

FAITH IN POLITICS DINNER

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Alabama State Archives

Montgomery, Alabama

March 4, 2017

I am always honored to have the opportunity to join my friend and fellow Alabamian, Congressman John Lewis, in offering you still another welcome to our home state. Although the history of our past may beg to differ with the affection John and I share today, all of our lives are better because of his accomplishments, and my life is forever changed because of his friendship.

When we were young, John and I lived only 38 miles from one another. He lived in the country and I was one of the 1, 580 people that lived in the town of Clayton, Alabama. His father, Eddie, was a farmer and my father, George, was a lawyer. Both his mother, Willie Mae and my mother, Lurleen, were the chief operating officers of our family. And as young children, we both evidenced a strong commitment to the soul and the safety of chickens for John and a variety of yard birds for me. For while John was preaching to chickens in hopes of saving their souls, I was hanging aluminum pie plates in fig trees in hopes of saving bird's lives from an angry mother with a bb gun in her hands.

But in the reality of our lives, we lived oceans apart. For the seeds of slavery had grown into thickets of segregations. And living along the stretches of the highway that ran between us, were descendants of some

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of the 435,000 slaves that were sold in Alabama, the 11, 435 men who bought them and the poor white farmers who had shaken their angry fists at all of them

In spite of the reality of segregation, John lived amidst the love of his family in a home where he could always return to experience the dignity that comes with living a life with purpose.

For many of us there is peace in the act of going home, where rediscovered moments live amidst the crooks and crannies, and the memories of laying in the backyards of our childhood looking for faces in the clouds of contentment that float by. For, it is a place of refuge from the storms of discontent and a place for the hopes of a father that his children's lives will count for something. It is where mother's stand by the door, or pull back the edges of curtains in the dark of the night to

watch for their children to come home.

But for the cause of segregation, there were no hugs or kisses from neighbors, no going away gifts or parties, and no opportunities to say goodbye to my childhood when we left our home in Clayton when I was eleven years old.

For we packed our clothes, turned off the lights and my father locked the kitchen door behind us. If my Mother had told me we were never coming back, perhaps I would have looked harder or faster at the places we passed by, that could have reminded me of what my life had been like. There was never an inkling of what was to become.

For our lives were hitched to an ascending star of power where the past didn't matter when there was so much to gain in the days that lay ahead. And it was no longer just 38 miles between my house and John's.

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But there would come a time when John and I would find one another, when distance did not matter, and looking over our shoulder was not as important as looking for the tomorrows that lie ahead.

While there is never a bad time to honor the struggle for civil rights in American history, every day is a good day to heed the call for freedom and justice for all for that was the hallmark of the civil rights movement

All of us must lead by example. We must live our lives with inspiration as we aspire to make the choices that can lead us to higher ground, that guide us to understanding and purpose of not just who we are but who we can become.

And there is never an inappropriate time to be vigilant to the great moments of the civil rights movement and honor the sacrifices of those that suffered in its pursuit.

For it is in that same spirit that we can be encouraged to heed the call to rise, inspire the nobility that lies in the heart of every American and to provide us with opportunities to see others, feel others and celebrate others, respecting them for who they are.

For it is in the celebration of the unity of mind, heart, spirit and humanity which gives the promise that when we say all men are created equal, it means something, protects something and encourages us to embrace the belief that the diversity among us has nothing to do with equality but has everything to do with strength of character and country.

There are lessons to be learned along the roadways that others

have traveled in pursuit of their dreams of enjoying the full measure of equality. There are great moments in history when men, women and

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children stood their ground to demand the rights that were guaranteed to them. And now is the time that all Americans should fulfill the promise they pledge each time the American flag goes by.

There is never a bad time for us to engage in acts of public service that create opportunities for enlightenment and change. For, we cannot expect the next generation of Americans to do something to change the world, if we do nothing to recognize our individual obligations to service.

And it is for that purpose and in honor of our own personal obligations to service, that we gather to celebrate the important role of women in the American Civil Rights Movement.

On December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a city bus here in Montgomery. Whether it was a simple act of courage or her personal indignity in the face of the indignity of segregation, her act of bravery was a moment among many that led to the beginning of the American Civil Rights Movement.

On the day of Rosa Park's trial in the City Court of Montgomery, 40,000 African American citizens boycotted the Montgomery City Bus System and at the age of 26, Martin Luther King was elected Chairman of the Montgomery Improvement Association.

For 381 days, African American women, men and children refused to ride public transportation while being inspired by the words of Martin Luther King, Ralph Abernathy and others to stand up for their dignity and hold hope in their hearts.

While a federal court order ultimately forced the integration of Montgomery's public transportation system rather than the boycott itself, the Montgomery Bus Boycott dealt a crushing blow to the belief

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that minorities had neither the will nor the opportunity to change the rules and it encouraged African Americans to believe that black lives mattered.

But the day of liberation from the shackles of segregation would be a long time in coming, for the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the Edmund Pettus Bridge still lay ahead.

While history reminds us of the heroics of the giants of the Civil Rights Movement, it sometimes fails to acknowledge the struggles and sacrifices of the men, women and children who marched behind them.

For they too faced the humiliation of shouting mobs and hate filled faces as they walked along the blacktop roads and city streets of America.

They were housekeepers and maids, laborers and farmers, students and teachers, mothers, fathers, sons and daughters who dared to believe that their lives and their dignity mattered.

Many African American Mothers had little they could say in answer to a daughter's question why in the land of plenty there was so little for them. But their lack of an answer encouraged them to stand for the day when their daughters could have an American dream of their own.

The mothers and daughters of the civil rights movement never waived in their belief that justice would come and they prayed for the day when the fair winds of freedom and following seas would carry them to the shores of a life without fear and a heart of purpose.

Their hopes, their dreams and their accomplishments made them heroes of their generations. And their courage and determination should inspire us to find those moments of opportunity that can lead to

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hope rather than roadways of shattered dreams that always lead back to where we started.

Their grace in the midst of hate should inspire us to believe that there is dignity in demanding that all of us deserve the full measure of justice and mercy under the law.

Their courage should harness the power in each of us to reach, to believe and stand firm in the belief that all lives count for something.

And their stories will inspire others to believe that even in the midst of despair lies the power to overcome.

The victory of the women who faced the humiliation of shouting mobs and hate filled faces as they walked with dignity rather than suffer the indignity of riding in the back of a bus of lost hopes for opportunity teach us that there are times when the screams of an angry mob become of little importance to those who believe that the rule of law and character of country means something.

Although Martin Luther King believed that complacency is the enemy of Liberty, he understood there would be times when it would take a crisis to empower others to stand. And we all must take heart in believing that there will always be righteous women rising to inspire others to stand, to sit and to kneel on behalf of the common man.

In America, we believe that dignity with character counts when faced with the indignity of injustice. And the women of the Civil Rights

Movement stood as champions. They were the mothers of great leaders and great leaders themselves, they marched by their husbands and marched on their own. They comforted their children in the dark of the night and inspired their daughters to believe that neither their race nor

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their gender could deny them a seat at the head of the table of their dreams.

The stories of the women of the civil rights movement inform our generation of daughters what standing up for yourself feels like. For it was through their own lives that the women of the civil rights movement came to understand that what you stand for in your life is not as important as what you do in your life and it is the act of doing that unleashes the power of your spirit.

On August 28, 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and spoke to the heart of America. It was one of his finest moments. It was the day he told America that he “had a dream”

In that speech, he said, “I have a dream that one day, right down there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.”

On the day of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Selma to Montgomery March, Bernice King and I stood on the steps of the Capitol and held hands as thousands of people marched toward us. For that moment in time, we became the embodiment of the little black girl and the little white girl holding hands as sisters down in Alabama.

And in the spirit of that moment, I hope there will be times in all of your lives when you too can take your own road less traveled by and find joy in the difference it can make in other’s lives.

For there is no benefit to dwell on how did we get here, when we know where we must go.

We must choose to stand up rather than stand by when justice for all is at risk.

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And let us always strive to be our best when there are storm clouds on the horizons of our lives.

On December 19, 1956, Dr. Martin Luther King wrote a letter to the black community to inform them that the segregation of public buses had been declared unconstitutional. After 381 days of walking, being threatened and demeaned amidst moments of humiliation, the Montgomery Boycott was over.

In his letter he said. "In a few days, you will be re-boarding integrated buses. This places upon us a tremendous responsibility of maintaining, in face of what could be some unpleasantness, a calm and loving dignity befitting good citizens and members of our Race. If cursed, do not curse back. If pushed, do not push back. If struck, do not strike back, but evidence love and goodwill at all times. In all things observe ordinary rules of courtesy and good behavior.

Be quiet but friendly; proud, but not arrogant; joyous, but not boisterous. Be loving enough to absorb evil and be understanding enough to turn an enemy into a friend. Use moral and spiritual forces to carry on the struggle for justice and do not be afraid to experiment with new and creative techniques for achieving reconciliation and social change."

Martin Luther King's letter in the moment of his victory over the indignity of segregation, should encourage and embolden us to proclaim today and for all the days to come, that it is through the "peace that comes with understanding", that we should, we must, and we shall... overcome