

CIVIL RIGHTS DAY IN WEST VIRGINIA

Commemorative Address by W. B. Allen

Chairman, U. S. Commission on Civil Rights

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It is a novel experiment, the proclamation of Civil Rights Day. It suggests celebration of the greatest victory—the victory of community. Our forefathers proclaimed *e pluribus unum*. Their goal became our challenge, but we have not yet been able to celebrate its accomplishment. I would like to think, however, that your proclamation of Civil Rights Day—this spontaneous invocation of our fondest wish—anticipates that coming event.

I thank you for this—for giving place to reflection on what the United States will have become when Civil Rights Day is a celebration everywhere and not a brooding over un-kept promises. When you asked me to join with you, I asked myself what it would be like to celebrate in America a civil rights day that meant we had no civil rights problems.

Surely the first thing it would mean is that there is no American anywhere, in any corner of the land, from reservation to rest home, whose rights are undefended by our Constitution. And the next thing it must mean is certainly that race will have become a charming expression of personal distinction rather than the blunt instrument of social distribution.

On the civil rights day which you caused me to imagine, there is no brooding about the future consequences of the hidden fault lines in our society. By then New Orleans will have been able to celebrate King Day without seeing the parade degenerate by night into roving gangs of black youths assaulting whites. By then the cycles of violence and denial in Miami will have given place to the firm assurance of the rule of law—such that rich and poor, black and white can all expect the same justice. The death of an innocent black youth at the hands of a policeman will be a recognized accident and not an expected injustice.

When we will have occasion to celebrate Civil Rights Day, and not just to note its passing, our country's laws will have ceased to distinguish between civil rights and equal rights of citizenship. In that day it will be enough, to be safe, just to be American. Neither man nor woman, race nor creed will seek for any advantage other than American citizenship—that title deed of liberty—for our laws will guarantee to all the advantage of equality.

The dream I share with you is not the idle dream of one who has nothing to do. The America in which we will be able to celebrate Civil Rights Day will not come in the succession of winters and summers as if by appointment. It may come next year, or a decade, or four score and seven years from now. I share with you the burden of bringing it into being, and it will come,

no sooner, nor more surely than we can produce it through our dedication to the task to make the country whole.

And when will our country be whole? When we count no longer by our differences but by our sameness. When we have no minorities but those that pass with elections. When we recognize in the term majority, not a racial epithet, but the insignia of republicanism.

To make our country whole we must lose even the habits we most rely on for safety today—the habit of dividing our society into minorities and pretending that each can have a guaranteed piece of the pie just by being a minority; the habit of closing our eyes to abuses when they are too large to handle and preening ourselves on successes too small to make a difference.

These are things not easy to discuss, for one always risks his reputation in doing so. It is easier to speak of the unique culture and traditions of “native Americans” than to insist that Indians are American too. It is easier to notice how many school systems are subject to mandatory busing and appointed court masters than to point out how few black people ever benefited from customary Anglo-American recovery procedures for intentionally inflicted injuries. It is easier, too, to report the extraordinary number of compliance reports in employment cases, than to insist on the reality of how little change the bureaucratic sword dance actually creates. And we see in the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) of 1986, that it is easier to give in to the pressure of anyone who comes along than to stand on principle. There we have one law that orders Americans to discriminate (to prefer for employment citizens to registered immigrants), while another law (Title VII of the 1964 civil Rights Act) makes the same discrimination illegal.

No, it is not easy to point these things out. But it is more difficult still to keep silent about them. Whatever the risks to ourselves, we must be willing to try to change America—and I don't mean Jim Crow America. I mean America of the last thirty years. We must change America for America's sake. And as far as the risk to ourselves is concerned—well, I follow the principle of George Washington, who said:

Though I prize as I ought the good opinion of my fellow citizens, yet, if I know myself, I would not seek or retain popularity at the expense of one social duty or moral virtue. While doing what my conscience informed me was right, as it respected my God, my country, and myself, I could despise all the party clamor and unjust censure, which must be expected from some. . . . And certain I am, whensoever I shall be convinced the good of my country requires my reputation to be put at risk, regard for my own fame will not come in competition with an object of so much magnitude.

As many of you know, Washington is a literal inspiration for me. Because you have chosen to honor this day in the manner that you have, I cannot help but think that he is also an inspiration for you. That is the reason I anticipate with great pleasure the contribution of your labors toward the ultimate Civil Rights Day.