

Recorded: April 24, 1956
Subject: Civil Rights

WASHINGTON REPORT NO. 9

by

Senator Hubert H. Humphrey

Once again I am talking to you via tape recording from my office in the Senate Office Building in Washington. A few minutes ago I completed testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee on legislation on civil rights now being considered by that Committee.

Because I know that every Minnesotan is deeply interested in human rights, I should like to tell you today what I told the Senate Committee earlier this afternoon.

This is what I told the Committee:

My views on human rights -- and that is the term I prefer, for it is the rights of fellow human beings we are talking about when we discuss civil rights -- are well known to this Committee.

They are the result of deeply held convictions, spiritual convictions, ~~that~~ it is a blemish on our democracy to permit in our midst any discrimination against fellow Americans because of their race, religion, color or national origin.

We are justly proud of the progress that we have made as a nation in expanding opportunity, security, and human welfare of our citizens.

There is no area of our life, which has not developed toward greater democracy.

To be proud of our nation and its progress, however, is not to be blind to the imperfections that still remain within our society.

The most evident of those imperfections, and the one which cries loudest for immediate remedy, is in the area of civil rights.

Discrimination based upon bias and prejudice still exists, and so long as it is alive, we must be vigilant to eliminate the cancer from our body politic.

Democracy is more than achievement, more than material progress, more than elections and government.

Democracy is essentially a faith of freedom, of equality, of human dignity and brotherhood.

This is the beacon of hope we now have to offer a troubled world. This is the lesson which we must now strive to get accepted in the world, if our nation is to avoid war and preserve its liberty.

The struggle against the totalitarian forces of Communism is not merely of a military character, as recent events have made even more clear than ever before.

It is political and ideological in nature as well.

We stand opposed to the doctrines which enslave men, and reduce men to mere automatons.

We believe in the inherent dignity and worth of man, that man is an end in himself, that only in a genuinely free society can man attain his true nature.

We believe that given equality of opportunity, each individual, irrespective of color, religion, national origin, or race, can realize his true self.

Those of us who strive for the enactment of Civil Rights legislation by the Congress do so because we are convinced that the enactment

of such legislation will help us as a nation in the world struggle against Communism.

The central principles on which America was founded are now being considered by others, in their evaluation of us.

Brotherhood and equality of opportunity have now become central aspects of America's national image, as it is seen abroad. Just as Lincoln decided upon emancipation of the Negro slaves, not only as an "act of justice" but also as "a military necessity", so the achievement in America of racial equality is now urgently needed on both those grounds.

Gandhi asked of the whole Anglo-Saxon world: "What can conquer your unpardonable pride of race?"

We must answer him. We must answer him soon. We should answer him now that the true spirit of democracy is bigger than racial pride -- and prove we mean it.

You can rest assured the eyes of millions of uncommitted peoples throughout the world -- people who may sway the balance between a world of freedom and a world of totalitarian oppression -- are upon this issue in the United States, and upon what we do about it -- upon what we do about it at this very hearing, and in this v^ery Congress.

Our proper response, both to the Kremlin, waiting for us to falter, and to the other vast areas of the world looking desperately to us as mankind's greatest beacon of hope for universal recognition of the dignity of man, is to do what we should have done anyway, to do what is right and just; to do what we eventually must do, regardless of external threats, to fulfill the vision of our founding fathers for creating a nation fully respecting the individual dignity of man, as an inalienable, inherent right, under God.

Communism and the atom have only heightened our age-old dilemma of good and evil, and raised the stakes of moral choice.

Ever since I have been in the Senate, I have consistently and continually sought greater fulfillment of human rights by legislative action aimed at eliminating discrimination.

Three years ago, at the start of a new Republican Administration, I again introduced a series of bills aimed at my continuing objective. At that time, in the hope of bipartisan action for a cause that should be above partisanship, I declared:

"We have just completed a national election. Both political parties came to the American people and said that they were champions of civil rights."

It remains for the Congress to act in accordance with the wishes of the vast majority of the American people.

In addition to re-introducing, for the third time, the Humphrey-Ives bill for a Fair Employment Practices Commission to guarantee equal opportunity of employment, I introduced at that time nine other measures covering legislative improvements needed for adequate civil rights protection.

Unfortunately, despite the campaign pledges of the Republican Party, no action was taken on any of these measures by the Republican 83rd Congress.

Included among my measures introduced on January 16, 1953, was a new and more moderate approach that I hoped would at least be accepted as a minimum step in the right direction.

It was a bill to create a Federal Commission on Civil Rights, providing for a commission to study continuously the problem of civil rights and discrimination and measures being taken to deal with the problem.

At that time I declared:

"I have never believed in an all or nothing approach to any of the major social, economic or political problems which face our nation.

"I therefore urge the Senate to find a middle approach, and take some steps to spell progress It is my belief that a Commission on Civil Rights would provide a constructive and factual approach to a problem which is torn with emotionalism. It is not a substitute

for other legislative proposals, but it may in fact turn out to be a preliminary step which must be taken to bridge the gap between divergent opinions and establish a foundation for a more constructive, positive legislative program. I shall, in fact, continue to devote my efforts to the enactment of a full program which I have presented to the Senate".

That was three years ago, but I stand by those words today. They are even more meaningful today.

Regrettably, no attempt was made by the Republican Administration and Republican Congress to act on even such a minimum approach to a crucial national problem.

When the Democrats regained control of the Congress in 1955, I again introduced a "civil rights package program" of eleven basic bills, including the same commission proposal.

For a year, I am told, this committee has been awaiting Administration views on such a program.

Now, at long last, the Administration has recommended enactment of such a commission, along with some other minimum steps all covered in long-pending legislation.

As belated as it has been, I welcome this Administration support. I hope sincerely it is offered in good faith, in sincere intent that will be backed by concerted efforts for Republicans to vote side by side with Democrats for enactment of such legislation. If they do, we can make progress of which all of us can be proud. If they do not, America's conscience will have a continued burden upon it.

When I introduced this group of legislative measures a year ago, I declared enactment of any part of them would be striking a blow for freedom all over the world.

I reiterate that statement today.

Instead of conflict and bitterness, my hope and prayer is that the 84th Congress can earn a place in history by symbolizing a feeling of good will and brotherhood in consideration of this vital program, with mutual respect and mutual tolerance for deeply held convictions, however opposite they may be.

Already favorably reported to this committee by your Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights are measures I have sponsored with some of my colleagues to protect the right to political participation and make it a crime to intimidate or coerce or otherwise interfere with the right to vote; to create a new civil rights division in the Department of Justice under an Assistant Attorney General; and to protect persons in the United States against lynching.

These, together with the proposed Commission which the President has now joined in supporting after three years, should provide a basic minimum of positive action, going a long way toward eliminating the injustices of discrimination.

I appeal for this Committee's favorable action in the name of democracy, in the name of humanity, in the name of morality.

If the Republicans will match the Democrats' vote for vote on this Committee, this legislation can be approved by the Committee and readied for floor action.

Surely, if the Administration is really behind its civil rights program, it can muster four Republican votes favorable to such action on this Committee.

In their 1952 platform, the Republicans promised that they would not "mislead, exploit, or attempt to confuse minority groups for political purposes". The Republican Party now has an opportunity to live up to that promise. The Democratic Party will welcome their support.

Together, we can build a stronger America, and brighten the beacon of hope for the rest of the world.



Minnesota Historical Society

Copyright in this digital version belongs to the Minnesota Historical Society and its content may not be copied without the copyright holder's express written permission. Users may print, download, link to, or email content, however, for individual use.

To request permission for commercial or educational use, please contact the Minnesota Historical Society.



www.mnhs.org