

49 Years Later, Blacks Still Pressing to ‘Overcome’

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
Thursday, 30 August 2012 09:29



It is called the anthem of the civil rights movement, no doubt sang at every major march and rally during the 1960s- including at the March on Washington, August 28, 1963, 49 years ago this week.

A sure sign of progress was when President Lyndon B. Johnson used its words amidst his Voting Rights speech before Congress March 15, 1965: “We Shall Overcome”, he declared to applause. Indeed, it is the clarion declaration of the struggle for equality and justice for African-Americans.

And yet, 49 years since the “March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom”, at the height of the protests that ultimately led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act, justice leaders in 2012 say Blacks have yet to overcome. In interviews this week, they resolved that August 28, 1963 is yet a euphoric reminder of the equality that must still be attained.

“The March on Washington for Freedom and Jobs inspired a change in the national discourse on equality and helped usher through the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act,” said Ben Jealous, president of the NAACP. “Today, we have reaped the rewards of our predecessors’ action, but we have yet to fully realize their dream – a country of economic opportunity and equality for all.”

He continued, saying that the NAACP has now reconstituted its Economic Department and dedicated it “to bridging the racial economic inequality that perpetuates racial division in the United States. The department advocates for best practices and policies that advance economic

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inclusiveness and equal opportunity. It is particularly focused on ending the predatory lending practices that made the bursting of the financial bubble so devastating to African-Americans.”

The National Urban League reported in March this year that the NUL’s Equality Index of Black America, which compares Black progress to Whites reveals the distance that America as a nation must go:

- In economics, African-Americans measure 56.3 percent compared to Whites.
- In social justice, African-Americans measure 56.8 percent compared Whites.
- In health, African-Americans measure 76.5 percent compared to Whites.
- In education, African-Americans measure 79.7 percent compared to Whites.
- And in civic engagement, African-Americans are 98.3 percent compared to Whites.

“Things have significantly changed, but not enough,” National Urban League President/CEO Marc Morial said this week. “The dismantling of de jure segregation and the expansion of Black political power are the most visible signs of this change. The persistence of poverty, economic and educational disparities, and violence remain the unfinished business. And the rise of a new reactionary 21st century backlash combined with cynicism and apathy concerns me the most.”

Other issues of unequal justice remain prevalent. The criminal justice system is overrun with Black males in prisons; police profiling and brutality remain disparate in Black communities; more than four million convicted felons, the majority of them Black and Latino, cannot register to vote although they have served their time and are released from prison; civil rights leaders are currently fighting new voter identification laws around the nation that they believe effectively disenfranchise millions of African-Americans.

Seeing the systemic changes of the past, some rights leaders believe it is still incumbent upon “we the people” to place pressure upon the government in order to achieve justice.

“We have laws protecting our rights that we did not have before, but these rights are constantly threatened, so we must be mindful and ever vigilant,” said Julian Bond, chairman-emeritus of the NAACP, who was at the March on Washington. “Despite remaining divisions between Black and White life chances, we enjoy opportunity we did not in the past.

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Our condition is a frustrating mixture of better and not as good as it should be. It requires each of us to do all he or she can to insure it improves, and the improvement is made permanent.”

Even then, the psyche of those who would fight for justice must remain focused on the millions who are struggling – not just about self, says Dr. E. Faye Williams, national chair of the National Congress of Black Women, and chair of the Black Leadership Forum.

“Unfortunately, I fear that too many of us have come to believe that individual success is more important than group success,” Williams says. “Too many of our people are not connecting their success to the sacrifices of Dr. Martin Luther King and other heroes and sheroes who came before us...and I am afraid that limits our ‘overcoming’ in greater numbers.”

Harvard law professor Charles Ogletree, director of the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice, agrees that there is much more that people should be doing to help expedite conditions – even economic struggles.

“There is strong evidence that hope is on the way and work is on the way. The new 163,000 jobs in July is a sign of progress,” Ogletree said. “If we can get employers to stop watching the market and start hiring people, we can solve the jobs problem today. We solved it during the depression in the 1930s and as Americans, we can solve it now. That is the essence of patriotism.”

The key to overcoming is to not give up even when conditions appear hopeless, concludes Jealous.

“The activists who marched in 1963 may not have known that landmark legislation was around the corner, but looking around the crowded mall at their peers, they surely knew they were on the right track. Forty-nine years on, the NAACP is still working to protect communities from discrimination and to provide the skills needed to realize the dream of economic justice.”

Summing it up in that March 15, 1965 speech, which came as a result of the March on Washington and the bloody protests that followed in places like Selma, Ala., President

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Johnson's words appear relevant today:

"There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem. There is no Northern problem. There is only an American problem," he said. "It's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us that must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice...And we shall overcome." {jcomments on}