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## **“To Secure These Rights”: The Need for a New Majority Coalition**

*Hubert H. Humphrey\**

We have learned in the last two decades important lessons in both the law and the politics of civil rights. I wish to underscore certain of these realities in outlining a civil rights strategy for the decade of the 1970's. We look back at the civil rights battles of the 1950's and 1960's with an air of nostalgia. In those years the legislative goals were relatively well defined: the removal of a host of legal barriers to civil equality and equal opportunity. More than this, the legal barriers existed primarily in one section of the country so that the lives of most Americans would be unaffected by whatever reforms we might achieve in Congress. We were, in a sense, working with a civil rights agenda that was uniquely suited to legislative remedy.

We now look back on those times as the easy days of the civil rights struggle. But if we think a moment longer, these days were not so easy. In the early 1950's, the number of United States Senators who were actively committed to passing the pending civil rights legislation could caucus in the rear corner of the Senate cloakroom. And I have the distinct impression that the Senate establishment of those years was decidedly unenthusiastic about these bills. One might even say downright hostile.

Those were years of unrelieved frustration and failure, until Senate Majority Leader Lyndon Johnson decided that we could postpone no longer the most urgent portions of the pending legislation. In what still must be regarded as one of the Senate's most amazing demonstrations of parliamentary skill, the Civil Rights Act of 1957 became law when Lyndon Johnson maneuvered the legislation through the Senate without a filibuster.

By the early 1960's, these initial steps were no longer sufficient as remedies for the problems that remained: equal access to public accommodations, equal job opportunity, the nondiscriminatory use of federal funds, and greater protection of the right to vote. The legislative outlook, however, was as dismal as it had been ten years earlier.

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\* United States Senator from Minnesota.

These comments are based upon an address given by Senator Humphrey at the dedication of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Library, Austin, Texas, December 11, 1972. For an account of the events of December 11, 1972 see N.Y. Times, Dec. 12, 1972, § 1, at 28. A full text of Senator Humphrey's speech may be found in 119 CONG. REC. 5352 (daily ed. Jan. 9, 1973).

The dramatic events in Birmingham, the decision by President Kennedy to seize the legislative initiative, his tragic assassination, and the total commitment of President Johnson to realizing these objectives produced a more hospitable legislative climate. But, even then, the outlook in the Senate was grim. Our eventual triumph was not preordained, by any means. At numerous points in the 75-day battle to break the filibuster the legislation could have been compromised irretrievably. The fact that none of this happened was due almost entirely to the political strategy that had been mapped out and that was followed even in the most difficult moments of debate.

These brief retrospective observations have only one purpose: to suggest again that the struggle for civil rights in Congress has never been easy and that, in many respects, our present difficulties are no more insuperable than the barriers we faced back in the good old days. Different, to be sure, but not insuperable. It is not only fashionable, but also entirely correct, to focus on the problems of the present decade: racially restrictive suburbs, racially exclusive schools, racially protected jobs, crime, drugs, and the host of other intertwined domestic problems. And it is on the new Northern battlegrounds that many of these issues will be resolved. I would like to discuss the political strategy that must be devised if we are to continue the progress of the 1960's in this decade.

I begin with this proposition: unless we agree on a strategy that can attract a majority coalition in the Congress and the nation at large, we can look forward to little in the way of concrete results. This lesson is as true today as it was twenty years ago. Between the extremes of empty appeals to the nation's moral consciousness and premeditated violence and intimidation is a broad field for constructive political action. And it is in this area where we must begin to think more creatively.

It is now commonplace in current political analysis to suggest that the national constituency in support of continued civil rights progress has vanished. We are, it seems to me, in a peculiar but vitally important period of our national life, a period in which our lack of direction in the civil rights arena is no greater than our lack of direction generally. The American people and their elected leaders are deeply confused and ambivalent about where we should be heading as a nation and, consequently, deeply divided about our shorter range objectives. I would argue, however, that it is within our power to break out of this impasse and to begin the mobilization of political resources that can restore the positive momentum of the 1960's, not only for civil rights but for the nation generally.

How is this to be done?

First, I would suggest that President Nixon has within his grasp an

extraordinary opportunity to move to the forefront of the quest for racial justice in this country. Just as he confounded his critics with his dramatic trips to China and the Soviet Union, or his adoption of wage and price controls, Mr. Nixon could as easily seize the initiative on the civil rights front.

I know, or at least I assume, that a second-term President must begin to think seriously about the historical judgments of his administration. And I can imagine no harsher indictment than his having failed to lead the United States in the most critical and urgent area of domestic concern.

Such affirmative leadership by President Nixon would be supported and applauded by the large majority of Democrats and, I suspect, by a significant number of Republicans. It would bring back to life, almost overnight, the bipartisan coalition that was responsible for all the civil rights legislation of the 1960's. Presidents, however, do not operate in a vacuum. So we should be devising a political strategy that will assist President Nixon in making this kind of affirmative decision.

There is good historical precedent for this approach. We forget that the period of the early 1960's was a time of convincing President Kennedy to adopt a more aggressive posture in support of the civil rights legislation that had been pending in the Congress for many years. We forget that his initial civil rights proposals in 1963 were judged totally inadequate by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. It was only after the dramatic events in Birmingham that the Kennedy administration became fully committed to the legislative package that eventually became the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

The times and circumstances are very different today. A realistic attack must now be launched on our most urgent domestic problems: education, jobs, health care, housing, crime, the environment, and transportation. As you attack these problems, either directly by the federal government or through the states and cities, you are touching the areas of daily life that now encompass most of what we mean by civil rights. Moreover, these goals can be achieved without seeming to advocate special advantages for one group at the expense of another. There is virtually no segment of our society that would not benefit directly from meaningful progress in each of these areas.

In this context, I intend to argue strongly that the entire concept of civil rights be broadened to include the rights and opportunities that should be available to all disadvantaged groups in America. I am thinking in particular of the physically handicapped, the mentally retarded, and the elderly, all of whom must face many of the same barriers of misunderstanding and prejudice that confront black and other minority

citizens. And we know that we are in a period in which the issue of women's rights and political power must be included in a broader definition of civil rights.

I intend to urge the Democratic congressional leadership, working in close cooperation with black and other minority leadership, to speak out forcefully on these matters in the 93rd Congress. I would hope that state leaders—governors, mayors, and county executives—would do likewise.

As I see it, we must identify the struggle for civil rights as an all-embracing struggle for the rights, privileges, and duties of all Americans. In the political arena, there just are not enough blacks, Chicanos, Indians, and Puerto Ricans to form an electoral majority. Overemphasis on the needs of these identifiable groups can be and has been counterproductive. What is needed is the creation of a climate of identity between the needs—and the hopes and fears—of the minorities and the needs—and the hopes and fears—of the majority. For example, we ought to be emphasizing that the important new dimension of civil rights is the right of every American to an opportunity to use his or her talents, to develop his or her abilities and capacities, to make a constructive contribution to society.

In plain, simple language, this means identifying the cause of civil rights with quality education for all children. Millions of parents, white and black, feel that the educational system is not satisfying the needs of their children.

We must identify civil rights with the civil right of every American to health care. White Americans, as well as black, brown, or red Americans, are all too often the victims of inadequate health care.

We must find common denominators—mutual needs, mutual wants, common hopes, the same fears—and use this body of accepted information as the binding that holds together a coalition of people: a coalition representing the hopes and fears of the majority. Out of this coalition of needs, hopes, fears, and injustices, we must fashion a new Bill of Rights for all Americans:

- The right to a meaningful life free from poverty;
- The right to full and equal protection of the law;
- The right to productive and gainful employment;
- The right to economic, political and, social opportunity free from the obstruction of discrimination based on race, creed, or sex;
- The right to a clean and decent neighborhood;
- The right to life free from violence and terrorism;
- The right to privacy, free from official or private invasion;
- The right to safety, including protection of person and property;

The right to quality education at all levels, free from segregation;  
The right to live in good health under a system of comprehensive insurance providing and assuring modern health care for all;  
The right to be free of hunger;  
The right to recreation;  
The right to a clean and wholesome environment.

These are rights, not just for the blacks or the Chicanos or the Indians, but for the blue collar worker, the poor white, the student, the farmer, the office or shop worker—for everyone. Without these rights being alive and well—being applicable and accepted—there are no real civil rights. We now have the formalities of law, the legal protections, but we have not had the kind of social acceptance that is required.

The new dimensions of civil rights are to be found in the living and working conditions of our people. It is not enough to have laws that declare discrimination in employment illegal. We must have jobs and income. It is not enough to ban segregation in education. We must have modern, well-equipped schools with competent, well-paid teachers. It is not enough to have government employ blacks and other minorities. We must insist that corporate industry, finance, and institutions of higher education practice true equal opportunity and equal treatment in all of their economic, management, and employment functions.

The emphasis must be on developing the American political and economic system to its fullest potential so that all may benefit. In the context of the ending of the Vietnam War, this appeal may well generate far more political support than some of our cynical political commentators would imagine.

This last point is very important. As U.S. participation in the war ends and as our prisoners of war return, we are, in a very real sense, being liberated from a burden that has stifled and blurred our vision of what is possible in this country. It was not just a question of the diversion of billions of dollars to support our military effort in Southeast Asia. It was equally a question of our energy, of our awareness, and of our willingness to buckle down to hard domestic matters as long as the Vietnam War was continuing.

Although it may not happen immediately, I am confident that, over time, we will come to know a political climate free of the hatred and antagonism that arose as a consequence of the war. In such a political climate it will be much more feasible to win the support of the American people for a renewed attack on the unfinished agenda of domestic concerns.

But, you ask, do we have *enough* time? How can we expect black Americans, Chicanos, Indians and other deprived minorities to post-

pone for one day longer their full and fair participation in American life? The answer is simple: we can neither expect nor ask them to be this patient.

On the other hand, one of the factors that always amazed me throughout many years of public life has been the degree of faith in the American system that has been retained by blacks and other minorities. In many respects, they have kept the democratic faith far more than white Americans who benefited more fully from the system. If those who have suffered most have not given up, then I fail to see how those of us who have suffered least can even contemplate such a course.

This means getting back to work—understanding the problems that remain and searching for the avenues of solution that eventually can be found. That is what we did in the 1950's and 1960's. We can do no less today and tomorrow.