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MIDWEST REGIONAL URBAN LEAGUE GUILDS

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS  
MARCH 11, 1972

FREED FROM OUR BONDAGE:  
BUT NOT POLITICALLY EQUAL

BY

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First of all I would like to thank you for the invitation to address your group.

I must admit that I have felt somewhat nervous about an appearance before some two-hundred women.

I didn't realize just how nervous I was until this woman came up to me at the Hotel and asked me "why I was pacing up and down in this particular room?" I told her I was going to deliver a speech shortly to a group of women. She asked me if I usually get very nervous before addressing large audiences? I told her no - no I never get nervous. "In that case," demanded the woman, "what are you doing in the Ladies Room?"

Nearly one-hundred and ten years ago the Black people of this country were deemed free.

Examining the word, free, in the literal sense, meant that we were entitled to the same rights and protection under the law, as were all the peoples of this nation.



From the moment we were freed from our bondage - we were protected by the Constitution; by the Bill of Rights; we were entitled to political equality - the right to vote - the right to choose.

Let us go back in history for a moment. Following the Civil War, we were freed from our bondage, but let me suggest to you, that there was by no means a recognition of political equality - and let me further suggest that we have yet to become politically equal.

A good historical example of this can be illustrated by what occurred following the election of 1868. General Ulysses S. Grant, the newly elected President, pushed for the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment which denied the right of any state <sup>to</sup> ■ disfranchise the Black. It took two years to ratify that amendment.

It is interesting to note that while Grant is generally credited with the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment - if we



look at what was written in the party platform just prior to the election - we glean something different.

Listen! "The guaranty by Congress of equal suffrage to all loyal men at the South was demanded by every consideration of public safety, of gratitude, and of justice, and must be maintained; while the question of suffrage in all loyal (non-Southern) states properly belongs to the people of those states."

What I am saying, ladies, is simply this. Prior to the election of 1868, while we had the franchise in the South, the party, including candidate Grant felt it necessary to promise the people of the North the freedom "to keep the Negro disfranchised in their own states."

It was only after Grant was elected and sitting in the White House, that he felt politically safe to push for the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment.

Freed from our bondage - but not political equality!



We have come a long way since 1868. The road has been tough. It took us over one-hundred years to get the Voting Rights Act. In 1964 there were only 1,480,720 black voters registered in the eleven Southern States. Following the enactment of the Voting Rights Act, that figure increased significantly to nearly three million.

As each year goes by we can see the evidence of the Voting Rights Act.

In Georgia, for example, 167,000 Blacks were registered to vote prior to the passage of the Voting Rights Act. In 1970, that figure changed to 332,000. If we view this in percentages - in 1965, 27.4 percent were registered to vote - in 1970, 52.6 percent.

No matter which way you cut it - the vote has doubled. Comparative figures in many other states show the same dramatic increase.



The subtitle of your program is "Is It Too Late for Political Involvement via Voter Registration" I can answer that in one short paragraph.

No, it is not too late - for if we don't register our voters, we will never be politically involved.

Further, based on the figures which I just mentioned - the effort to get Blacks registered is showing dramatic results.

As I stated before it took us over one-hundred years to achieve the Voting Rights Act - so for God's sake let us encourage the use of the rights which it gave us.

It has always been my personal conviction that with every right must also go responsibilities. And one of the responsibilities which I have as a voter is to look at both sides of the political picture -- then make my choice.

Several weeks ago I attended a small cocktail party. A man came up to me and began to chat. As the conversation progressed



he asked me what I thought of Ed Muskie. When I answered him - he had this rather puzzled look on his face. He finally spoke up and said "you mean to tell me you are a Republican?"

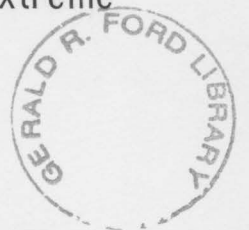
This brought home a point. Most Americans identify the Black voter with the Democrats. And further there is no reason to assume otherwise.

A Gallup poll taken in September, 1971, showed that Blacks consider themselves Democrats by a margin of 72 percent to 9 percent.

In 1868, we were freed from our bondage but there is still no political equality.

Webster's defines equal as being "free from extremes". You would have to agree that 72 to 9 is pretty extreme.

This country was built on the two-party system. Yet, for the Blacks, the figures seem to indicate the extreme - the extreme being only a one party affiliation.





In 1968 in the city of Atlanta, 98 percent of the Black votes went to Hubert Humphrey - while less than 2 percent went to Richard Nixon. It is generally accepted that any candidate in a two-way race who receives 55 percent or more of the total vote - is considered to have won by a landslide. To quote Paul Jones, "that's not a landslide it's more like an avalanche. And just as people get lost in snow avalanches and tend never to be heard from again, the Black voter is getting lost in this electoral avalanche. And he's never heard from again - at least not until the next election."

When I look at the figures - I find myself thinking the Democrats don't need to worry about the Black vote - with 72 percent of the Blacks claiming Democrat party affiliation - why should they.

On the other hand the Republicans, far too often, feel that they shouldn't waste their time developing programs for the Blacks - because no matter what they do they won't get the vote.



Why is it that Blacks consistently vote for the Democrat?

For most of us that is easy to answer.

The general assumption is that the Democrats do everything for us as a people. I think this is a blatant misconception, and as is often the case with misconceptions - the only way they can be dispelled is by pointing out a few facts.

It was Thomas Jefferson, considered to be a Republican by today's political standards - who in writing the Declaration of Independence issued a slashing attack on the perpetuation of the slave trade. This particular portion of the Declaration which deals with the "sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people" was eventually removed from the original text, because it was felt that it would antagonize the Southern States. A Republican spoke out against injustice - only to be struck down.

Abraham Lincoln said, "This is a world of compensation; and he who would be no slave must consent to have no slave. Those



who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves; and, under a just God, cannot long retain it."

Not too long after these remarks were made, this nation became embroiled in one of the most disastrous civil strifes known to mankind. The man who made the decision, that blood must be shed, because, all else had failed, in order that the black man could be free was Abraham Lincoln - a Republican.

In the early 1950's it had become apparent that even though the white primary was in theory illegal - the Blacks in many parts of the South would never achieve their full voting rights unless the Federal Government intervened.

During the mid-1950's recognizing that not all of our citizens had the equal right to vote, Dwight Eisenhower began to push for the passage of what has come to be known as the Civil Rights Act of 1957.

The most important aspect of this legislation was that for the



first time the Justice Department was authorized to bring suits against voting discrimination.

Further, when the decision was made to integrate Little Rock High School - it was Dwight Eisenhower sitting in the White House - not a Democrat.

During the 1960's this nation was so torn with internal strife and discontent that many claimed a second "Civil War" was in progress or imminent.

A war in Vietnam was raging; foreign nations were looking with contempt upon us; many of our people still did not have the franchise, nor quality education; many of our children went to bed hungry; there was no work.

Who can forget the sight of cities burning - Newark, Detroit, Watts and I can still visualize the machine guns on the steps of the Capitol of the United States.

We watched in horror as one leader after another was struck down - President John Kennedy, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X,



Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy.

For the decade of the 60's the Democrats controlled the White House. The Democrats controlled both Houses of Congress.

The decade of the 60's was a grim picture - the spirit was dying. Too many promises made - too many promises never kept.

As we begin a new decade - let us look at the picture.

The war in Veitnam is drawing to a close; the doors of communication with China have been opened; our cities are not being burned down.

To become more specific in 1969, \$75 million was budgeted for civil rights enforcement activity compared to 1973's recommendations for \$602.1 million - an eight-fold increase over a five-year period. Also in 1973 the total Federal civil rights budget will almost triple the 1969 expenditures - \$0.9 billion to \$2.6 billion.

The Justice Department has substantially increased its staff of Attorneys, to enforce Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act,



from 93 in Fiscal Year 1969 to 158 in Fiscal Year 1972; in 1973 funds will be increased by 35 percent. The number of compliance reviews performed under this program are expected to increase 52,000 in 1973 compared to 12,300 in 1969.

The 1973 budget provides \$69 million for legal services compared to \$36 million in 1968.

Minority business assistance increased from \$200 million in 1969 to \$360.3 million in 1971. In 1973 outlays will amount to \$505.8 million.

In Fiscal Year 1968, the Small Business Administration reserved 8 federal government contracts worth \$10.4 million for minority businesses. In Fiscal Year 1971, SBA reserved 751 contracts worth over \$60 million for minority businesses.

In 1969, 500,000 minority children in the South were in desegregated schools. In 1971 that figure rose to over 3 million.

In 1968 the President said, "For too long, white America has sought to buy off the Negro - and to buy off its own sense of

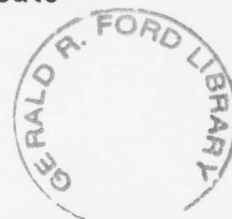


guilt - with ever more programs of welfare, or public housing, of payments to the poor, but not for anything except for keeping out of sight: payments that perpetuated poverty and that kept the endless, dismal cycle of dependency spinning from generation to generation. "

Our task - our challenge - is to break this cycle of dependency... The way to do it is not with more of the same..."

↪ I have been speaking to you in very partisan terms. Not because I want you to become Republicans; not because I want you to register voters so they can vote Republican; but because I feel that there are two major political parties in this country - each with something to offer. And thus far we in the Black community - as the figures show - are only looking at one party.

There is no doubt that you must work to register our brothers and sisters - but more importantly, you must work to educate them.



It is not going to be an easy job because as I travel around the country I have noticed a tremendous amount of apathy.

Anthony Lewis stated in Portrait of a Decade, "The experience under the 1957 act has shown that the most persevering federal government effort, even though it finally overcomes legal booby traps, cannot actually add large numbers of negroes to the voting rolls unless another ingredient is present. That is the will in the local negro community to obtain the franchise."

Those of you sitting here today have a responsibility not only to register voters - but to give them reason to register.

Our people must begin to realize that their vote must count - our people must rise up and say to the Democrats - for too long you have had our vote. Far too often you have not kept your promises in return for that vote.

Further, our people must rise up and say, the Republicans have a responsibility to seek our vote - to include us as they do





the other segments of the population - not to write us off as a lost vote.

In other words, what I am talking about is what has been described by some as political sophistication with the vote as the chief instrument. For instance, with hundreds of black people assembled in Gary, Indiana, over the weekend to map political strategy in this election year, are they talking about a strategy involving a united black front - a strategy that signals leverage..... a political sophistication that would, in my view, include a posture of independence. In other words, will the delegates somewhere along the way avow to a standard of 25 percent Democrat, 25 percent Republican and 50 percent Independent, a flexibility that would provide black power at the voting booth. <sup>OR</sup> will our brothers and sisters fall by the wayside with a commitment to one candidate or one party -- again burying themselves in the old political avalanche.



You know as well as I do, that much of what we have achieved over the last one-hundred years has been due to our own efforts.

We also know that the Democrat party has accomplished a great deal in advancing the cause of the Black people.

But, to be totally realistic about the overall political picture - the Republican Party has also contributed greatly to our cause.

In fact the record for the last three and a half years has been rather remarkable when you consider that Richard Nixon didn't owe his election victory in 1968 to the Black vote. I have talked with this man personally - and I know that his commitment to us is personal and his conviction honest.

The Black vote is going to be more important in this year's Presidential election than ever before.

You must work to register voters - you must work to inform our brothers and sisters - you must work to make our vote count.



For when we make our vote count then we can truly say we are not only free from our bondage, but we have achieved political equality.

John Quincy Adams said in 1821 "always vote for a principle, though you vote alone, and you may cherish the sweet reflection that your vote is never lost."

