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Confronting the Question of Conscience

Deval Patrick

Introduction

Confronting the Question of Conscience

by
DEVAL PATRICK*

I am of an age that I am more *of* the Civil Rights movement than I ever was *in* it. But it had a deep effect on my life. I remember the time when I first heard Dr. King speak. It was during the Chicago garbage strike. Dr. King was speaking at a park on the South Side of Chicago and my mother took my sister and me to see him.

I think I was about six or seven then. To this day, I can't remember a word he said. But I do remember the deep solemnity of the occasion. I remember the sense that something important was happening. I remember how at that moment I felt connected to all of the other people in that park—people like me of limited means, but limitless hope. I remember feeling the power of that hope—how it made us feel motivated to give shape and purpose to the lives we were all trying to lead.

There was a time, I think, when all of America felt the hope of Dr. King's message, when the problems we had created for ourselves were not seen as beyond our ability to care about and to fix. In one way or another all Americans were touched by the power of the civil rights struggle because there was never any denying what it was about: simple justice. It was about making good on the American promise and living up to this nation's most sacred birthright: one nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men and women are created equal.[1]

The civil rights movement represented the best of American ideals. It produced countless acts of courage and compassion—acts both

* Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Justice. An earlier version of this Introduction was given as the commencement address at the City University of New York Law School in May of 1995.

1. *See* Abraham Lincoln, The Gettysburg Address (Nov. 19, 1863), *in* 7 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 22-23 (Roy P. Basler ed., 1953).

great and small. Its dramas are now triumphantly written in the annals of history:

> * How a railroad porter's son named Thurgood Marshall brilliantly conceived and painstakingly executed the strategy that would convince the Supreme Court to end the racial segregation of schools by law.
>
> * How a woman named Rosa Parks, tired at the end of a long day of work, refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama bus and sparked a boycott that ended segregation on Montgomery's buses and introduced the world to the power, the passion and the thoughtfulness of a young clergyman named Martin Luther King, Jr.
>
> * How that same young clergyman went on to capture America's conscience—by penning an eloquent plea while sitting in a Birmingham jail cell—and our imagination, spirit and hope by sharing with us his dream.
>
> * How brave men and women from all walks of life and all parts of the country sacrificed their bodies and their lives to ensure that every citizen could truly exercise the right to vote.

Today, of course, most Americans embrace the aims of Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurgood Marshall, and the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. At least they say they do. But it was not always that way. Those who pursued civil rights faced epithets and threats, dogs and fire hoses, jailings and injunctions, beatings and bombings. They were branded "agitators" and "radicals." They were driven out of towns and burned out of their homes. Too many paid the ultimate price.

That they persevered is a tribute to their bravery and their determination. That they were victorious in the court of history is a tribute to the power of their idea—that fundamentally *American* idea of liberty defined by notions of equality, opportunity and fair play.

Dr. King told us that he had been to the mountaintop and he had seen the promised land. He might not get there with us, he said, but he wanted us to know that we as a people—a united American people—would get to the promised land. He sketched a vision of a society where *all* of us—regardless of race, creed, religion—could live together. A society where, rather than letting our differences tear us apart, we would draw strength from our diversity. "[A] society," in his words, "at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. That will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man," he told us. "That will be the day of man as man."[2]

2. Martin Luther King, Jr., Speech in Montgomery, Ala., *quoted in* Jean Godden, *Looking for New Ways to Honor M.L. King,* THE SEATTLE TIMES, Jan. 18, 1993, at B1.

Dr. King was surely right—that we Americans, as a people, will make it to the promised land. That one day, *all* of our children will be judged "not . . . by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."[3] That we will all be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood together.

In my lifetime alone, we've made great progress toward this ideal:

* We've eliminated many of the overt incidents of racism—the "whites only" signs, the separate drinking fountains—the daily badges of inferiority and contempt that society once imposed on African-Americans.

* We've eliminated many of the barriers to education and employment that once kept African-Americans out of the economic mainstream.

* We've seen the growth and expansion of a black middle class.

* And we've eliminated many of the barriers to political participation that people of color historically faced in this country, attacking many of the ingenious schemes incumbent politicians cooked up to keep certain groups excluded from power.

It took a lot of work to get to where we are—acts of conscience by millions of ordinary Americans, of every kind and place; the political courage and statesmanship of Democrats and Republicans alike; the vigilance of courts and private advocates, committed to the Constitution and its requirement of equal protection; and the tireless efforts of the dedicated public servants in the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice, who proved their readiness over and over again to counter the myriad efforts the obstructionists employed to evade the basic requirements of the law.

As a result of this work, this sacrifice, this faith, we are a freer, more democratic, more integrated, and more equal society than we were when I was growing up—and indeed than we have ever been in history. We, too, have now seen the promised land. And as long as we keep up the struggle, we get a bit closer every day.

But we are not there yet:

* Three decades after Dr. King shared his dream with us, our cities remain segregated, in fact if not in law.

* Nearly four decades after President Eisenhower signed the law creating it, the Civil Rights Division continues to receive thousands of complaints each year charging discrimination in employment, housing, voting, and education, among other areas. Further, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission received

3. Martin Luther King, Jr., Speech at the Civil Rights March on Washington (Aug. 28, 1963), *in* A TESTAMENT OF HOPE: THE ESSENTIAL WRITINGS OF MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. 219 (J. Washington ed., 1991).

over *ninety thousand* charges of bias in the workplace last year alone.

* The Anti-Defamation League reports that hate crimes are at an all time high nationally.

* More than a quarter century after the Kerner Commission Report warned of the prospect, America remains to far too great an extent two nations—black and white; separate and unequal.

We have not been able, in a few short decades, to cure the effects of over three centuries of degradation, deprivation and discrimination. Progress has sometimes seemed so difficult. But neither can we declare victory and give up, simply because further progress seems tough.

Abraham Lincoln explained this truth to us a long time ago. He knew that the struggle to promote equality, to provide opportunity, to secure fair play, would be an ongoing struggle. He knew that reality would begin to match these ideals only slowly, bit by bit, and only through hard work. He told us that these basic values "should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening [their] influence, and augmenting the happiness and value of life to people of all colors everywhere."[4] He knew that race in America posed a question of conscience and that each generation must confront the question.

For much of my lifetime, our nation has been struggling with Lincoln's admonition. To our national credit, we have been working to expand the ideal of equality, to face up to and heal our nation's racial divisions. At times progress has seemed maddeningly slow, and our success has been all too incomplete. But we have in the main agreed on the goal. We have believed in a just and integrated society. And we have continued to press ahead, despite the naysayers, the demagogues, and the cynics who stood in the way.

But now, I fear, we may regress. Much of our nation's civic discourse on the great moral and social questions of the day is degraded and irresponsible. In no area is this degradation and irresponsibility more apparent than in the area of race relations. Today's rhetoric—the code words, the slogans, the cynical exploitation of people's differences—crowds out any rational debate. Today's rhetoric is not designed to promote reasoned debate, so much as provoke hostility

4. Abraham Lincoln, Speech at Springfield, Ill. (June 26, 1857), *in* 2 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN, *supra* note 1, at 398, 406.

and division. We seem to have lost the ability to have a candid conversation about race.

Thanks largely to the carefully crafted machinations of political strategists, our national debate on civil rights these days seems to begin and end with affirmative action. Even then we rarely speak honestly about the issue. Some pretend to find a "quota" in every effort to include historically excluded groups the way a child sees monsters in every dark closet. The fact that there is a clear difference, both in the law and in reality, between affirmative action and a "quota," is conveniently ignored.

But the focus on affirmative action and "quotas" diverts our attention from the real issue. The issue isn't affirmative action—it's opportunity. People who act like civil rights is about "quotas" ignore the fact that too many people are still excluded from the mainstream of our nation's social, political, and economic life simply because of their race—and their race alone.

It is still true, for example, that some restaurants still withhold service from people simply because of the color of their skin.

It is still true that getting a job or landing a promotion is too often hampered by race, ethnicity or gender.

It is still true that too many county and state officials stand in the way of some citizens' exercise of their right to vote, or the opportunity of disabled citizens to participate in civic life.

Violence because of hate is still with us—and it is growing.

People who have worked hard to build their own job opportunities should not have to worry about taking a job in another city because housing discrimination makes finding a place to live a difficult, humiliating process. And people who work to achieve the American dream of owning a house should not have that dream deferred because mortgage lenders or property insurers look askance at them simply because of their race.

If practices like these exist *anywhere* in this country, they are too prevalent. The Civil Rights Division has been vigilant in investigating these practices and in bringing cases to stop them. But we must do more.

The point is that civil rights is not about affirmative action. It's about breaking down the artificial barriers to equality, opportunity and fair play. It's about making sure everybody has a fair chance to perform in our society. It's about regaining that sense of hope we felt in that Chicago park so many years ago. It's about affirming our basic values and aspirations as a Nation.

Affirmative action is simply a tool, one that has been employed in *some cases* as a means to address patterns of exclusion—exclusion of the here and now, not merely of the past. For forty years we have been a nation committed to integrating daily life, and thereby reaffirming our democratic ideals. We must not surrender any tool to help us finish the job.

But we must be honest. While long and hard experience has taught that a mere proclamation that our society be "colorblind" is not enough, there is no denying the fact that, at least in some contexts, affirmative action has just not worked. Lazy employers and sloppy school administrators sometimes turn affirmative action into a numbers game, abandoning merit and quality and good judgment in favor of the numerical straitjackets we label "quotas." That kind of practice is too high a price to pay. That kind of practice breeds nothing but resentment and understandable frustration. That kind of practice makes affirmative action the enemy of achievement, and discredits us all. I know about the deep mistrust of quotas in this society. And I share the scorn for that.

As most of the public knows, the President has directed the Justice Department to review the federal government's programs relating to affirmative action, as a part of his thinking through the Administration's policy on affirmative action. While it would be inappropriate for me to prejudge the outcome of the President's review, it is quite appropriate to emphasize one point: the Civil Rights Division is a law enforcement office. My job is to enforce the laws as laid down by Congress and interpreted by the courts. And the courts have developed a detailed body of law in this area. In plain terms, courts have defined lawful affirmative action as including a range of activities, from recruiting and special outreach to goals and timetables. Quotas—meaning numerical straitjackets that disregard merit—are unlawful. Period. By contrast, the Department of Justice has supported affirmative action plans that do not compromise valid qualifications, and which are flexible, realistic, reviewable and fair. Generally, this means we have defended the legality of affirmative action plans where: (1) race, national origin or gender is one among several factors considered; (2) relevant and valid job or educational qualifications are not compromised; (3) numbers used, if any, are genuine goals rather than numerical straitjackets or "quotas," and reflect the relevant pool of candidates; (4) timetables for achieving the goals are reasonable and there is review of the continuing value of the plan at appropriate intervals; and (5) rights of non-beneficiaries are respected. These are the standards we use—and must use—in enforcing the law.

Conversely, the Supreme Court has been clear that misuses of affirmative action or programs parading as "affirmative action" will not pass legal muster. Such misuses can occur when: (1) an unqualified person receives a benefit over a qualified one; (2) numeric goals are so strict that the plan lacks reasonable flexibility; (3) the numerical goals bear no relationship to the available pool of qualified candidates and therefore can easily become quotas; (4) the plan is of indeterminate length, such that it outlasts achievement of its goals; or (5) "innocent bystanders" are impermissibly burdened.

In short, the courts have rejected rigid, inflexible programs that disregard merit. At the same time, they have recognized that there is no inherent tradeoff between diversity and quality. As many of our nation's most successful businesses have discovered, diversity is good for business. The President has often said that we do not have a person to waste in this country. When we commit to having a diverse and integrated work force, we commit to using the very best of all the talent we have.

In private and local workplaces all over this country, employers are trying voluntarily—without any government compulsion—to integrate their work forces. Colleges and universities have undertaken the same goals. When turned into an oversimplified numbers game, when managed by sacrificing quality or burdening the majority's vested rights, the means are wrong. But when these efforts have been undertaken flexibly, without sacrifice of merit, without violence to another's vested interests, nothing in the law prohibits them. And nothing in the law should.

But some people don't want to talk about that.

They don't want Americans to hear that diversity promotes merit, or that the vast majority of civil rights enforcement has nothing to do with affirmative action. Some want Americans to believe that anecdotal abuses define all affirmative action, that every civil rights law is about "quotas."

Some want Americans to believe that white men are being systematically deprived of opportunities in this country. The cover of a national magazine recently asked if the existence of affirmative action programs meant that "no white men need apply."[5] But even with the programs that are in place, African Americans and Hispanics continue

5. U.S. News & World Rep., Feb. 13, 1995.

to lag far behind whites in employment, income and education level. The unemployment rate for African Americans was more than twice that of whites in 1993, while the median income of African Americans was barely more than one-half that of whites. Hispanics fared only modestly better in each category. Tragically, in 1992, African American and Hispanic children were more than three times as likely to live under the poverty level as white children.

Unequal access to education plays an important role in creating and perpetuating these disparities. In 1993, less than 3% of college graduates were unemployed; but whereas 22.6% of whites had college degrees, only 12.2% of African Americans and 9.0% of Hispanics did. As the nature of our economy evolves, educational credentials will become even more crucial in determining whether individuals can rise into the middle class or will be consigned to poverty-level jobs or unemployment.

Women and men are employed at roughly equivalent rates, but women remain severely left out of most stereotypically male occupations, such as the construction trades, police forces, fire fighting, science and engineering. While women have made inroads at the entry level of certain professions, such as business, law and medicine, they have not been promoted as anyone would have expected.

The recent study by the Glass Ceiling Commission, a body established under President Bush and legislatively sponsored by Senator Dole, found that white males continue to hold 97% of senior management positions in the largest American enterprises. About a half a percentage point or less are African American, Asian, or Hispanic. African Americans hold only 2.5% of top jobs in the private sector and African American men with professional degrees (like me) earn only 79% of the amount earned by their white counterparts. Comparably situated African American women earn only 60% of the amount earned by white males. The report identifies the fears and prejudices of lower-rung white male executives as a principal barrier to the advancement of women and minorities. The report also found that, across the board, men advance more rapidly than women.

The so-called "angry white man" is real, with real anxieties, real frustrations, and real challenges. But the facts show that affirmative action should hardly be the cause for his concerns. It has hardly shut white men out of the game. Far from it. Instead, it is minorities and women who continue to be denied a full and equal opportunity to compete. Affirmative action has done no more than loosen the firm hold white men have historically had on the most important jobs, school admissions, and benefits in our society. The politicians and pundits who say otherwise are simply ignoring the facts.

What disappoints me most is that so many of the critics know better. They know the great patriotic struggle for civil rights in America has not yet been won. They know that minorities and women are still disproportionately on the bottom of everything. They know that discrimination still exists. They know that civil rights is about a lot more than "quotas."

So why do they keep distorting the truth? Why do they keep calling every effort to protect civil rights a "quota"? The answer can be summed up in one word: politics. Because quotas are what they call in politics a "wedge issue."

Think about that for a moment. "Wedge issue." It's really quite a descriptive term. Affirmative action is called a "wedge issue" because it can be used to divide people from each other—to cleave apart the ties that bind us together as a society.

That's just what some prominent political strategists want to do. In recent months, they have talked openly and publicly about how they can best "use" the affirmative action issue to exploit the racial tensions and divisions that exist in this country. Rather than seeking to heal these divisions, these political strategists seek to accentuate them and exacerbate them—the better to turn them to their own political advantage.

Worst of all, they evidently don't care about the consequences. They don't care that driving a "wedge" through society can at best only splinter us into mutually distrustful, mutually antagonistic camps. They don't care that cultivating hostility and suspicion makes it all but impossible for ordinary men and women to come together, put aside their differences, and work to improve each other's lives. They don't care that America can never achieve the greatness that is its destiny—that we can never compete in the increasingly fast-moving world economy—if we cannot all unite around the great strength that is our diversity.

They don't care if they tear our country apart—so long as it helps them get power. Maybe, just maybe, with our guard down and our faith weakened, they'll win—but at what cost to our society and our national ideals? At what cost to that shared sense of meaning we all felt when we listened to Dr. King?

These divisive tactics have a long—if disreputable—pedigree in American politics, but that does not make them right. Indeed, there is deep, deep irony in the way the politicians seek to use race and affirmative action to divide our country:

> * They claim that affirmative action "balkanizes" our society. But it is the cynical use of affirmative action as a "wedge issue," the deliberate tarnishing of all civil rights enforcement as "quotas" in order to divide Americans from one another, that really threatens to turn us into the Balkans.
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> * They use the rhetoric of "colorblindness," but their intentions are color-conscious: they seek to divide the electorate on racial lines, and to draw votes from one racial group at the expense of another.
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> * They assume the mantle of the great Republican president, Abraham Lincoln. But the cynical use of "wedge issues" runs counter to everything for which Lincoln stood.

Lincoln knew the danger of political tactics that seek to divide people from one another. He warned us—in words today's politicians would do well to recall—that "a house divided against itself cannot stand."[6] Lincoln saw how the cynical use of race as a political issue led to a splintered election, a divided country, and the bloodiest, most agonizing war this nation has ever fought.

Lincoln knew that we are *one* nation, indivisible. He did not seek to drive a "wedge" between different groups. Quite the contrary. He fought to keep all of us together. He sacrificed his life for the effort. Using race as a "wedge" to exacerbate our nation's divisions demeans Lincoln's memory. It is an affront to the American creed that Lincoln was so dedicated to maintaining. That creed and our rich collective history teaches us that the fate of each one of us is inextricably bound to that of each other and of society as a whole. We know that we cannot progress as a society by leaving some of our people behind; we must all advance together.

In America today, some of us have forgotten these basic principles. That is more than a failure of memory; it is a failure of idealism.

Idealism is something I think about a lot these days. In the Spring, the city of Washington, D.C. is full of schoolchildren. The spring days are warm and long, the azaleas and dogwoods are in their glory, and schoolchildren from across the country have come to see their nation's capital. When you see how these children are dressed—in the style they call "grunge"—when you hear them standing in the Capitol Rotunda asking where the nearest McDonald's is, you may

6. Abraham Lincoln, Speech at the Illinois Republican State Convention (June 17, 1858), *in* 2 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN, *supra* note 1, at 461 (quoting *Mark* 3:25).

come to wonder whether they have given much thought to their idealism.

But every day, as I see these children taking in the sights of Washington, I hold out a great deal of hope for the future. I know that they are wearing the dress, walking the walk, and talking the talk of their times—just as I and my contemporaries did in ours. But I also know that many of these children harbor a latent idealism beneath the contemporary coolness—just like we did. Some find themselves a little embarrassed by the simple majesty of the Declaration of Independence at the National Archives, or a little uneasy with the messages engraved on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial. Within that embarrassment, that unease, is the kernel of idealism.

If we do not nurture that idealism, encourage it, allow it to grow, then the purveyors of mendacious rhetoric and cynical politics will win. In my time there were national purposes, like civil rights, and national heroes, like Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy, who called forth our idealism, who met their nation with the challenge of conscience. With great lurches, with pain and courage, we responded to that call and reached across our differences to find our common humanity.

Today, like in all other times, the human spirit is the same. Young people still harbor idealism, a little shyly, perhaps, and with disguised reticence. What shall we offer them? What will history say of how we responded?

To promote and perpetuate idealism, we have an obligation to take time for public service. But we also have a broader obligation—we must work to create the institutions, particularly educational institutions, that will allow each and every one of us to develop our talents fully. For children cannot live up to their ideals unless they can live up to their potential.

And if we really care about passing on our sense of idealism, we have one more obligation—an obligation to public discourse. I see that obligation particularly clearly in the area of civil rights. We must never forget—and we must never let each other forget—that it is our faith in the principles of equality, opportunity and fair play that makes us Americans. And the struggle for civil rights is about nothing less than the affirmation of this common moral creed. It is our pledge of allegiance, if you will, to the American Ideal.

That's why the politicians and pundits are wrong when they try to portray civil rights as a competition among groups for entitlements. Civil rights is about *opportunity*—and promoting opportunity is something in which each of us—whatever our color, gender, or religion—has a stake. Not only does promoting opportunity make us a more stable, vital, and competitive society, it also ensures that we remain true to our fundamental values and aspirations as a people. And the most fundamental of these values is that—diverse as the people of this country are and have always been—we are *one* nation, *one* people, with *one* common destiny. And *each* of us is diminished when *anyone*—on account of a happenstance of birth or chance—experiences anything less than the full measure of his or her dignity and privilege as a human being and as an American.

There are surely differences between us that we must respect and celebrate; but we are all brothers and sisters in our hearts. All of us had forbearers who felt the sting of repression—repression they came here to escape, repression they experienced on these shores, or both. And any of us is vulnerable to the demagogue or the tyrant. Only when we invest in each other's struggles can we ensure that the rights of each of us are protected. Only then can we make good on the promise that is America.

Nothing could be more harmful to the fabric of our nation than intentional efforts to divide our society on racial lines. Nothing could be more immoral than to distort the goals and discredit the tactics of the civil rights struggle, simply to score some political points. Nothing could be more foolish than to demean and belittle our common bonds to gain power, only to risk destroying "the last, best hope of earth."[7]

I know what civil rights is really all about—expanding opportunity and making good on our nation's most sacred promise. My life embodies the fulfillment of that promise. Now, so does my work. In the Civil Rights Division, we have demonstrated a firm commitment to protect the civil rights of *all* Americans. We have stepped up our efforts to prevent discrimination in housing and lending. We have also been vigilant in resisting any encroachments on the right to vote—the instances of voter harassment and intimidation that, shockingly, still exist in this country, as well as the more subtle devices deliberately designed to minimize or cancel out minority voting strength. And we have effectively and energetically enforced a variety of other civil rights laws, such as the National Voter Registration Act—the so-called "Motor Voter" law—which will simplify voter registration for all Americans, and the Americans With Disabilities Act, which in

7. Abraham Lincoln, Second Annual Message to Congress (Dec. 1, 1862), *in* 5 THE COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN, *supra* note 1, at 518, 537.

practical terms expresses the simple truth that people with disabilities deserve a full opportunity to participate in all areas of our nation's civic life.

Neither time nor space permits me to catalogue all of the efforts the many dedicated people in the Civil Rights Division make in the country's interest every day. But the breadth and sweep of even my brief summary illustrates the daunting nature of the task ahead. While we still have not fully conquered discrimination against African Americans, we have come to understand that civil rights is not just about relations between blacks and whites. It is about ensuring that *everyone* has an equal opportunity to participate as a full member of our society. It is about ending discrimination against women as well as against African Americans, against Hispanic Americans as well as against people with disabilities, against Asian Americans and religious minorities, to name just a few. Talented public servants throughout the government are working hard to promote civil rights on all of these fronts. They deserve the support of all patriots.

But we have to understand that there's no magic bullet out there—no miracle cure that will instantly rid this country of inequality. Neither affirmative action nor any other single tool can guarantee equal opportunity. Our problems are too complex, our society too diverse, our economy too fast-paced for us to place all of our hopes on any one strategy.

In the end, success in this struggle will depend on all citizens who recognize their stake in the struggle to redeem the American conscience and act upon it. So, I challenge all Americans to stand up to the discriminators: the Louisiana corrections officials who passed over qualified women in favor of less qualified men; the California condominium manager who told a Latino couple "no room" because he thought Latinos were given to multiplying; the cab drivers who pass right by African-Americans; and the lenders that discriminate against minority neighborhoods.

I challenge our representatives in the Congress to put their money where their mouths are: Give us the tools, the resources to fight violations of the civil rights laws. Appropriate the funds to allow the Civil Rights Division to pursue the thousands of complaints we receive every year, to help the EEOC overcome the backlog that piled up during years of neglect, to allow us to mount an effective response to the alarming increase in hate crimes.

I say to those who use the rhetoric of vigorous enforcement but do not act, join us in doing what it takes to provide *everyone* a full and equal opportunity to make the most of their talents:

* Join us in recognizing the real, persistent discrimination against minorities and women that still exists.
* Join us in working to expand the economy, to increase opportunities for all Americans.
* Join us in demanding the best from our children—and in making the investment to give them the world-class schools and personal attention that will help them achieve it.
* Join us in teaching our children to celebrate difference, despise prejudice, and recognize the essential humanity in each of us.
* Join us in promoting a national discourse that will heal rather than harm, that will unite rather than divide.

To make good on the American promise of an equal opportunity for all, all of us Americans must work and struggle together. We must recommit to our basic principles and redouble our efforts to translate those principles into reality. We must once again inspire millions of ordinary Americans to join together in the extraordinary struggle to make all men and women free.

Government has always played an essential role in protecting the civil rights of all Americans, particularly from the excesses of the states. That remains a solemn responsibility of the federal government, one I assume proudly. But, in this area as in many others, government alone cannot solve our problems. In order to ensure that our nation's commitment to civil rights remains firm and unyielding, to ensure that everyone will have an equal opportunity to participate fully in our society, each American must do his or her part as well. We must reach out to one another—across the arbitrary and artificial barriers of race, across gender, across ethnicity, across disability and class and religion, across our fear and hopelessness. We must reject the politics of demagoguery and division. We must work to overcome the cynicism and despair that keeps this country from its full promise. We must *all* commit to equality, opportunity, and diversity—in deed as well as in words—in the spirit of our nation's most sacred purpose.

Now is the time for *this* generation of Americans to recapture that shared sense of hope and purpose I felt in that Chicago park three decades ago. We must once again confront the American Dilemma, and the question of conscience it poses. Let history record that we were up to the task.