

[1972]

AFTER FIFTEEN YEARS ON THE COMMISSION ON CIVIL RIGHTS

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In the 1972 Presidential campaign, I was appalled at the meager mention or consideration of what most Presidents came to see as their most pressing domestic problem: civil rights and race, or if you will, racial justice in America. For the preceding fifteen years, under four Presidents, I had been a member of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, and during the four preceding years of the first Nixon term, Chairman of the Commission.

As the election drew near, it became apparent to me that I must speak out on the issue, as strongly as possible, even though it would make President Nixon and his domestic team very unhappy. We had made great progress during the '60's, especially under President Johnson who almost single-handedly pushed through the keystone Civil Rights Law of 1964 which ended apartheid in America, followed by the Voting Rights Law of 1965 and the Housing Law of 1968.

Once Richard Nixon became President, we began to slow down, stand still, and then moved backward on most of the achievements of the '60's. It would be fair to say that the public was losing some interest in progress, too, especially as the problems shifted from the South to the North and struck liberals where they live. It is always easier to practice virtue for someone else and at a distance.

Anyway, in the late Summer of 1972, I returned from Europe and joined my brother and his family in a wonderful Alpine house in Vail, Colorado. Each morning for a few days I went out on the sundeck and wrote until the following article was finished. It really came from my inners and from fifteen years on the Commission. The New York Times kindly published it in their Sunday Magazine Section before the voting took place. Then I paid the price for criticizing the administration once too often, especially during an election.

Once President Nixon was re-elected in a landslide, I had a call during the next Monday morning's Executive meeting of the Commission in Washington. The secretary of John Erlichman's assistant, Mr. Malik, called my Executive Director telling him to tell me to be out of my Commission office by six that evening. It had to be one of the first firings of the newly-re-elected administration, slightly boorishly done, after fifteen years of difficult service. I took my time and sent in a resignation later in the week. That letter was finally acknowledged two months later when I was long gone. In retrospect, maybe they did me a favor, although I am sure that wasn't what they had in mind.

Four years later, last Fall, when another candidate, Governor Jimmy Carter, came to our campus in October to speak at our Center

for Civil Rights, I had the pleasure of introducing him by reading the first few paragraphs of this same article, published almost four years ago to the day, again a Sunday. Mr. Carter spoke at Notre Dame that day on human rights, here and abroad. He has continued to speak on the subject, and has acted courageously, too, despite a rising flood of cynical criticism. I am grateful that what was envisioned four years before in Vail, while only getting me fired as its first effect, may have had a delayed reaction. The problem is still our most pressing, still in need of leadership which, fortunately, it is now getting for an ultimate solution.