



New American Gazette: Transcript of King, Parks, and Montgomery Forum

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Title: The New American Gazette: Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, and Leola Brown Montgomery at Ford Hall Forum.

Recording Date: 12 February 1988

Item Information: The New American Gazette: Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, and Leola Brown Montgomery at Ford Hall Forum. Ford Hall Forum Collection, 1908-2013 (MS113.3.1, item 0068) Moakley Archive, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

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Recording Summary:

This episode of the New American Gazette featured the remarks of Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, and Leola Brown Montgomery from the Conference on Women and the Constitution. The conference was convened by former First Ladies Betty Ford, Pat Nixon, Rosalyn Carter and Lady Bird Johnson on February 12, 1988 to celebrate the US Constitution and the contributions that women have made to the country's founding document. Coretta Scott King, an activist and civil rights leader, urged women to become the moral vanguard for a more compassionate, humanitarian world society. Sharing experiences from the struggle for civil rights and desegregation, Rosa Parks and Leola Brown Montgomery discussed their groundbreaking accomplishments in seeking justice and equality for all people. The radio program is introduced by Barbara Jordan an American lawyer, educator and politician who was also a leader of the Civil Rights Movement.

Transcript Begins

ANNOUNCER: From Alumni Auditorium in Northeastern University in Boston, the Ford Hall Forum presents the New American Gazette, with your host, Barbara Jordan.

BARBARA JORDAN: One year ago more than 300 academics, government officials, activists and private citizens met for a two-day meeting in Atlanta to reflect on the unique contributions that women have made to our country's founding document. The Conference on Women and the Constitution was convened by former First Ladies Betty Ford, Pat Nixon, Rosalyn Carter and Lady Bird Johnson to celebrate the US Constitution. Coretta Scott King urges women to become the moral vanguard for a more compassionate humanitarian world society.

[00:01:00]

At the conference, in which I was honored to participate, we saluted women who not only rocked the cradle but rocked the boat, women who rewrote the laws, waged the debates and campaigned for equality throughout the Constitution's 200-year history. As the women's movement emerged to the forefront to of the nation's consciousness, its leaders were quick to adopt methods and activities used with success by the Civil Rights Movement.

Few are better qualified to speak with authority on the legacies of these two movements for social change than today's guest on the New American Gazette. As a longstanding Civil Rights activist and president of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Coretta Scott King continues her husband's devotion to human rights. In addition, Mrs. King leads a broad coalition of religious, labor, business, civil and women's right organizations to educate and lobby for full employment and economic opportunity for all.

[00:02:23]

Today, Mrs. King speaks of the courage and commitment necessary in working for equality. Predicting that women will lead the great freedom movements into the next millennium, Coretta Scott King urges women to become the moral vanguard for a more compassionate humanitarian world society.

[00:02:48]

Painting broad brush strokes for a bold, new vision of the world, while reviewing the legacies of the past, is Coretta Scott King.

[Applause]

CORETTA SCOTT KING: To all of the distinguished persons on the dais here, to all of you distinguished ladies and gentlemen in the audience today, let me say what a great privilege it is for me to participate in this conference which has been so successful. But you brought us together at a very important time in our nation's history. And you've brought together a remarkable group of leaders and scholars who have dedicated their lives to the protection and extension of women's rights under the Constitution. And I'm truly proud to be a part of this coming together.

[00:04:20]

From the early days of the Republic, women have spoken out for equality. Women like Abigail Adams understood that freedom was an indivisible ideal instead of an elitist privilege. Continuing this tradition into the 19th century, Lucretia Mott was a major force in launching the abolitionist, feminist, and peace movements in this country. Freedom has always been an indivisible goal for all right-thinking Americans. It is clear, however that the Civil Rights Movement profoundly influenced the explosion of feminist thought and action that began in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The movement inspired a broad range of freedom struggles and lent a new legitimacy to the constitutional rights of protests and the moral obligation of civil disobedience of unjust laws. The movement was not only about rights for black citizens. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 provided a powerful tool, provided a powerful tool women could use to fight sex discrimination in hiring and promotion on the part of private employers, employment agencies, and unions.

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The movement was also a direct challenge to McCarthyism and the climate of fear and oppression that was consuming the soul of this nation. And I recall when we went to Montgomery in 1955 it was the height of the McCarthy era. And what we did in Montgomery was against the law, to boycott a business, to stand up and protest the way we did. Those of us who lived back then and who were active understand how difficult it was to have accomplished what we did accomplish in Montgomery at that particular time.

The movement showed millions of Americans that you can indeed. You must defy authority when that authority is in the wrong. We must also remember that women were among the most courageous and dedicated civil rights workers, beginning with Mrs. Rosa Parks, to Johnnie Carr and to Viola Liuzzo, Fannie Lou Hamer and many others who paid the highest price in the black freedom struggle; women who could be found in the front lines of every campaign from Montgomery to Memphis. Let's be clear that all of these women were great feminists because they stood up for freedom. And they were not about to be turned around. [Applause]

Not even by threats, or violence, and other forms of intimidations. The Civil Rights Movement reminded America of the promise of equality that has been dishonored by generations of racism and paternalism. No one knows better than I do that there was some male chauvinism in the movement.

[Laughter]

[00:08:31]

And even today I occasionally have to straighten out some of my male colleagues.

[Laughter]

But once people start talking and thinking and organizing for freedom there is no end to it. But let me say that my husband did encourage me to be actively involved. And I was actively involved throughout the whole struggle. He even encouraged me at times when I really just didn't figure out how I could do it and really take care of the family and the children the way

they should be taken care of. He said when it was critical, get somebody else. Find somebody. As a matter of fact there are some women here who are in the, who were in that delegation that went to the 17-nation disarmament conference in Geneva in 1962.

[00:09:33]

And when I told Martin that I had received this invitation from Women Strike for Peace. And we had just had a talk. And he was getting ready to get started in Birmingham, it started the mobilization. He said, “Well, now I’ve been traveling so much and you’ve been traveling. So you are going to have to stay home for a while with the children because they’re being neglected.” He often projected his own sense of guilt and neglect onto me.

[Laughter]

And of course I said, “No problem.” But then a week or so later I got this invitation and I took it to him as I always did. I always cleared everything with him. He said, “You should do that. That’s important.” I said, “Well, what about the children?” “Well, get someone to stay with them.”

[Laughter]

[00:10:31]

But you can’t be truly nonviolent as Martin was and as I seek to be and separate your—as Martin said, your moral concerns and decide that some things you’re going to be nonviolent and some things you’re not. It’s either you’re non-violent or you’re partially non-violent. And it is an evolutionary process. So I feel that people on the basis of conscience should have an exemption. And the question is who decides that. But we fought the battles of supporting those young men, brave young men in those days, back in the late forties.

And I always saw the connection between the peace and justice issues as being indivisible. And so when Martin said, “You need to be there,” because we were going to talk to the Russians and the United States delegations about a test ban treaty. Because many of the women, 50 American

housewives were very upset about the fact that the babies milk was being poisoned by the continuing nuclear testing

[00:11:50]

And so I went on that trip. And from that point on then I became the family spokesmen on peace issues and the rallies in New York and Washington. And I marched and I spoke on platforms. And so unfortunately, and I don't brag about it, I was the only woman most times and certainly the only black. And about 1967 when Martin said, you know, "I can no longer be silent on this issue because silence is betrayal." And I think some people misunderstood what he was talking about. It was a matter of conscience for him.

And every issue that he dealt with in the Civil Rights Movement was elevated to a moral issue. And that's not what we are about today. And I think that's where we have fallen short in terms of achieving some of our goals. Because it's political. What's expedient, you know, what works? But somehow when the great gains have been made throughout history, it has been those people who had the courage to stand on their convictions and do what conscience tells them is right to do, that makes the difference. And I think women are more prone to follow their consciences.

[00:13:03]

And that's why it's important that we have women in high places of decision-making throughout our country at every level, in the corporate board rooms and the highest levels of government. Even we envision the day when Geraldine Ferraro can be president of the United States.

[Applause]

It is important to appreciate that the Civil Rights Movement influenced the women's rights struggle. But it is even more important that we recognize that women and minorities must build and strengthen the coalition for civil and human rights if we are to make real the promise of the Constitution. Our brother Justice Thurgood Marshall, as he eloquently criticized the Constitutional Convention of 1787 for protecting slavery and for not providing the franchise for women.

[00:14:17]

This has ruffled the feathers of some of the proponents of unbridled constitutional boosterism. Some people apparently feel that blacks and women should join in a critical celebration of a document that protected the slave trade and denied women their democratic rights. But Justice Marshall tells it like it. Our criticism of the un-amended Constitution is not intended to be divisive. Instead we want to insure that common generations understand the importance of protests and dissent in making the Constitution a document, which all freedom-loving people can be proud of.

Just as the Civil Rights Movement helped enforce the reconstruction amendments, the women's rights movement is needed to enforce the spirit and letter of the Nineteenth Amendment. We still have a way to go, however, before we can say that the Constitution is working for all Americans. In recent years we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of black elected officials. But black office holders are still less than two percent of all elected officials, even though we are more than twelve percent of the population.

[00:15:36]

Women are also severely underrepresented in American political life. It has been said again and again. Today women are about 53 percent of the population of the United States. Yet, even though women are a majority of American voters, we hold only one out of every seven elected offices in the nation. It's clear that not enough women are running for office and not enough are voting at all. Black women who suffer a burden of double discrimination, the lack of political representation in national and higher state level elected office is almost total.

It seems hard to believe that in 1988 along one black women sits among the 535 members of the United States Congress. And that isn't an indictment on me and all of the other black women as well as our white sisters and brothers.

[Applause]

[00:16:42]

One of the reasons why it's hard to get elected is because you've got to raise a lot of money. And it becomes incumbent upon those of us who cannot actually do the job to support others in financial ways to help make it happen. Although black women, or about seven percent of the population, when you only have one in the Congress of 535, that says a lot about where we need to concentrate our efforts. Black women hold less than one half of one percent of all elective offices in America.

Now we've made progress and that's tremendous. But we still have a long way to go. If black women were fairly represented in Congress we would have about 30 black women in the US House of Representatives. We don't even have 30 black women or men in the House of Representatives. We would have seven women serving as US Senators. Well, you know, those of you who are knowledgeable, we've got about one or two, one.

[00:18:16]

I mean it's like two now. You know, I know it's been almost an all-male club for a long time. The Senate is a very powerful body, you know, and it's hard for women to get there. But we need some women there, more women to join those two. If we were fairly represented as black women, we would have three or four black women governors instead of none. Seven black women would be mayors of the nation's 100 largest cities instead of none, although we have some women in some of the smaller cities.

If America is to fulfill the promise of the Constitution we will need many more women of all races holding elective office. Let us resolve that there will be more women office holders because we are going to take the responsibility to make it happen.

[Applause]

[00:19:24]

We're going to mobilize all our voter registration and get-out-the-vote campaigns in every major city in the nation until the women of the nation are fairly represented at every level of federal, state, and local government.

[Applause]

To help rectify this injustice, we have to make a greater effort to campaign more vigorously for election law reforms and to take full advantage of existing laws. This means utilizing every possible opportunity to set up voter registration tables in our churches, temples and schools, at cultural events, in our places of employment as well as unemployment and welfare offices, and other social service agencies. The variety of creative voter registration tactics we can employ is limited only by our imaginations. As women we've come a long way in the last decade but we still have a lot of work to do to make sure that issues of concern to women are placed squarely in the forefront of the national debate—affirmative action, quality, affordable child care, the equal rights amendment, the civil rights restoration act, parental leave, and so many other forms we care about will be voted on in the Congress in the months ahead.

[00:20:49]

The women of the 1980s and 1990s have an historic mission in a very real sense. It was the mission of Black Americans during the Civil Rights Movement, not merely to obtain our freedom but to expand democracy for all Americans in the same way it is the mission of women not only to improve their own circumstances but to advance the values of caring and compassion in American society and throughout the world. The women of America have time and again demonstrated a remarkable capacity for overcoming hardship and adversity.

We are more than equal to the historic struggle that lies ahead and we look to the future with courage and commitment because our cause is just. Let the word go out from Atlanta that in 1988 we will organize ourselves as never before. And nobody is going to turn us around.

[Applause]

[00:21:55]

So let us encourage more women to run for public office and let us encourage those who prefer to work behind the scenes to become super star campaign managers and super star deputy voter registrars. And we must remember, however, that voter registration and get out the vote campaigns are only one part of political empowerment. We must also become more aggressive lobbyists to advance our legislative interests.

We need a clearly defined legislative agenda and we have to build and strengthen legislative alert networks so that every women's and minority organization in America is quickly informed when Congress is ready to act on bill we are concerned about.

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In addition to greater political empowerment we have to start thinking about a more systematic approach to coordinating our economic power. Women's groups especially should join together and form a nationwide, selective patronage council that will help inform and to support those who support us. Every week women make consumer choices involving countless millions of dollars. Imagine what could happen if we began to coordinate consumer choices on the basis of corporate social responsibility.

[Applause]

And we do this as part of our struggle for greater economic empowerment. And we need to be become more active in organizing stockholder's campaigns and play a greater role in trade unions and other progressive groups, which can join us in coalitions for common goals.

[00:23:44]

We need to do all these things, not only to improve the living standards of women and our families but because we have an historic mission to put things right in America, we have something special and unique to contribute to this country and the world. Something that arises out of the joy and suffering of our collective experience as women. We have a strength and a

tenacity and a gift for nurturing and compassion, which has been finely honed and tempered in our struggle to raise families in a sexist society.

And let me put it this way. If the women of America don't lead the struggle against poverty, racism and militarism, then we must ask who will. We can send women of conscience, ability, and integrity to the halls of power in Washington, D.C. and in our state and local governments if we pick up the ballot and use the power. If we exercise our rights and responsibilities as citizens and as consumers with all the compassion and wisdom of womanhood. We not only will win the struggle against racism and sexism, we just might save this nation from its pending appointment with Armageddon.

[Applause]

As we struggle for political and economic empowerment we must make sure the women become the moral vanguard for a more compassionate and humanitarian world community. We must advocate a vision of a world where starvation will not be tolerated. We must lead the way to a world where no child lives in fear of a nuclear holocaust or suffers the ravages of war and militarism. We must project a bold, new vision of a world where valuable resources are no longer squandered on the instruments of death destruction but are creatively harness for economic development and opportunity. This is the ultimate mission of black women in politics.

[00:26:05]

And I believe that after two centuries of struggle we are on the right road to making the Constitution work for all Americans and that women will be leading the great freedom movements as we move into the new millennium. Make no mistake about it, we will face increasing resistance in the years ahead because political and economic power are never surrendered without conflict and struggle.

But we are more than equal to the historic struggle that lies ahead and we look forward to the future with courage and commitment because our cause is just. Women are getting organized as never before. And again, nobody is going to turn us around.

[Applause]

[00:26:56]

If we, the women of America sow the seeds of political and economic empowerment, in the not too distant future, we will reap a bountiful harvest from freedom from sexism, racism and militarism. And when that day comes, my sisters and brothers, the morning stars will sing together and the children of God will shout for joy. And with this faith and in this spirit together we shall overcome.

[Applause]

[You're listening to Coretta Scott King on the New American Gazette.]

[Applause]

[Pause]

[00:28:03]

BARBARA JORDAN: On December 1, 1955 a black woman riding a segregated bus in Montgomery, Alabama refused to move to the back of the bus when asked to make way for a white passenger. The subsequent arrest of Rosa Parks dramatized southern segregationist laws to the nation and served as a pivotal event in the Civil Rights Movement. The resulting Montgomery bus boycott began four days later and lasted 13 months. Today we meet women whose uncommon deeds and courageous beliefs have earned them the title: heroines of constitutional change.

Sharing experiences from the struggle for civil rights are Rosa Parks and Leola Brown Montgomery. Moderating a panel of heroines of constitutional change is Christine King Farris, Vice President of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change.

[Applause]

[00:29:35]

CHRISTINE KING FARRIS: We're very fortunate to have in person those who made these changes in our great country in our Constitution becoming a reality. Today then we will start with Mrs. Leola Brown Montgomery. Her daughter Linda Brown Smith could not be with us today. But, of course, the mother, Mrs. Leola Brown Montgomery for bringing that suit of the Brown v. Board of Education.

LEOLA BROWN MONTGOMERY: Thank you.

CHRISTINE KING FARRIS: And so at this time Mrs. Montgomery will share with us. We are so happy to have you.

[00:30:25]

LEOLA BROWN MONTGOMERY: Thank you, Ms. Farris. I'd like to say I'm very pleased to be here. It makes me very happy to be on this program. I participated in many commemorative activities but this one is very important because it focuses in on women. And we know we're most important [laughter] especially since women have played a key role in the history of country, both behind the scenes and in taking the lead. You look around and you see how far we've come. But we still have a long way to go.

For example, the participation of minorities in this conference would not have been possible 40 years ago. At the same time, from Georgia to New York, from Michigan to California, reported, racially motivated incidents make us aware that we also have a long way to go.

There are a lot of misconceptions about the Supreme Court decision of 1954, Brown versus the Board of Education. One misconception is that this was the first attempt to use the legal system to desegregate schools. In 1946 Heman Sweatt was denied admission to the University of Texas Law School and took his case all the way to the Supreme Court.

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In Sweatt versus Painter, Mr. Sweatt became the first black student to attend law school at the University of Texas at Austin. There were also many other, similar cases.

The second misconception is for some is where the case took place, simply because Topeka is in Kansas and Kansas was not and is not known for having a large minority population. Also, because in most written texts this case is referred to as Brown versus Board of Education, instead of Brown versus the Topeka Board of Education. A lot of people may not even know where Topeka is. But that's where it began.

After the Civil War, blacks who migrated to Kansas, full of the promise and equal opportunities faced separatism in restaurants, employment, public accommodations, recreation, theaters, and ultimately in education. In 1949 the population of Topeka was around 80,000. Of this number there were about 6,500 blacks.

[00:33:06]

The black citizens of Topeka faced the same challenges as blacks any place else in the United States and were most incensed by the system that their children encountered to get an education. There were only four black elementary schools in Topeka. There were many more elementary schools for white children all within walking distance of their homes. Whereas many of the black children lived nowhere near the schools that they had to attend and had to be bused several miles.

I consider Plessy versus Ferguson to be a forerunner of Brown versus the Board of Education because that doctrine was justification used by school boards across the country to educate our children in separate and unequal facilities. Although it was the premise that it was separate and equal and that was not so.

[00:34:03]

In 1949 the Topeka chapter of the NAACP and their attorneys met with black parents to make plans for each family to try to enroll in the white school nearest their homes. My husband, the

late Reverend Oliver L. Brown and I were willing participants because there were many evenings when he would return home from his job, he would find me almost in tears because our daughter Linda, who was then six years old would only get halfway to the school bus stop, which was seven blocks from our home, and because of the cold she would have to return.

For a six-year old child waiting on a school bus that was sometimes 30 minutes late in the kind of weather that we have in in Kansas was just too much to bear and too much for parents to tolerate. Bus transportation was not even provided for our kindergarteners. So an elaborate system of carpooling was establishing within the black community. Sometimes Linda would return home and tears would be frozen on her face.

[00:35:10]

Even in warm weather, whether walking to the bus stop was hazardous because the children had to walk through the busy and dangerous switching yards or the Rock Island Railroad and cross a busy avenue. In September of 1950, 12 black families had agreed to attempt to enroll their children in the schools nearest them. I remember the morning my husband took Linda by the hand and took her over to the white school, which was only four blocks and attempted to enroll her there.

He was told by the school principal that it was not his personal feelings but the policy of the school board. And that made it impossible to enroll her there. After trying to enroll our children, these 12 sets of parents who tried this, and being turned down, we went back to the NAACP and a case was filed in the federal court in February 1951. The case was argued in federal district court and it was decided in favor of the board of education. And it segregated elementary schools.

[00:36:24]

The funny thing about Topeka was that the secondary schools were always integrated, junior high, and high school. That is to say classes were integrated. But all activities and social events were segregated. There were black football and basketball teams within the school; also white football teams and basketball teams. Class parties were separate and held in different rooms.

In Topeka the issues was not so much integrating the elementary schools to improve the quality of instruction but rather then inaccessibility of the neighborhood schools. We lived only four blocks from one of the elementary schools for white children. My children played with white and Hispanic children all summer. Yet when fall came they had to be separated to attend school. And the children didn't really understand. They questioned me many times, "Why is this so?"

[00:37:21]

And my daughter wanted to know why she could not go with her friends. And I told her, "Dear, it's the color of your skin. They won't let you go to that school." Which she couldn't comprehend, a child six years old. During the local court battle, there was very definite division within the black community. There were those who felt this action was long overdue. And there were those who expressed concern about upsetting the balance of things, which they feared could lead to job loss and threats of violence.

The local school board, which somehow believed itself to be above reproach mailed threatening letters to the black teachers. I have one such letter here that I'd like to read in your hearing.

Dear Ms. Buchanan,

Due to the present uncertainty about enrollment next year in schools for Negro children, it is not possible at this time to offer you employment for the next year. If the Supreme Court should rule that segregation in the elementary schools is unconstitutional our board will proceed on the assumption that the majority of people in Topeka will not want to employ Negro teachers next year for white children. It is necessary for me to notify you now that your services will not be needed for next year. This is in compliance with the continuing contract law. If it turns out that segregation is not terminated, there will be nothing to prevent us from negotiating a contract.

You will understand that I am sending letters of this kind to only those teachers of the Negro schools who have been employed during the last year or two. It is presumed that

even though segregation should be declared unconstitutional, we will have need for schools for Negro children and we would then retain our Negro teachers to teach them.

I think I understand that all of you must be under considerable strain. And I sympathize with the uncertainties and inconveniences, which you must experience during this period of adjustment. I believe that whatever happens will be ultimately, will ultimately turn out to be the best for everyone concerned.

Sincerely,

Wendell Godwin, Superintendent of Schools

Now this was some of the things that we had to endure during that time.

After the unsuccessful attempts in federal court an appeal was made to the United States Supreme Court under the guidance of the NAACP's legal staff, headed by the now Honorable Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall.

[00:40:12]

At the Supreme Court level, the case was consolidated with similar cases from Clarendon County, South Carolina; Prince Edwards County, Virginia; and New Castle County, Delaware. And argued in terms of the psychological damage brought about by segregation in public education. Experts from the psychiatric community examined whether or not segregation served to break a youngster's morale and block the development of a strong, positive self-concept so essential to educational progress.

During that time my husband, the Reverend Oliver Brown, well his name was Oliver at that time, Oliver Leon [?] Brown was called into the ministry and received his first assignment to St. Mark's AME Church in Topeka, Kansas. Exactly one year later I was home doing the family ironing and listening to the radio. At 12 noon there was a flash and the regular program was interrupted for an important announcement. That announcement was the Supreme Court's decision on ending segregation was unanimous. Unanimous.

[Applause]

I was overwhelmed and could hardly wait for the children and my husband to get home that night so I could relay the news. When they came home I told them the news jubilantly and there was much happiness, rejoicing, tears, embracing, and prayers. That night our family attended a rally sponsored by the NAACP. Linda did not immediately benefit from the Supreme Court's decision because in the fall of 1954, she entered junior high school, which was already integrated. However, her two younger sisters, Terri and Cheryl were able to attend integrated elementary schools. Integration in that city that fall went very smoothly. It seemed as though black and whites had been going to school together for years.

[00:42:23]

My family never suffered any abuse and racial strife or received any threatening phone calls unlike that, which was suffered in many cities in other parts of the country. I think we were very lucky.

It was at this time after the decision was handed down that the Constitution of these United States became a living document to me because without the Fourteenth Amendment it might not have been possible to seek legal recourse to overturn a legal ruling such as Plessy versus Ferguson; paving the way for black people and other minorities and women to seek due process of law. Brown One was the original decision of 1954. Brown Two reflected the 1955 Supreme Court mandate that clarified what was meant by "with all deliberate speed."

[00:43:17]

Many of you are well aware that we were back in Topeka during the fall of 1986, which is being called Brown Three which is still in litigation. It has not been settled. As unfortunate as this may seem, this sends a message that we can never become complacent. We must keep examining our options, taking steps to ensure that the barriers of continued racism doesn't erode the progress we have made. It is in this country's best interest not to enter into a fourth decade since Brown, struggling with a definition of, "with all deliberate speed."

There are many places still in these United States that do not understand the mandate or simply mean to ignore it. But we must press on to make it known and to have it enforced throughout this century. Thank you.

[Applause]

[00:44:35]

CHRISTINE KING FARRIS: Thank you very much, Mrs. Montgomery. We're moving now to the mother of the Civil Rights Movement, Mrs. Rosa Parks.

[Applause]

Let me just give you a bit of background about Mrs. Parks. It was in 1955 in December, actually that she was working as a seamstress in a local department store that this well-known bus confrontation occurred. She was riding home after work on December the first of that year when she and three other blacks were asked to rise and move to the back of the bus to give places to the white rider. And of course, you know, that Mrs. Parks refused and the rest is history.

[Laughter]

[00:45:38]

And at this time I am happy to present to you the mother of the Civil Rights Movement, Dr. Rosa Parks.

[Applause]

ROSA PARKS: Thank you so very much, Ms. Farris and to Ms. Montgomery, and Ms. Lewis Tucker, Mrs. King, and all of us who are here assembled, friends of freedom and seekers of justice and equality for all people. And, of course, this women's conference has been and is very, very great. It does show the power of women and what we can do if we could make our minds

that we are going to be unified and work together. We have had a long history of, as they say, male chauvinism, and I had my part also in some instances. And I want to tell Mrs. Montgomery that was a very wonderful presentation that she made. And she revealed so many things I did not know about Brown versus the Board of Education case.

[00:47:11]

I was the secretary of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP and Attorney Thurgood Marshall, of course, was a special counsel. And if I recall, well I have to depend on my memory, I didn't make a prepared speech that he went to the Supreme Court a number of times with this case—not this case but to abolish racial segregation in the public schools. And it was in 1954, just as Mrs. Montgomery spoke, I did get the news about this decision being handed down.

And I felt, I think, for the very first time that there was opportunity for young people to get an equal education. I had already met Dr. Martin Luther King in early in the summer shortly after he came from Georgia. And Mrs. King, I had heard her beautiful voice on occasion at some recitals and some programs. But I didn't know them personally well enough to try to involve them in my youth counsel workshop.

[00:48:41]

So I went on anyway with what we had. And in the midst of this, I tried to get the election notices out for the senior branch and get together this workshop and hold my job at Montgomery Fair coming up to the Christmas holidays. I worked very hard. Sometimes I didn't even sleep at all. Sometime I would just lie down for an hour and get right up. Sometimes I didn't even go to bed.

But I was still in the struggle and trying my best to find a way out of the dilemma that we were in because it was being much oppressive or just too much so for the youth. And mind was always on youth because they could look at TV and they could know what was happening in other places, and other people were doing things. So I tried to keep them encouraged in Montgomery. And along with Mr. E.D. Nixon who wanted to find a litigant for this case, as it started with my arrest.

[00:49:59]

And again I had to go back to the December 1, 1955 after I had finished my day's work and boarded the bus and found one vacant seat. The back of the bus was very crowded with people standing all the way up to where I was sitting. And I don't know today why someone happened to leave that seat unless they saw me get on the bus and decided they wouldn't sit there. I don't know.

And it was just one of those incidents that when I, along with the other three people, and I wonder sometime if it would have been different if four of us had gone to jail instead of one. But of course they wanted to stay safe and it didn't matter to me what happened. Because I felt that I had endured much too long this oppression, this humiliation, or down right insult to me as a woman, and also as a passenger. That if I continued I would just not protest that it would be not in the best interest for me as an individual or us as a people.

[00:51:22]

And incidentally, I do want to mention that this same driver as I boarded the bus, I looked in his face and I remembered him as one who had evicted me from the bus as far back as 1943. When he—I didn't even try to sit down, even though there were some vacant seats and I noticed the black folks were all the way to the back standing up. So I walked straight back and went there to find a place to stand.

And just about the time I stood up he looked back and told me to go to the back door. And I told him I'm already on the bus and I don't see any need of getting out of the bus, going back around to get to the back door. So when he did that he rose from his seat and escorted me out of the bus and I had to find another way home. I don't remember now whether I walked the rest of the way home or rather I caught another bus.

But it was in the winter time and it was kind of late and it was getting dark early. When people asked me why did I wait until that day I can always say that I didn't wait to that day to protest. I had been protesting a long time.

[00:52:35]

But it was on December 5, 1955 that people decided, when they heard of my arrest that they would remain off the buses. And it was the very fact that when people remained off the buses and didn't ride on December 1st and they had the mass meeting at the Holt Street Baptist Church that same evening, everything was falling into place. And I was wondering what was going on. So I was very happy to know, first of all, that I had the fortitude to remain where I was and not give in. And the fact that this driver insisted on swearing out a warrant against me instead of just having me off the bus and going on by because the policeman was somewhat reluctant to take me to jail. And on Monday morning when I went to trial, the buses were empty. And we were happy about that. And people were walking.

[Applause]

[00:53:46]

People were walking in the street, young and old. Just it seemed that they just had a new spirit and they were walking straight. And I saw on *Eyes on the Prize* how they were walking. I suppose all of you have seen that. You see how people were walking in Montgomery. They had a new step, holding their heads up and looking brave and smiling. So didn't anyone look like they were downhearted at all even though they were walking.

And shortly after my trial was over there began the Montgomery Improvement Association because not too very long after that the NAACP was outlawed in Alabama. And it took some ten years for them to be declared a legitimate organization again. So in Montgomery we had the NAACP. In Tuskegee there was the Tuskegee Civic Association. Birmingham there was the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights. So every organization that got together, doing the same thing with the same people but not under the name of the NAACP.

[00:54:56]

Even though the NAACP remained a strong support in many ways but we just could not hold meetings and be an organized branch.

I could go on and on but I'll try to make this a little bit more brief and let you know that when the carpools were set up we had a transportation system in Montgomery under the leadership of Reverend Sims and Mr. Lewis there and others. They had dispatches in places. And it was very, very great to have such a system. At the churches, various churches, sometimes several churches at one night when they would be people singing and praying and shouting and rejoicing over our freedom. Because we were indeed free as to the transportation system. So we could not continue and did not at that particular time continue with implementing the Supreme Court decision on public schools but we were together in that manner.

[00:56:24]

And the attention was from Montgomery throughout the country and in other countries, too. And today if you go to Montgomery you will not only find everything integrated, no public signs. And on the buses you will not only find blacks driving the bus but we have black women as well who are driving the buses in Montgomery, Alabama.

[Applause]

And as long as the boycott law was considered illegal and there was so many incidents that I cannot name but I certainly would advise all of you to want know more about what Montgomery was is to read *Stride Toward Freedom*, Dr. Martin Luther King's first book. And I'm so happy to know that we have the Martin Luther King Center for Social Change, Center for Nonviolent Social Change. And Mrs. King is carrying on very strongly. She has five very fine young people and a sister and their families. It's just great to know that we, those of us who cared for Dr. King's philosophy, that we have not given up, we will not give up, but we will continue as long as life lasts. Thank you.

[Applause]

ANNOUNCER: You've been listening to the New American Gazette with this week's guest Coretta Scott King, Rosa Parks, Leola Brown Montgomery, and Christine King Farris. This program was recorded at the Women and the Constitution Conference in Atlanta on February 12, 1988 by the Carter Center of Emory University and the Jimmy Carter Library. The New American Gazette was produced for the Ford Hall Forum by Deborah Stavro. Post-production engineer is Roger Baker.

Funding for the New American Gazette is provided by Digital Equipment Corporation and Bank of Boston. The programs are produced in cooperation with the nation's eight presidential libraries, the National Archives and Northeastern University.

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