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OPINION

Moral Courage: Standing Up for What is Right

Thank you Sen. Booker and Rep. Lewis

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

On Wednesday, Sen. Cory A. Booker, D-N.J. and Rep. John Lewis, D-Ga., joined the list of speakers testifying before the Senate Judiciary Committee against the nomination of Sen. Jeff Sessions, R-Ala. for Attorney General of the United States. Both were assigned to a panel at the very end of the hearing process, a slot fellow panelist Rep. Cedric L. Richmond, D-La., the head of the Congressional Black Caucus, called “the equivalent of being made to go to the back of the bus.” Several of the committee members supporting Sessions left before Booker’s and Lewis’ important testimony began. But that didn’t deter them from speaking out against the threat they see to civil rights progress if Sessions becomes Attorney General.

Congressman Lewis noted that he was born in rural Alabama too, not far from where Sessions grew up, but as a black child he inherited a far different society: “There was no way to escape or deny the choke hold of discrimination and racial hate that surrounded us.” He said, “A clear majority of Americans say they want this to be a fair, just, and open nation . . . They are concerned that some leaders reject decades of progress and want to return to the dark past, when the power of law was used to deny the freedoms protected by the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and its

Amendments. These are the voices I represent today. We can pretend that the law is blind. We can pretend that it is even-handed. But if we are honest with ourselves, we know that we are called upon daily by the people we represent to help them deal with unfairness in how the law is written and enforced. Those who are committed to equal justice in our society wonder whether Senator Sessions’ call for ‘law and order’ will mean today what it meant in Alabama, when I was coming up back then. The rule of law was used to violate the human and civil rights of the poor, the



“Those who are committed to equal justice in our society wonder whether Senator Sessions’ call for ‘law and order’ will mean today what it meant in Alabama, when I was coming up back then. The rule of law was used to violate the human and civil rights of the poor, the dispossessed, people of color.”

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In additional written remarks Congressman Lewis was even clearer about some of his current fears: “Some people argue that the 48 years of a fully-operational Voting Rights Act simply erased hundreds of years of hate and violence. This is not ancient history; the scars and stains of rac-

ism are still deeply embedded in our society. This is proven by the thousands of pages of evidence submitted to Congress which verify continued voting rights discrimination across our nation and in the Deep South. Representing Alabama on this Committee, Sessions had an opportunity to lead. Instead, the senator turned a blind eye to the persistent and consistent efforts to make it harder and more difficult for minorities, the poor, the elderly, and others to exercise the right to vote . . . After the Shelby v. Holder decision [the 2013 Supreme Court decision striking down key provisions of the 1965 Voting Rights Act],

minorities were in mourning as Sessions was celebrating. He declared the decision was ‘good news for the South.’ Alabama and other states immediately adopted voter ID legislation -- making it harder for minorities to execute their right to vote. We must face the truth. We are a multi-racial, multi-ethnic country . . . [a]nd we cannot

avoid the fact that there is a systematic, deliberate attempt to destroy the advances of civil rights in this country and take us back to a period when America declared its greatness on one hand, but fostered the worst kind of racial discrimination on the other.”

Booker, born after the Civil Rights Movement, made it clear that he feels personally indebted to heroes like Lewis who were attacked and some even killed during the struggle to make America a more just nation — and equally resolute against moving backwards. He took the courageous step of being the first sitting senator to testify against the confirmation of another senator. In his prepared remarks he said, “I want an Attorney General who is committed to supporting law enforcement and securing law and order. But that is not enough. America was founded heralding not law and order, but justice for all. And critical to that is equal justice under the law. Law and order without justice is unobtainable . . . If there is no justice, there is no peace. The Alabama State Troopers on the Edmund Pettis Bridge were seeking law and order. The marchers were seeking justice -- and ultimately the greater peace.”

Booker added: “If confirmed, Senator Sessions will be required to pursue justice for women, but his record indicates that he won’t. He will be expected to defend the equal rights of gay and lesbian Americans, but his record indicates that he won’t. He will be expected to defend voting rights, but his record indicates that he won’t. He will be expected to defend the rights of immigrants and affirm their human dignity, but his record indicates he won’t. His

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Assessing President Obama’s Impact and Legacy

Arc of history will judge him favorably

BY MARC H. MORIAL

Throughout our history, the National Urban League has taken seriously our responsibility to hold the President of



the United States accountable to the needs of urban America and communities of color. During the Great Depression, Executive Secretary Eugene Kinkle Jones served on President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s “Black Cabinet.” Lester Granger, who headed the League during World War II, is among those credited with persuading President Harry Truman to desegregate the Armed Forces. Whitney M. Young advised pres-

idents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson and was instrumental in the passage of the landmark Civil Rights Act. Urban League Presidents Vernon Jordan, John Jacob and Hugh Price continued our engagement with the Presidents with whom they served to further the work of civil rights and secure support for Urban League programs.

The first African-American Presidency quite naturally has held special significance for the National Urban League. In recognition of Barack Obama’s unique place in American history, we set out to create a comprehensive analysis of his two terms, which we recently released to great national interest.

Any evaluation of the Obama administration must first recognize that he inherited the worst economy since the Great Depres-

sion, and was faced with Congressional opposition unprecedented in its intensity and sinister nature. Both his accomplishments and his failures must be evaluated against those conditions.

In creating our scorecard, the National Urban League harkened back to the famous question Ronald Reagan asked the nation during his sole debate against President Jimmy Carter: “Are you better off than you were four years ago?” In this instance, the question is, “Is the nation better off than it was eight years ago?” And, “Is Black America better off than it was eight years ago?” The answer to both questions is, unequivocally, yes.

President Obama is leaving office with an approval rating even higher than Reagan’s, exceeded only by Presidents Franklin D. Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower and Bill Clinton. During Obama’s

presidency, the economy has added 15 million new jobs, and the jobless rate has dropped from 7.6 percent to 4.7 percent - and from 12.7 percent to 7.8 percent for African Americans. The high school graduation rate for African Americans has increased from 66.1 percent to 75 percent. There are 614,000 fewer long-term unemployed. Wages are up 3.4 percent. More than 16 million Americans who were uninsured now have health care coverage, with the uninsured rate for African Americans cut by more than half.

Barack Obama’s passion and steady hand made a huge difference in charting a progressive course and positively impacted the lives of ordinary Americans. Black Americans felt both the pride of his accomplishments and the pain when it was clear his opponents sought to diminish a great American. I am confident the long arc of

history will judge him favorably.

While we scored many of the administration’s achievements with our highest rating, “Superior,” President Obama’s tenure as a whole had shortcomings due to some notable missed opportunities and outright failures, such as the economic development of urban centers, gun violence and the foreclosure rate and bank closure rate in communities of color and low-income neighborhoods. On these and other issues, we rated the Obama administration “Fair” or “Poor.” Our evaluation springs from a consideration of his accomplishments balanced against the conditions under which he served. The National Urban League has given the Obama Administration an overall rating of “Excellent,” our second-highest rating.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.