



Department of Justice

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REMARKS BY

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ST. LOUIS CONFERENCE ON EQUAL
OPPORTUNITY IN HOUSING

Chase Park Plaza Hotel
St. Louis, Missouri

Tuesday, June 15, 1965, 7:00 P.M. CDT

We meet this evening on the anniversary of an event of momentous and seminal significance in the development of Anglo-Saxon law and government. On June 15, 1215 -- 750 years ago today -- "in the meadow which is called Runnymede between Windsor and Staines" King John affixed his seal to the Magna Carta.

The rebellious barons who forced the King to grant the charter were not much concerned with its effect in the distant future. They were practical and selfish men who demanded redress for specific grievances. Nor did the tyrannous John probably know or care that in granting redress he was setting precedent for the limitations of governmental power. Until that time, the power of the King, so far as anyone knew, was absolute.

The language of the charter is still remarkably acute. It set down a guarantee of freedom under law:

"No free man shall be taken, imprisoned, disseised, outlawed, banished, or in any way destroyed, nor will We proceed against or prosecute him except by the lawful judgment of his peers and by the law of the land."

And it guaranteed impartial administration of justice.

"To no one will We sell, to none will We deny or delay, right or justice."

These are words which have filtered down the centuries with enormous impact. The principles of the Great Charter were carried by the colonists to the New World. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights are its direct descendants.

This link was dramatically, if poignantly, underscored at the recent ceremonies in which an acre of ground at Runnymede was deeded in perpetuity to America by the British people in honor of President Kennedy.

We are, in the United States, today, still working to guarantee the impartial administration of justice written into the Magna Carta. We are still fighting to assure that "to none will We deny or delay, right or justice."

Equal justice before the law is, after centuries of denial, finally being won for Negro citizens.

This has been a decade of struggle and a decade of great achievement. The courts have made it clear that separate but equal has no meaning in any area of the law. The 1957 and 1964 Civil Rights Act gave the government tools to eliminate publicly sanctioned segregation. The Voting Rights Bill of 1965, which I am confident will be passed by Congress with dispatch, will further hasten the end of official discrimination.

The work is not complete. There will continue to be difficulties in enforcing legal guarantees. Loopholes may develop in the laws and mopping-up action will be required. But the legal principle is now established;

the system of officially sanctioned segregation is in its death throes in the United States. The legal rights guaranteed to the American Negro have existed for a century. Now they are being put into effect.

We have thus, as President Johnson noted at Howard University ten days ago, reached the end of the beginning. For as the President said, "it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity" unless everyone can walk through the gates.

We seek, in the President's words "not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result."

Moving from the area of theory and law to the area of fact means that we must now confront all the mean realities of inequality, of deprivation, and poverty right at home in our own communities.

These problems will be even more difficult to dissolve because they represent the sum total of our neglect and failure as a whole society.

Unemployment, poverty, bad health, inferior schools, rat-infested slums -- these are not just Negro problems -- they are American problems. This conference is concerned with what is probably the most crucial and the most important problem of all. Segregated housing is the cause -- direct and indirect -- of many other kinds of segregation.

Almost three out of four Negroes in America live in a city, and most Negro city dwellers are forced by discrimination into slums. Segregated housing creates segregation in schools and hospitals and most other areas of everyday life. It creates a separate community that might as well be walled in like a medieval ghetto, so effective is the division.

These walls will not be made to tumble by law alone, but by persuasion and action on the community, neighborhood and individual level.

Conferences like this already have proved their value. Last November I spoke at a similar meeting in Baltimore. Following that Conference the local board of realtors revised its listing contract to contain a clause saying: "The Seller agrees to offer his property to all qualified purchasers regardless of race or color."

Not stopping with a simple statement of nondiscriminatory policy, the Baltimore board has developed an educational program to acquaint salesmen with ways to overcome seller resistance to prospective Negro buyers.

Promising steps of a similar nature have been taken in other cities. In Cincinnati, for instance, the housing industry has joined civil rights groups in setting up a city-wide fair housing council. Such action has not been restricted to cities, but has been growing rapidly, even in white, middle-class suburbs.

In the past five years, fair housing committees affiliated with the National Committee Against Discrimination in Housing have increased from 18 to about 1,000.

The fact that three levels of government -- city, county, and state -- are co-sponsoring this conference with the President's Committee on Equal Opportunity in Housing, says much about the interest in finding solutions here in St. Louis.

I have no need to stress to this group, however, that despite all these positive beginnings, the great bulk of the work lies ahead. We have barely scratched the surface of accomplishment in truly integrated housing.

The first job is to clear away the fables and fears that block progress in this field. The causes of discrimination rest, at bottom, in the human mind. It is there where discriminatory attitudes must first be undermined. It is there where the fantasies about what will happen if a Negro moves into the neighborhood must first be broken.

These myths do not come as sharply into play when their falsity is theoretical -- when they are to be tested in someone else's backyard. But they may be the dominant cause of resistance when the question is not theoretical equality, but Negroes moving to one's own street.

You know what these myths are -- they are as much a part of American folklore as Paul Bunyan:

"If we let one in they will all come in"

"They will take over"

"All the whites will move out"

"The neighborhood will deteriorate"

"Property values will go down"

Statements of this kind are so common and so mesmerizing that it is easy to forget that they are just myths. But that is what they are -- myths -- untrue assumptions.

"I cannot comprehend how any man can want anything but the truth" wrote Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius. "It is our false opinions of things which ruin us."

The only way to counter the mythology of race relations is with facts and knowledge. And facts and knowledge are becoming increasingly available as starts toward integrated housing are made in many cities. Evidence is now piled high that the parade of horrors evoked by the prospect of a Negro family moving into a white neighborhood is a mirage.

Hundreds of white communities, both urban and suburban, throughout the country, have been quietly and successfully integrated. Apartment developments in dozens of major cities have adopted equal opportunity policies. And they have done so without financial calamity, disorder, or disruption of any sort.

The towns, cities, and developments where integration occurred are not freaks. The white families who accepted Negro neighbors were not all "do-gooders" or "firebrand liberals." The builders and owners were not possessed or suicidal. They were serious businessmen, not afraid to make a change which was both sound business and the right thing.

Little progress will be made in opening equal opportunities in housing until more real estate dealers and housing industry executives emulate them. One of the most dismaying things about the myths I have mentioned is that so many real estate people -- men and women who should be better informed -- either subscribe to them or are convinced that every prospective white customer believes them.

In either case, by preserving the misconceptions and misapprehensions of a passing age, they are damaging the nation's interests in general, and their own in particular. All prospective customers are not bigots. Impartiality toward Negroes does not mean financial ruin or social ostracism.

Lending institutions, home builders, and real estate dealers who insist on believing the opposite are fighting what is essentially a rear-guard action, and in so doing, are endangering their own long-range business prospects.

For, above all, segregation is really not practical. It is not practical because trying to preserve it in the face of the overwhelming trend of history, of opinion and of moral influence, will be costly and ultimately self-defeating.

With the Voting Rights bill nearing passage civil rights leaders have already indicated that housing is their next major goal for advancement.

I hope that leaders in the housing industry will work with them to bring about progress. Early and constructive action can obviate the kind of hostility and conflict that which help none and hurt all.

This conference and others like it can help to smooth the path. It can facilitate communication between the groups. And it can spread the understanding that in North as well as South, in St. Louis as well as Selma, national interest is self-interest.

The confirmed existence of ghettos, whether they be of Negro poor, or Puerto Rican poor, or Irish poor, endangers and deprives and deprecates not only those in it, but the entire community.

If our central city areas increasingly become empty cores in fat doughnuts of suburban prosperity, we do damage not only to our democratic vision, but also to the prosperity of downtown businessmen. If welfare costs mount ever higher, the price is paid by all citizens. If crime continues to increase in slum areas, its effects reverberate through all levels of society.

In stressing the impracticality of continuing segregated practices in housing, I have not meant to ignore the even more fundamental consideration. For aside from the fact that it is economically unsound, and aside from the fact that it is opposed to public policy, segregation is basically immoral.

I am happy to note that St. Louis religious leadership has been active in the fight on segregation and is participating in this conference. The significant role the clergy has played in recent civil rights developments underlines the fact that this revolution is as much moral as it is social, and as much spiritual as it is secular.

There is a rising tide which recognizes that our prosperity is not complete and our promise as a nation not fulfilled until all can partake of it, and all can contribute to it.

This is a hope and an idea as old as man, and we are today working to attain it.

"Your abundance," says the New Testament, "may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want; that there may be equality."