

Testimony of Dr. Ronald Walters

Hearings Pursuant to H.R. 685
The United States Civil Rights Trail System Act of 2009
Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands,
July 8, 2008,

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, I am Dr. Ronald Walters, Professor Emeritus, University of Maryland College Park and formerly Distinguished Leadership Scholar, Director of the African American Leadership Center and Professor of Government and Politics at the University of Maryland. I have been a participant in the Civil Rights movement, a former member of the Board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and a current member of the Rev. Joseph Lowery Institute. I have written widely on the subject and have this year visited the site of some of the historically significant events.

Introduction: The Importance of the Project

The Civil Rights Movement is one of the touchstones of fabric of American Democracy which cannot be undervalued in terms of its domestic and global significance. In defying laws that set limits on the human condition and opportunities of peoples of African descent in America, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. whose Judeo-Christian ethic posited the right of African-Americans to defy unjust laws. This ethic connects with the Boston Tea Party, the justification of the American Revolution and the sentiments in the Declaration of Independence which held that it was right of citizens to “alter or abolish” oppressive conditions under which they lived.

As such, when peoples in this country or abroad have mounted movements to change their circumstances, they have often utilized the example of the Civil Rights movement as a model for their actions. Therefore, it has achieved in this country an iconic status marking the progress of African Americans citizens, but it has also empowered other groups with citizenship rights such as Hispanics, Asians, Women, Americans with disabilities, those who experience age discrimination and others.

Americans, however, are very often not aware of how extensive is the global reach of the symbol of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. actions and the Civil Rights movement. When the March on Washington of 1963 was held at the Lincoln Memorial, African Americans in Paris ignited a petition drive for equal rights for Blacks in America that spread all over Europe. Then, on the day of the March 2,500 people also marched

in Kingston, Jamaica in sympathy and thousands more marched in Amsterdam, Oslo, Cairo, and Accra.

That is why it was not surprising to see the students involved in the pro-democracy movement fill Tiananmen Square in Beijing, China in 1989 and invoke the slogan of “we shall overcome” in their attempt to foster greater democracy in that country as they faced down tanks in the streets.

In my own travels to many countries as a Distinguished faculty lecturer for the USIA, whether in Japan, Germany, Brazil, and other countries I have encountered both colleagues, as well as government officials and journalists who were quite familiar with the precedent that the Civil Rights Movement set. They have been eager to know how well it has worked and the extent to which it has helped to promote progress for African Americans and other disadvantaged groups in America.

Then, as an academic with ties to communities of African descent in many parts of the world, I have witnessed the attempt of peoples who are generally the most disadvantaged in any country I have visited, attempt to use the model of the Civil Rights movement to challenge their governments to redress problems of racial discrimination. So, as much as the Civil Rights movement is often celebrated as a domestic movement, its importance is part of the substance that buttresses the claim of American democracy to be a force for the liberation of oppressed people all around the world.

Yet, the Congress should be aware of the fact that in many states the sensitivity of the event prevented educators and government officials from including such events in the history of their cities and states and thusly in the process of formal education. Since students are hungry to know all of the history of this country some, such as students at the University of Michigan (who were originally involved in the 1964 Freedom Summer) have used their Spring Break period to travel into the cities that were the scene of events marking the Civil Rights movement.

Potential Sites

The importance of the Civil Rights movement, therefore, continues to demand the respect that it has earned as a part of American history that should be further institutionalized. Although it has achieved some measure of recognition because of the events surrounding the Birthday and the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the more complete story of the places of seminal events occurred is not yet a part of the American narrative. Yet, the Civil Rights movement was a peoples movement and the stories of common heroism of ordinary people is the real motivating force that generated a national thrust for social change. As this story cries out for a more profound level of recognition, an appropriate mechanism for

developing a more coherent opportunity for both Americans and foreign guests to consume this historical saga is the serious consideration and passage of H. R. 685, sponsored by Rep. Lacy Clay (for himself and Rep. Zach Wamp) and his co-Sponsors.

The work of the envisioned feasibility study in identifying valid sites for a trail associated with the Civil Rights movement could be a daunting task and while it would no doubt reveal many credible sites, fortunately, there is a new book, by Charles Cobb, Jr., *On the Road to Freedom: A Guided Tour of the Civil Rights Trail* (Algonquin Press, 2008) that identifies many of them. The work of Charles Cobb is authenticated by the fact that he was a veteran of the Civil Rights movement as Field Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee that was active in many of the Southern sites and his role as a journalist equipped him to write meaningfully about what occurred at these places. Exemplary of some of the places mentioned, there are sites listed in the following states:

Tennessee:

Nashville: The Nashville Public Library Civil Rights Room
Memphis: The National Civil Rights Museum, Lorraine Motel

Mississippi:

Philadelphia: Highway 21 South of Town, The Old Jolly Farm
Jackson: The Old Capitol Museum
The Evers House, 2332 Margaret Walker Alexander Dr.

Ruleville: Home town of Fannie Lou Hammer

Alabama:

Montgomery:

Selma to Montgomery Trail (Voting Rights Trail
Interpretative Center
Dexter Avenue King Memorial Church
Rosa Parks Library Museum
Edmund Pettus Bridge
National Voting Rights Museum and Institute

Washington, DC:

Lincoln Memorial (March on Washington, 1963)
National Mall (scene of repeated Civil Rights
demonstrations)
U. S. Capitol (Built by slaves)

Regional Scope

The development of a Civil Rights Trail also presents an opportunity to construct a national context for the Civil Rights movement which, although most of the dramatic incidents occurred in the South, important events also happened in Northern and border states such as Detroit, Chicago, Kansas, Missouri, Arkansas and others. Topeka, Kansas was the site of the historic Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. The saga of school integration played out in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 through President Dwight Eisenhower's protection

of the "Little Rock Nine" by the use of federal troops. Recently recognized by City officials of Wichita, Kansas and the National NAACP was the 1958 NAACP Youth Council protests that desegregated the Dockum Drug store in the heart of town, one of the Rexall Drug store chain.

This initiated other Sit-ins that eventually led to those in Greensboro, NC. In the City of Detroit the CORE chapter supported Freedom Rides in 1960-1961 and in 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. first presented his "I have a dream" speech. The City of Chicago was host to Dr. King, throughout most of 1966 and 1967 as he sought to bring justice to a population that Hosea Williams, an SCLC staff member found to be "depleted of hope."

Indeed, in 2004, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) and the Library of Congress constructed a civil rights trail, "Voices of the Civil Rights movement," and took a bus tour to gather stories of participants in the Civil Rights movement. This tour covered 39 cities in 22 states, traveling through the traditional South, but including Kansas, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Wisconsin, Illinois, Missouri and Nevada, illustrating the national reach of the movement that constituted the whole cloth of this demand for justice.

Disparate Projects

A number of Civil Rights memorials have been established in various cities around the country, and while that is a strength to support such a project, it is something of a weakness in that they do not have the coherence that a "trail" would have in linking key events together in some rational manner that supports the narrative of the movement. Some such sites do exist that have direct relevance to the Civil Rights movement and others have been created that have local significance that may exist as feeder stations to such a national "trail."

In addition, strong institutional support for this project exists not only in the archives of existing projects on the Civil Rights movement at the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Center in Atlanta, Georgia but there are other projects, such as that compiling Dr. King's papers at by Professor Clay Carson at Stanford

University, the King papers at Boston University and Morehouse in Atlanta, the Civil Rights Documentation Project at the Moreland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University and others. Moreover, as indicated above, many cities have begun to collect and archive papers of their local events related to the Civil rights movement through libraries such as:

- the Nashville Library Civil Rights Room that collected records of the student Sit-ins in that city, led by my Fisk University colleagues Diane Nash and John Lewis;
- specialized museums, such as The National Civil Rights Institute in Memphis, Tenn,
- the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute,
- the Civil Rights Memorial Center at the Southern Poverty Law Center.
- Recently, the State of Mississippi appropriated \$73 million in order to construct a Civil Rights museum to be located on site near Tougaloo College that is expected to draw 125,000 visitors per year.

Many of the national efforts will be supported by the newly constituted National Museum of African American History and Culture, a major national institution that is part of the Smithsonian system. Congress has recently passes a bill that has been signed into law (P.L. 111-19) that enables it to “collect video and audio recordings of personal histories and testimonials of individuals who participated in the Civil Rights movement.”

Models for the Creation of a Civil Rights Trail Project

One model for the Civil Rights movement Trail Project is the Harriet Tubman Special Resource Study for the Underground Railroad. It was funded by Congress in 1990 in order to identify the most efficient manner in which the historic phenomenon of the Underground Railroad might be memorialized. In my opinion, two such findings of the Resource Study may be relevant to this project. They are as follows:

Concept B. “An appreciation of the Underground Railroad would be accomplished by improving existing interpretative programs and by implementing new programs that would provide visitors with a complete, in-depth understanding of the Underground Railroad while focusing on local aspects of the story of the site.”

Discussion: As indicated above, several cities and states have developed resources that are designed to memorialize local aspects of the Civil Rights movement. The task of related them to the larger narrative in a coherent way that tells a more complete story of the Civil Rights movement for the American people should be a major objective of this project. The concept of a “Trail”

suggests that it will be possible to link together places where important events occurred and to enable people to access those sites through some mode of travel.

The task of developing this narrative might naturally fall to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in association with the research and museum centers already established. However, the mandate and support for the creation of interpretative programs might be a part of the finding of the feasibility study created by H.R 685.

Concept E. "Visitors would have an opportunity to travel along trail systems that evoke the perilous experience encountered by those who sought freedom through escape on the Underground Railroad. A variety of natural resources along these trail systems would help to bring this story alive. A trail or trails would be designated through the National Trails Systems Act of 1968, as amended.

Discussion: The model of a trail then, would be deliberately constructed and criteria would have to be developed for the inclusion of sites (cities, monuments, museums, etc.) in the trail. Elements of historicity, such as the timing of events might also be considered so as to make a logical narrative consumable by the public. So, major events could have priority as they related to historically timed events, but local events related to them could be part of the story as well.

Tourism

The fact that tourism has been a major objective of cities and states enacting projects in the field of Civil Rights gives substantial evidence that there is public interest in these historical events. Many of the initiatives are constructed with the intent to provide a "trail" that visitors can use to access such events. For example:

- The State of Virginia unveiled a Civil Rights in Education Heritage Trail to mark the 50th anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education Supreme Court decision at four sites in Halifax County'
- In 2007 The City of St. Augustine, Florida established the ACCORD Freedom Trail Project to commemorate its role in the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Major sponsor, Northrop Grumman;
- In 2008, the Alabama Department of Tourism initiated the Civil Rights Heritage Trail in the Black Belt association with Auburn University to commemorate the Civil Rights movement in Alabama history;
- The Selma to Montgomery Trail established in 1996 to commemorate the Voting Rights March already exists as a project of the National Park Service which annually draws thousands of visitors.
- This year, the City of Birmingham appropriated \$1 million to

establish a Civil Rights Trail that would include several sites.

The establishment of such sites are a clear indication that cities and states have confidence, based on the popularity of such sites, that they will contribute to tourism and thus, to the economic development of such areas. This focus could turn out to be a very worthwhile mechanism to foster economic development at sites that are gross underdeveloped.

For example, I visited Marks, Mississippi this year on a poverty tour of the Mississippi Delta; it was the site selected by Dr. King because it was in the poorest county in the United States in 1968. We went into Marks, Mississippi and there on one corner was a billboard showing the spot where Dr. Martin Luther King's staff began the mule train for the Poor People's March to Washington, DC in April of 1968 to dramatize the plight of the poor. The poverty status of the people of Marks remains not much improved until this day.

Conclusion

Finally, as one who testified in both Houses of the Maryland Assembly before it passed a statement expressing "deep regret" for slavery, I note that a critical question came to me then that was reiterated when the U. S. Senate and then one year later the House of Representatives passed resolutions expressing apologies for slavery – "what does it mean?" One thing it could mean is that the Civil Rights movement that was designed to help erase the stigma of slavery from the nation should be properly memorialized as an era when many races, genders, ages and sections of the country repudiated a racist past and sought a way forward to a brighter future. The passage of H. R. 685 would support the task of studying the feasibility of such a Civil Rights trail project. This Bill presents another opportunity for the country to erect the most visible evidence that in valuing these memorials it also expresses its determination to move from slavery to freedom. I urge its passage by this Committee, the Committee on Natural Resources and by the full Congress.

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