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Tel. 301-504-2240

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Remarks By  
Dr. Ivan Selin, Chairman  
United States Nuclear Regulatory Commission  
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**"WORTH A LIFE": THE LIBERATORS AND THEIR LEGACY**

It is a pleasure and an honor to take part in this celebration of African-American history. I do so today in part as a mark of respect for the African-Americans who are so valued a part of the NRC community, but not for that reason alone. I am taking part because I also believe strongly that the men and women who are remembered and revered, when African-American history is discussed, are not and should not be heroes and role models for black people alone. Every child in this country, regardless of race and regardless of sex, can be proud to have a Frederick Douglass, a Harriet Tubman, a Rosa Parks, and a Martin Luther King as part of his or her national heritage.

A few weeks ago, a towering figure in American history passed from the scene. That was Thurgood Marshall, who died at the age of 84. The news accounts of his death all began by referring to Thurgood Marshall as the "first black justice of the Supreme Court," but that description, while true, did not begin to capture the breadth of his achievement. Many referred also to the fact that he was the lawyer who won the landmark school desegregation case, Brown v. Board of Education, in 1954. That too was only part of the story. For when Justice Sandra Day O'Connor described him, not long before he died, as a "real, first-class, American hero," she was talking about something more. What she had in mind were the many years, beginning in the 1930's, in which Thurgood Marshall, as head of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, made trip after trip into the heart of segregated America to fight for civil rights.

Thurgood Marshall did not know, when he left on those solitary journeys, that he would live to sit on the Supreme Court. He did not even know that he would live to sit at his own dinner table again. Threats against his life were routine, and they were not empty threats. On one of his trips he was seized

by a gang of men and led away to be lynched. A group of local black men, at peril of their own lives, followed; because they refused to leave, and the gang was afraid of witnesses, he was released. One of the rescuers went back to the scene the next day and retrieved a souvenir -- the hangman's noose that had been prepared for Thurgood Marshall's neck.

Thurgood Marshall knew very well that if someone decided to kill him, the system of justice of that place and time would do very little about it. But he kept on, fighting and winning the legal battles and inspiring his staff of lawyers. Sometimes they would get discouraged and frightened, worn down by the violence, harassment, and threats. And then Thurgood Marshall would talk to them, giving them heart for the battle, not denying the danger but accepting it. The cause of freedom and equality was, he said, "worth a life."

"Worth a life" -- those three words sum up the heroism not just of Thurgood Marshall, but also of Harriet Tubman and Medgar Evers, of Martin Luther King and James Chaney and John Lewis, of the soldiers of the 54th Massachusetts during the Civil War and the nine students who integrated Little Rock's Central High School in 1957. Some of them paid with their lives and some did not, but all of them knew they might die, and accepted the risk nonetheless. In so doing, they established their place as heroes and heroines of African-American history, and more generally of American history.

From my point of view, having lived through the years of the civil rights movement, people like Thurgood Marshall, Rosa Parks, and Martin Luther King were liberators, not just of African-Americans, but of all Americans. They knew that America could not call itself a free country while so many of its people remained deprived of their most basic rights. They understood too that racism was itself a kind of bondage, that far too many of their fellow citizens, North and South, black and white, were prisoners of the prejudice in which they had grown up. And let me emphasize North and South, for racism and discrimination are and always have been a national phenomenon, North, South, East, and West. No one part of this country has grounds to point fingers at any other on this score.

For me and countless others of my generation, the civil rights movement of the 1950's and 1960's was a central, formative experience in our lives, shaping our notions about what America stood for, about justice, about service to one's community and one's country, and about human courage and strength.

The civil rights movement held a mirror up to the face of America; America looked in it and was not proud of what it saw. I was at the March on Washington in 1963, and it was one of the

most moving experiences of my life, although it took me years to understand its full meaning for me. It helped me to appreciate anew one of the lessons that the world learned from the tragic events of the 30's and 40's in Europe: that one community cannot stand by while another is mistreated, or all will eventually suffer.

The legal injustices that Thurgood Marshall did so much to eradicate are only part of the problem, however. The even greater challenge, where America continues to lag, is in providing real economic equality to all its citizens. That is a reality that all the great African-American liberators, down through history, have known: that the rights of citizenship do not mean much unless accompanied by equality of economic opportunity. Frederick Douglass made that point powerfully long ago. Observing that when Russia freed the serfs in 1861, each one was given three acres of land, he wrote:

Not so when our slaves were emancipated. They were sent away empty-handed, without money, without friends and without a foot of land to stand upon. Old and young, sick and well, they were turned loose to the open sky, naked to their enemies.

A century later, when a quarter million Americans gathered on the Mall on a hot August day in 1963, the march was called a "March for Jobs and Freedom." You see which came first.

For all the progress made in the 30 years since 1963, we also know full well that many Americans are still waiting for true equality of economic opportunity.

Finally, while we are here today to talk about African-American and American history, which implies a focus on the past, we must realize that history is being written every day, by the people in our midst. It is up to all of us how that history will be written -- and I mean all of us: tomorrow's leader, tomorrow's role model, tomorrow's liberator may be the child whose lunch you packed this morning.

Fifty and a hundred years from now, will history look back on these decades and record that America entered the 21st Century progressing toward greater equality of economic opportunity, greater freedom from the bonds of prejudice, and greater mutual understanding and respect? We do not know. What we do know, however, is that every American has a stake in how that question is answered, and in seeing that the nation's promise is fulfilled for all its citizens. The great African-American liberators have helped all Americans to understand the inescapable truth that we are all in this together.

