

Stand Up and Speak Out: The Need for Everyday Heroes

by

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The following is the complete text of a May 1, 2005 speech delivered by now President Baraka H. Obama at the NAACP Fight for Freedom Fund Dinner in Detroit, Michigan, reprinted here [titled provided by this publication] for readers to reflect upon his insights on the Civil Rights Movement, championed by everyday women and men who stood up and spoke out for what they believe was right.

Thank you. Half a century after the first few hundred people sat for justice and equality at these tables, I am honored to be here with this crowd of thousands at the 50th NAACP Fight for Freedom Fund Dinner.

Founded at a time when we were constantly reminded how the world around us was separate and unequal...when the idea of legal rights for Black folks was almost a contradiction in terms...when lunch counters and bus seats and water fountains were luxuries you had to fight for and march for, the 50th anniversary of the Fight for Freedom Dinner reminds us of just how far our struggle has come.

I was reminded of this last month, when I had the honor of going to Atlanta to speak at John Lewis's 65th birthday celebration. Many of the luminaries of the Civil Rights Movement were down there, and I had the great honor of sitting between Ethel Kennedy and Coretta Scott King, who both turned to me and said "we're really looking forward to hearing you speak." Now that's a really intimidating thing!

And as I stood up there next to John Lewis, not a giant in stature, but a giant of compassion and courage, I thought to myself, never in a million years would I have guessed that I'd be serving in Congress with John Lewis.

And then I thought, you know, there was once a time when John Lewis might never have guessed that he'd be serving in Congress. And there was a time not long before that when people might never have guessed that someday, Black folks would be able to go to the polls, pick up a ballot, make their voice heard, and elect that Congress.

But we can, and many of us are here, because people like John Lewis believed. Because people feared nothing and risked everything for those beliefs; because they saw injustice and endured pain in order to right what was wrong. We're here tonight because of them, and to them we owe the deepest gratitude.

The road we have taken to this point has not been easy. But then again, the road to change never is.

Some of you might know that I taught Constitutional Law at the Chicago Law school for awhile. And one of the courses I taught was a course in race and law, where we chronicled the history of race in this country and people's struggle to achieve freedom in the courts and on the streets. And often times my students would come up to me and say things like, "Boy I wish I could've been around at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Because things seemed so clear at the time. And while there may have been room for debate on some things, the clarity of the cause and the need for the movement were crystal clear, and you didn't have the ambiguities you have today.

Because it's one thing to know that everyone has a seat at the lunch counter, but how do we figure out how everyone can pay for the meal? It was easy to figure out that Blacks and whites should be able to go to school together, but how do we make sure that every child is equipped and ready to graduate? It was easy to talk about dogs and fire hoses, but how do we talk about getting drugs and guns off the streets?" This is what they told me.

And of course, I reminded them that it wasn't very easy at all. That the moral certainties we now take for granted - that separate can never be equal, that the blessings of liberty enshrined in our Constitution belong to all of us, that our children should be able to go to school together and play together and grow up together - were anything but certain in 1965.

I reminded them that even within the African-American community, there was disagreement about how much to stir things up. We have a church in Chicago that's on what use to be known as State Park Way. After Dr. King's assassination, the street was renamed to Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. But the pastor of the church - a prominent African-American in the community - hated Dr. King so bad that he actually changed the address of the church.

And so it's never been clear. And it's never been easy. To get to where we are today it took struggle and sacrifice, discipline and tremendous courage.

And sometimes, when I reflect on those giants of the Civil Rights movement, I wonder - where did you find that courage? John Lewis, where did you find that courage? Dorothy Height, where did you find that courage? Rosa Parks, where did you find that courage?

When you're facing row after row of state troopers on horseback armed with billy clubs and tear gas...when they're coming toward you spewing hatred and violence, how do you simply stop, kneel down, and pray to the Lord for salvation?

Where do you find that courage?

I don't know. But I do know that it's worth examining because the challenges we face today are going to require this kind of courage. The battle lines may have shifted and the barriers to equality may be new, but what's not new is the need for everyday heroes to stand up and speak out for what they believe is right.

Fifty years ago this country decided that Linda Brown shouldn't have to walk miles and miles to school every morning when there was a white school just four blocks away because when it comes to education in America, separate can never be equal.

Now that ruling came about because the NAACP was willing to fight tirelessly and risk its reputation; because everyday Americans - Black and white - were willing to take to the streets and risk their freedom; because people showed courage.

Fifty years later, what kind of courage are we showing to ensure that our schools are foundations of opportunity for our children?

In a world where kids from Detroit aren't just competing with kids from Macomb for middle-class jobs, but with kids from Malaysia and New Delhi, ensuring that every American child gets the best education possible is the new civil rights challenge of our time.

A student today armed with only a high school diploma will earn an average of only \$25,000 a year - if you're African-American, it's 14% less than that. Meanwhile, countries like China are graduating twice as many students with a college degree as we do. We're falling behind, and if we want our kids to have the same chances we had in life, we must work harder to catch up.

So what are we doing about it?

When we see that America has one of the highest high school dropout rates in the industrialized world - even higher for African-Americans and Hispanics, what are we doing about it?

When we see that our high school seniors are scoring lower on their math and science tests than almost any other students in the world at a time when expertise in these areas is the ticket to a high-wage job, what are we doing about it?

When we see that for every hundred students who enter ninth grade, only eighteen - eighteen - will earn any kind of college degree within six years of graduating high school, what are we doing about it?

And when we see broken schools, old textbooks, and classrooms bursting at the seams, what are we doing about that?

I'll tell you what they've been doing in Washington. In Washington, they'll talk about the importance of education one day and sign big tax cuts that starve our schools the next. They'll talk about Leaving No Child Behind but then say nothing when it becomes obvious that they've left the money behind. In the budget they passed this week in Congress, they gave out over \$100 billion in tax cuts, on top of the trillions they've already given to the wealthiest few and most profitable corporations.

One hundred billion dollars; think about what that could do for our kids if we invested that in our schools. Think of how many new schools we could build, how many great teachers we could recruit, what kind of computers and technology we could put in our classrooms. Think about how much we could invest in math and science so our kids could be prepared for the 21st century economy. Think about how many kids we could send to college who've worked hard, studied hard, but just can't afford the tuition.

Think about all that potential and all that opportunity. Think about the choice Washington made instead. And now think about what you can do about it.

I believe we have a mutual responsibility to make sure our schools are properly funded, our teachers are properly paid, and our students have access to an affordable college education. And if we don't do something about all that, than nothing else matters.

But I also believe we have an individual responsibility as well.

Our grandparents use to tell us that being Black means you have to work twice as hard to succeed in life. And so I ask today, can we honestly say our kids are working twice as hard as the kids in India and China who are graduating ahead of us, with better test scores and the tools they need to kick our butts on the job market? Can we honestly say our teachers are working twice as hard, or our parents?

One thing's for sure, I certainly know that Washington's not working twice as hard - and that's something each of us has a role in changing. Because if we want change in our education system - if we want our schools to be less crowded and funded more equitably; if we want our children to take the courses that will get them ready for the 21st century; if we want our teachers to be paid what they're worth and armed with the tools they need to prepare our kids; then we need to summon the same courage today that those giants of the Civil Rights movement summoned half a century ago.

Because more than anything else, these anniversaries - of the Voting Rights Act and the Civil Rights Act and Fight for Freedom Fund Dinner - they remind us that in America, ordinary citizens can somehow find in their hearts the courage to do extraordinary things. That change is never easy, but always possible. And it comes not from violence or militancy or the kind of politics that pits us against each other and plays on our worst fears; but from great discipline and organization, and from a strong message of hope.

And when we look at these challenges and think, how can we do this? How can we cut through the apathy and the partisanship and the business-as-usual culture in Washington? When we wonder this, we need to rediscover the hope that people have been in our shoes before and they've lived to cross those bridges.

Personally, I find that hope in thinking about a trip I took during my campaign for the U.S. Senate.

About a week after the primary, Dick Durbin and I embarked on a nineteen city tour of Southern Illinois. And one of the towns we went to was a place called Cairo, which, as many of you might know, achieved a certain notoriety during the late 60s and early 70s as having one of the worst racial climates in the country. You had an active white citizen's council there, you had cross burnings, Jewish families were being harassed, you had segregated schools, race riots, you name it - it was going on in Cairo.

And we're riding down to Cairo and Dick Durbin turns to me and says, "Let me tell you about the first time I went to Cairo. It was about 30 years ago. I was 23 years old and Paul Simon, who was Lieutenant Governor at the time, sent me down there to investigate what could be done to improve the racial climate in Cairo."

And Dick tells me how he diligently goes down there and gets picked up by a local resident who takes him to his motel. And as Dick's getting out of the car, the driver says "excuse me, let me just give you a piece of advice. Don't use the phone in your motel room because the switchboard operator is a member of the white citizen's council, and they'll report on anything you do."

Well, this obviously makes Dick Durbin upset, but he's a brave young man, so he checks in to his room, unpacks his bags and a few minutes later he hears a knock on the door. He opens up the door and there's a guy standing there who just stares at Dick for a second, and then says, "What the hell are you doing here?" and walks away.

Well, now Dick is really feeling concerned and so am I because as he's telling me this story, we're pulling in to Cairo. So I'm wondering what kind of reception we're going to get. And we wind our way through the town and we go past the old courthouse, take a turn and suddenly we're in a big parking lot and about 300 people are standing there. About a fourth of them are Black and three fourths are white and they all are about the age where they would have been active participants in the epic struggle that had taken place thirty years earlier.

And as we pull closer, I see something. All of these people are wearing these little buttons that say "Obama for U.S. Senate." And they start smiling. And they start waving. And Dick and I looked at each other and didn't have to say a thing. Because if you told Dick thirty years ago that he - the son of Lithuania immigrants born into very modest means in east St. Louis - would be returning to Cairo as a sitting United States Senator, and that he would have in tow a Black guy born in Hawaii with a father from Kenya and a mother from Kansas named Barack Obama, no one would have believed it.

But it happened. And it happened because John Lewis and scores of brave Americans stood on that bridge and lived to cross it.

You know, two weeks after Bloody Sunday, when the march finally reached Montgomery, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to the crowd of thousands and said "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." He's right, but you know what? It doesn't bend on its own. It bends because we help it bend that way. Because people like John Lewis and Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks and thousands of ordinary Americans with extraordinary courage have helped bend it that way. And as their examples call out to us from across the generations, we continue to progress as a people because they inspire us to take our own two hands and bend that arc.

Congratulations to all of you here at the NAACP who are busy bending that arc. Thank you.