tired of sailing my little boat
 Far inside the harbor bar—
 I'd rather go out where the big ships float
 Out on the deep where the great ones are.
 And if my frail craft proves too slight
 For waves that sweep those billows o'er,
 I'd rather go down in the stirring fight
 Than drowse to death by the sheltered shore!

7. As we remember and commemorate the Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the innumerable folks who sacrificed their time, their talents, their treasure, their hearts, and their lives to make it happen, let us now vow to make America a better nation: a pluralistic, inclusive, and equitable nation where justice will roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream! (Amos 5:24) Despite the setbacks and the challenges to democracy we face every day, I still have the hope and faith that peace, harmony, justice, and fairness will triumph through painstaking, diligent, assiduous, indefatigable and creative efforts to make the goal of American democracy finally a reality.

Longfellow, in his poem called "A Psalm of Life," said it so well:

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
 Is our destined end or way;
 But to Act, that each tomorrow
 Find us farther than today.

Lives of great ones all remind us
 We, too, can make our lives sublime,
 And in departing, leave behind us
 Footprints on the sands of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
 Sailing o'er life's solemn main
 Forlorn sister, shipwrecked brother,
 Seeing, shall take heart again.

8. So I close by saying that our task is enormous and multifaceted before us. Our charge is clear. We've got a lot of work left to do to make America be America. As the saying goes:

Once a task you've first begun,
Never finish until it is done;
Be the labor great or small,
Do it well, or not at all!

So build it well, whate'er you do;
Build it straight and strong and true;
Build it high and deep and broad,
Build it for the eye of God!



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