

Back in the Saddle  
(Or Just Going Along for the Ride)

Yesterday, September 15, 2011, I attended a Civil Rights Symposium, my first in at least 15 years or more. I learned about it through an e-mail from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (LDF). I am not sure why I still get mailings from them. I may have sent them a contribution for old times sake. The Symposium was sponsored by the Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice of Harvard Law School, headed by Prof. Charles Ogletree, and where my friend David Harris is now working. The title of the event was “Celebrating Challenges and Champions: From Houston to Marshall to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.”

After a great buffet lunch (who says there is no free lunch?) Dean Martha Minow and Prof. Ogletree welcomed everyone, and Lawrence Watson sang “Lift Every Voice...: to a very classy music and video accompaniment. The audience stood and clapped, no one missing a beat. I looked around. I did not know anyone, until I spotted an older white man, a lawyer I had known from the Greater Boston Civil Rights Coalition. He looked old, but I realize he must be 20 years younger than me. I suspect that invitations to the event went to a very select audience: the Institute’ mailing list, and LDF contributors. There may have been 75 to 100 people sitting at about 20 tables in the Ropes Gray Room of Pound Hall. Predominantly black, they ranged in age from students in their 20s to old folks like me, and even older.

With my buffet lunch and drink in hand, I looked for a place to sit. Most of the tables had three or four people at them, who seemed to know each other; tables of young people who I believed were black Harvard law school students; and tables of old people who reminded me of the black bourgeoisie. There was a table with five or six people, three of whom were white (the only other whites that I observed). Up front, was a table with a single black young man. I headed for it. I sat down, introduced myself and we started talking. I asked him if he was an HLS student. It turned out that he was a graduate of Yale Law School, that his mother told him about the Symposium, and that he was working as a lawyer for the State Department, stationed for a year in Kabul. His name was Steven Ker and he lived in Lexington.

A few minutes later, an older man sat down next to us and we introduced ourselves. Several people came over to him to say hello. He must have been important. Finally, his name—Walter Carrington—registered. When I started work at the Department of Employment and Training, I knew a Marilyn Carrington. Taking a long shot, I asked him if Marilyn Carrington was his sister. He looked surprised, and said yes. I asked him what he did, and he explained that he had been a Cambridge Councilman and Sargent Shriver asked him to come to Washington with him when the Peace Corps was established. He later was Ambassador to Trinidad. He was important.

When I ran conferences and symposia, I tried to get a big crowd. Ogletree was more selective. And he had an impressive line-up of speakers and panelists. It started with Professor Daniel Coquillette who presented a remarkable History of African Americans and Harvard Law School. HLS was founded by Isaac Royal, a brutal slaveholder, and the three sheaves of wheat on the school’s insignia is from his coat of arms. During the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, HLS recruited students from the South, and many Confederate Army officers were HLS graduates. For a very long time, HLS was not a welcoming school for African Americans. (I was back in

my lecture-attending mode: taking notes throughout the afternoon. And as usual, when I try to read them the next day, they are a jumble. But I managed to decipher a few good stories.)

In a panel “From Houston to Marshall to Today” I learned from LDF’s John Payton that Charles Hamilton Houston was Thurgood Marshall’s teacher, and the lawyer that drew the road map in 1935, that led to Brown vs. Board of Education. Houston talked about lawyers as either being social engineers or parasites. I like that. HLS Professor Randall Kennedy asked what do we want, and answered: racial justice. He noted that everyone can agree with that, but we may find that we interpret it differently. To the question, “When do we reach the Promised Land,” it was once answered, “When we have a black president.”

A terrific panel of former clerks to Justice Marshall came up with some great anecdotes: A prisoner was convicted of murder but couldn’t be sentenced to death because he required psychotropic drugs. Marshall asked how is it administered. By injection, he was told. Marshall sarcastically suggested that they give him enough to kill him. When he was getting old and was asked when he might step down, he said he will leave when he is 108 and shot by a jealous husband.

During the afternoon I kept looking around for David Harris. I finally spotted him standing in the back. I went over to him, we embraced, I asked him about the family and was told everyone was well. I asked about work, and David assured me that all was well there as well. I asked if he had had input in the conference, he said yes but gave me no details. What was clear was that almost all the panelists were published authors and their books were for sale in the outer hall. That may have been the motivation for the conference. As opposed to earlier conferences that I attended, I didn’t hang around and shmooze. I didn’t give anyone my business card and say let’s do lunch. I simply left before the conference was officially concluded, and walked to the 66 bus and went home.

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