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Voices on Campus - Julian Bond on "From Civil War to Civil Rights"

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VOICES ON CAMPUS

Julian Bond, From Civil War to Civil Rights

Dr. Julian Bond was Chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's Board of Directors 1998-2010 and is now Chairman Emeritus. He is Distinguished Scholar in the School of Government at American University in Washington, DC, and Professor Emeritus in History at the University of Virginia. He visited BSU on November 5, 2013 as part of the President's Distinguished Speaker Series. The following is an excerpted version of his talk.

Those who say that 'race is history' have it exactly backward – history is race. The word 'America' scrambled, after all, spells 'I am race.' And America is race – from its symbolism to its substance, from its founding by slaveholders to its rending by the Civil War, from Johnnie Reb to Jim Crow, from the Ku Klux Klan to Katrina, from Emmett Till to Trayvon. This is the third year of the sesquicentennial of the Civil War, the war that claimed more American lives than all other wars combined in our nation's history. That it is occurring during the presidency of the first black person to hold his country's highest office is only one of many ironies that abound ...

Our response to the nation's first black president during the Civil War's anniversary confirms that we are still a country at war with itself. But we are not the same country. We have gone from Civil War to civil rights. In 1961, when the nation observed the Civil War's centennial, the civil rights movement was gaining momentum, as was Martin Luther King. It was only six years earlier, during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, that King had been introduced to the nation and the world. He was 26 years old. At that early age and at that early stage of the boycott, King understood how historic it would be. Four days after Rosa Parks stood up for justice by sitting down, the boycott began. That evening, at the first mass meeting, King declared: "When the history books are written in the future,

somebody will have to say, 'there lived a race of people, a black people ... who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and civilization'."

In 1963 alone, the year that King told the nation of his dream at the March on Washington, there were more than 10,000 anti-racist demonstrations. The result was the enactment of the 1964 Civil Rights Act – the most sweeping civil rights legislation before or since and one of Congress' finest hours. We look back on the years between Montgomery in 1955 and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 with some pride.

...But those were not "the good old days" ... When the Supreme Court announced in May 1955, in the second



(Photo credit: Stephen Rowell).

Brown decision, that the white South could make haste slowly in dismantling segregated schools, I was a year older than Emmett Till. He was killed, in Money, Mississippi, for whistling at a white woman, three months after the second *Brown* decision. Till's death terrified me. But in the fall of 1957 a group of black teenagers encouraged me to put that fear aside. The nine young women and men who integrated Little Rock's Central High School set a high standard of grace and courage under fire as they dared the mobs who surrounded their school. Here, I thought, is what I hope I can be, if ever the chance comes my way.

The chance to test and prove myself did come my way in 1960, as it came to thousands of other black high school and college students across the South, in a mobilization of young black people not duplicated in our country before or since. First through the sit-ins, then in Freedom Rides, and then in voter registration and political organizing drives in the rural South, we joined an old movement against white supremacy that had deep, strong roots...

From *Brown* in 1954 forward, the movement expanded its targets, tactics and techniques... When Martin Luther King came on the scene as the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, he articulated a new method - nonviolent resistance - of fighting segregation.

The new method required direct action through mass participation. Gains were won at lunch counters and movie theaters, bus stations and polling places, and the fabric of legal segregation came undone.

That movement then was a second Reconstruction [and] it changed our country forever. A voteless people voted with their bodies and their feet and paved the way for other social protest. It became a movement for political and economic power, and today black women and men hold office and wield power in numbers we only dreamed of before.

many others, I am the grandson of a slave. My grandfather, James Bond, was born in 1863, in Kentucky; freedom didn't come for him until the 13th Amendment was ratified in 1865. He and his mother were property, like a horse or a chair. At age 15, barely able to read and write, he hitched his tuition – a steer – to a rope and walked across Kentucky to Berea College and the college took him in. My grandfather belonged to a transcendent generation of black Americans, a generation born into slavery, freed by the Civil War, determined to make their way as free women and men. Martin Luther

rates are 134 percent higher for blacks; chances of imprisonment are 570 percent higher; rate of death from homicide 493 percent higher; lack of health insurance 33 percent more likely; the proportion with a college degree 53 percent lower... After the 2008 election, the narrative was that we had become a post-racial society. Wrong. Jim Crow may be dead, but racism is alive and well. That is the central fact of life for every non-white American, including the President. It eclipses income, position, and education. Race trumps them all.

We have work to do – none of it is easy, but we have never wished our way to freedom. There needs to be a constantly growing and always reviving activist progressive movement across America if we are going to maintain and expand victories and our vision for the country. Martin Luther King didn't march from Selma to Montgomery by himself. He didn't speak to an empty field at the March on Washington. There were thousands marching with him, and before him, and thousands more who did the dirty work that preceded the triumphal march...

Racial justice, economic equality, and world peace – these were the themes that occupied King's life; they ought to occupy ours today. We have a long and honorable tradition of social justice in this country. It still sends forth the message that when we act together, we can overcome. My slave-born grandfather speaks to us today. "Wrong" he said in his 1892 Berea College commencement address, "for a time may seem to prevail and the good already accomplished seem to be overthrown. But forward in the struggle, inspired by the achievements of the past, sustained by a faith that knows no faltering, forward in the struggle."

Racial justice, economic equality, and world peace – these were the themes that occupied King's life; they ought to occupy ours today. We have a long and honorable tradition of social justice in this country. It still sends forth the message that when we act together, we can overcome.

But despite impressive increases in the numbers of black people holding public office, despite our ability to sit and eat and ride and vote and attend school and live in places that used to bar black faces, in some important ways nonwhite Americans face problems more difficult to attack now than in the years that went before.

We are such a young nation so recently removed from slavery that only my father's generation stands between Julian Bond and human bondage. Like

King belonged to another transcendent generation of black Americans, a generation born into segregation, freed from racism's constraints by their own efforts, determined to make their way in freedom.

Today, we are still being tested by hardships and adversity... People of color are more likely to be poor than rich, and they are worse off than their white counterparts. Almost every social indicator, from birth to death, reflects black-white disparities. Infant mortality