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# The 'Right to Vote' still a cause in need of championing

By Steve Horton

Passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act was a landmark event in Congressional as well as national history—legally marking the end of the Jim Crow Laws in the South and discriminatory practices in the North.

Much of the credit went to the courageous persistence of the Civil Rights Movement, personified by the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, that slowly but surely changed attitudes about segregation and the accompanying oppression.

But history also gives a nod—and rightly so—to the efforts of Lyndon Johnson who had only months before assumed the presidency after the assassination of John Kennedy.

It had been Kennedy who had earlier introduced the legislation. However, given the ability of southern Democratic senators to block this sort of bill with the filibuster and lukewarm support from the Republicans, the bill was given little chance of success.

That dynamic changed though with his death

Johnson, as his successor, decided to take up the cause. Having been the Senate Majority Leader prior to his election as vice president, the tall Texan had a reputation for being an effective and relentless negotiator. Over the ensuing weeks, he used those skills to cajole lawmakers. Aiding him was the emotional residue still at high tide from Kennedy's death—with many Americans viewing passage as a fitting tribute to the martyred president.

Yet, despite securing passage, it became evident that the Act was only part of the prize. There was still the matter of access to the ballot box. Still the matter of all those obstacles enshrined in the statute books of Southern states, including poll taxes and literacy tests, designed to discourage and suppress Black voters, coupled with the implied threats and overt acts of violence employed by terror groups and even law enforcement to reinforce this aim.

That, too, needed to end, with a federal law being the most effective means of accomplishing this goal.

Actual equality, the realization of true citizenship, needed to embrace the Right to Vote.

Leaders in the various wings of the Civil Rights Movement had realized this, which is why a large part of their efforts centered on registering black voters and protesting the laws and practices that prevented it.

One of the focal points was Selma, Alabama and the surrounding county where half the population was comprised of black residents, but only two percent of them were registered to vote.

On Feb. 18, 1965, a young black man, Jimmie Lee Jackson, was shot by an Alabama state trooper while trying to protect his mother during civil rights demonstration in a nearby town. That, in turn, motivated leaders to organize a march from Selma to the state capital in Montgomery, over fifty miles away, with the intention of presenting their grievances to the governor, George Wallace. It was set to take place on March 7<sup>th</sup>.

The fierce resistance by the police that greeted those marchers when they began to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge became known as 'Bloody Sunday'—the stuff of legend. The news

reports of the beatings and arrests, accompanied by visual images, shocked countless Americans across the nation.

It also inspired a second attempt, this one drawing many additional supporters, including celebrities. That march went without a hitch—a success, if you will—nevertheless, there was still violence. A young white housewife from Detroit, Viola Liuzzo, who had come to Selma to show her support, was murdered by a carload of Klansmen while driving back from Montgomery.

Her death, like ‘Bloody Sunday’, became a rallying cry that led to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

In between those two marches, President Johnson—now passionate about the cause of civil rights—delivered what became known as the “We Shall Overcome” speech to a joint session of Congress on March 15<sup>th</sup>.

Assisting Johnson with this address was Richard Goodwin, the late husband of the historian Doris Kearns Goodwin, who played a large role in the progressive wing of the Democratic Party from the late 1950s into the early 1970s as an advisor and speechwriter in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and in the subsequent presidential campaigns of Robert Kennedy and Eugene McCarthy.

Kearns Goodwin talked about that historical moment during in an hour-long interview with David Axelrod, conducted the day after President Joe Biden’s inauguration. She was a guest on his podcast, *The Axe Files*, found on the CNN website.

From her perspective as a historian, Kearns Goodwin spoke of recent events and challenges facing the nation—the COVID-19 pandemic, the Black Lives Matter movement, the November election and attempts by former President Trump and his supporters to overturn the results, the storming of the U.S. Capitol, and the deep political and cultural divisions existing between Americans—comparing them to other contentious times in our nation’s past.

She touched on Lincoln taking office in 1861 with seven slave states having already succeeded due to his election, faced with the daunting task of preserving the union and the system of government by, for and of the people. She noted how Franklin Roosevelt brought

hope and optimism to the nation when he gave his first inaugural address in 1933, seeking to soothe the fears of his fellow countrymen who were in the midst and despair of the Great Depression.

Other analogies she offered were the social divisions that existed during the Progressive Era at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with Teddy Roosevelt leading the way toward needed reforms, and the more recent turmoil of the 1960's with the struggle for civil rights, debates over the Vietnam War, and the racial unrest that exploded into violence in several large American cities.

It was while discussing the issue of race and how it's been a key component of American politics and society since our country's founding, ebbing and flowing as part of the national dialogue and now very much on the front burner, that Kearns Goodwin talked about the 1965 Act, and of Johnson who she worked for as an aide and the involvement of her husband in helping craft the address and articulating what Johnson was proposing with his legislation.

In arguing for the Right to Vote for all Americans, the president noted that "Our fathers believed that if this noble view of the rights of man was to flourish, it must be rooted in democracy. The most basic right of all was the right to choose your own leaders. The history of this country, in large measure, is the history of the expansion of that right to all of our people.

"Many of the issues of civil rights are very complex and most difficult," he added. "But about this there can and should be no argument. Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote. There is no reason which can excuse the denial of that right. There is no duty which weighs more heavily on us than the duty we have to ensure that right."

On this occasion, Johnson was championing the cause of blacks to participate as full citizens, but pointed out that this measure of equality belongs to everyone regardless of skin color, race, economic status, party affiliation, or religious beliefs.

As recent events have shown, the Right to Vote—extended to each and all without undue legal obstacles or strategies to disenfranchise or suppress—is still an issue, still under duress, and still a cause in need of championing.

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