

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

The Long Night's Journey, 1877-1941

Speaker: Linda Reed

Thank you. On behalf of the University of Alabama in Huntsville and on behalf of President Frank Franz, I am very pleased to welcome all of you to this lecture series focusing on the history and impact of the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama. This historic initiative brings to Huntsville, distinguished speakers who will reflect on events of the past and who will share with us their hopes for the future. I must once again commend the faculty from the University of Alabama in Huntsville and from Alabama A&M University, who worked over a period of more than two years to make this possible. Those faculty include, but are not limited to, John Dimmock, Lee Williams, Jack Ellis, Mitch Berbrier from UAH, and James Johnson and Carolyn Parker from Alabama A&M. I am very pleased that you could be with us.

Good evening. It is my pleasure to take a couple of moments to acknowledge our sponsors. These are the people who have made it possible for us to do all these kinds of things. They have given us funds and all kinds of support. They are the Alabama Humanities Foundation, a state program of the National Endowment for the Humanities; Senator Frank Sanders; The Huntsville Times; DESE Research Inc.; Mevatec Corporation; and Alabama Representative, Laura Hall. At Alabama A&M, we have the Office of the President, Office of the Provost, the State Black Archives Research Center and Museum, Title III Telecommunications and Distance Learning Center, Office of Student Development, the Honor Center, Sociology/Social Work Programs and the History Political Science Programs. At the University of Alabama in Huntsville, we have

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the Office of the President, Office of the Provost, The History Forum Banking Foundation, Sociology, Social Issues Symposium, The Humanities Center, The Division of Continuing Education, the Honors Program and the Office of Multi-Cultural Affairs, Office of Student Affairs and the UAH Copy Center. Let's give these people a show of appreciation. I've been asked to announce that the Charles Moore exhibit, and by the way, Charles Moore's pictures are the ones you see on our brochure that hopefully each of you has received. The Charles Moore exhibit on Civil Rights Photos will open at the Union Grove Gallery on the UAH campus, Monday through Friday, 12:30 until 4:30. Is it already open Jack? It is already open. I also need to ask you to remember to please turn in to us your evaluation forms. You may leave them with any of the ladies at the back. If you have to leave them on your chair, that's fine but please fill out the evaluation forms and leave those with us. We would appreciate that. I have the pleasure of presenting the young lady who is going to introduce our speaker. Ms. Melanie Crutchfield, a sophomore premed major from Columbus, Georgia is a valued member of the Alabama A&M University Honors Program. She is broadly involved in all aspects of the program. She is a varsity Honda Campus All Star Challenge Participant and she represented us in Orlando for this national competition. She will represent A&M University in New York at the Thurgood Marshall Scholar's Conference. She has distinguished herself as an up-and-coming scholar and she plans to become a medical doctor, specializing in Pediatric Pathology and Childhood Diseases. I am delighted to present to you, Ms. Melanie Crutchfield, who will introduce our speaker for this seminar.

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Introduction: This evening's presenter, Dr. Linda Reed, returns to our campus in a capacity that personifies the excellence and accomplishments that our legacy allows us to expect of our graduates. Dr. Reed is a 1977 graduate of Alabama A&M University. She received her Ph.D. from Indiana University, with a specialization in African-American History, Twentieth Century. Her accomplishments are numerous and distinctive. She presently serves as Associate Professor of History at the University of Houston and with the Martin Luther King Jr./Cesar Chavez/Rosa Parks, Visiting Professor at Michigan State University. Additionally her career has taken her to various positions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Auburn University, as well as Indiana University. Her awards too, are many and varied. She is a Ford Foundation Fellow, a Carter G. Woodson Fellow, a University of Houston City Council Brain Wit Award Winner and a recipient of the Young Black Achievers of Houston Award, Question and Review. Dr. Reed has published a variety of books and essays relevant to the Civil Rights Movement. Some of those include, *Fannie Lou Hamer, Civil Rights Leader, Brown Decision, Historical Context and an Historian's Reflection*, various entries in the Encyclopedia of African-American Civil Rights and the award winning book, *Simple Decency and Common Sense: The Southern Conference Movement*. Her intellectual interest is in the American South and the General Civil Rights. It is my pleasure to present to you our speaker for this evening's program, Dr. Linda Reed.

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Linda Reed: I think I will hire Melanie to introduce me all around. It is certainly a pleasure to be back to what is practically home to me, Alabama A&M University. The secret is out. I graduated in 1977. I think some of us were talking earlier and one person said, "You probably don't want to say what year you graduated." So the secret is out. Thank you Melanie! That was such a wonderful introduction. I want to thank the planning committee for thinking so highly of my work in terms of what I have done with some of the interpretations of the Civil Rights Movement, in order to include me in this very stellar group of scholars and activists from that period. It is really an honor. I said to one of the persons on the planning committee that I wish I could just come back to each one of these lectures myself. They are just absolutely fantastic and I am truly honored to be included among that group of individuals.

I want to share just one story about my time here at Alabama A& M University. I was telling this to one of the students earlier today. You know, Alabama A&M is referred to as the Hill and so students may not realize it. Your exercise program is built in. Well, we're into physical fitness now. I won't tell you what my weight was when I used to be a student here. I used to have classes down in this area of the campus. Just before choir practice, I would walk all the way across campus up to either Buchanan Hall or one of the dorms up on the highest part of the hill, for a fifteen-minute power nap before six o'clock choir rehearsal. I was in the choir the entire four years that I was here. It is just wonderful to think about that built-in exercise program. That is just one of the stories, but there are so many that I could share about this wonderful institution. Just one more, and this is really for the young people who might be students here, or students

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anywhere else. One of the things that was said to me in the very first weeks of the time that I was here was from Dr. Henry Bradford. It was in chapel. He said, "There is no reason why any of you should leave Alabama A&M University and not be known on your campus." I have made that part of my life's mission that wherever I am, people should know who I am and what I stand for, so much so that as I resigned from being director of the African-American Studies Program this summer, one of the things my dean said about me was, "Well you know Linda will come with her issues and she is not always so soft spoken about them, to put it mildly." I learned a lot while I was here at Alabama A& M and I am very appreciative of it.

This evening I want to talk about the subject "Simple Decency and Common Sense, A Message for all Times." Some of you might know that this title is taken from the book with that same title. America must be concerned with bridging economic gaps and perhaps a small group, such as the Southern Conference Movement, that is willing to step ahead of the status quo people of our time, would be a start. Yes, our problems are of the magnitude to require federal actions but individual efforts could also help. With a limited time to speak this evening, I want to talk about the Southern Conference for Human Welfare's founding, about the significance of my labeling the Southern Conference Movement's Mission as one of simple decency and common sense and some of the struggles of the other organizations, the Southern Conference Educational Fund in the period just after the 1940's, a lot of the work was carried on the 1940's but some of the work took us into the 1950's.

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I want to make a brief mention up front about the Southern Conference Movement and how it began. I talked a little bit about how happy I am to be back at my alma mater but also it is very appropriate to talk about the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and the Southern Conference Educational Fund here because Alabama is the place where the Southern Conference Movement had its beginning. In 1938, at President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's urging, the National Emergency Council, made up largely of Southerners, including the University of North Carolina's president, Frank P. Graham, and labor organizer Luther Randolph Mason, studied economic conditions of the South. I will talk a little bit about that more. But then, there is also the question of why there was a need for the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in 1938.

During the 1870's and 1880's, as white Southerners struggled to compete with the North's rapidly growing economy, progressive Southerners coined the term *New South* to draw attention to the region's industrial growth. The South proved hospitable to a variety of industries, textiles, tobacco, steel, and iron railroads. Southern industries in one way or another enjoyed the advantages of proximity to raw material, more transportation cost and cheap labor. With industry concentrated in large cities such as Birmingham, Alabama; Atlanta, Georgia; Richmond, Virginia; and Louisville, Kentucky, the *New South* eventually came to reference as the South of the cities, factories and blast furnaces as opposed to the rural South. *New South* people wanted the South to move forward industrially. What about all of its regions? What about the rest of the South? The Southern society for the promotion of the study of race conditions in the South, meeting in Montgomery, Alabama, gives us a clue. In 1900, that organization epitomized the

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views of the various *New South* spokesperson on the concept of white supremacy. This lily-white gathering set out to solve the Southern racial problem beginning with placing the blame on black people for the backwardness of the Southern economy. The conferees failed to produce a single responsible proposal by which to resolve their grade problem because they defined the South and Southerners as white and refused to see the black people as an integral part of the Southern economy. This analysis contained a serious contradiction. As a Southern society for the promotion of the study of race conditions in the South blamed Africa- Americans for the region's economic troubles. Indeed, if the economic situation of the whites improved and that of blacks remained dismal, all would be well, the white organization believed. The social dominance of whites and absolute degradation of black people remained the organization's most important goal. Black Americans must be kept wholly within the limits of Jim Crow at all cost, according to this organization.

By the 1930's and 1940's, the South remained in many ways the same as the South of the 1880's and 1890's and also what that organization talked about in terms of the 1900's, despite the claim of some southerners that after the turn of the century, the region could be labeled a *New South*. In 1938, a small group of mostly white southern liberals gave the term a new meaning. Southern liberals of the twentieth century did not dissociate the *New South* totally from its original intended use. In addition to *New South* denoting industrial development, Southern liberals used the term to suggest that Southerners finally needed to dismantle old South values in regard to racial equality. In a sense, in Southern economic problems of the 1930's, Southern liberals, unlike most white

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Southerners, figured inequities and discrimination against African-Americans as major drawbacks for the fullest development of the Southern economy. Although the region had gone far in its industrial growth, Southern liberals argued that racial inequities slowed economic progress in the realization of the *New South*. Blacks, still treated as inferior, continued to be disfranchised, to face violence at the hands of racist whites, to be denied well paying jobs, to experience injustice in the judicial system, and to be forced to live in narrowly circumscribed and substandard housing. Simply put, blacks in the South, during the twentieth century, like those of the late nineteenth century, continuously faced conditions of economic, political and social oppression. Indeed, between 1920 and 1930, over a million black people left the region in search of a better life in the North and other sections of the country. Yet the South held the majority of the black population. Liberal Southern whites eventually allied themselves with those educated African-Americans who stayed in the American South in their struggle for justice, initially addressing the economic gap between the racist and later political and social unfairness. The federal government helped Southern liberals associate industrialism with Southern values also. However productive the South had been at the turn of the century, by 1938 the *New South* prosperity had become precarious. Also, in 1938 the National Emergency Council, a group that President Roosevelt set up to study economic conditions in the South, described the region as the nation's number one economic problem, the nation's problem, not merely the South's.

Although the South was the poorest region in the country, the NEC's report on the economic conditions of the South argued, "It has the potential for becoming the richest."

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The report contended that institutional deficiencies kept the South from realizing its potential. In discussions on economic resources, education, health, housing and labor, the NEC addressed the same issues that Southern liberals tackled to create a just society. The NEC concluded that the South's white population suffered because of the regions poor economy and that black people suffered more. The Roosevelt administration and the NEC linked Southern poverty and racism in an unprecedented way, but having negative commentary on the South, left Southerners to search for their own solutions.

Southerners generally agreed with the findings of the NEC report, but refused to support it because they did not feel strong support for President Roosevelt and there was a great deal of anti-New Deal sentiment. At the same time, Southern liberals in particular, accepted that the region's economic problems were tied to its resistance to end racial discrimination. In direct response to the NEC report, a group of Southern black and white liberals founded the Southern Conference for Human Welfare in Birmingham, Alabama in November of 1938. The Southern Conference for Human Welfare and the Southern Conference Educational Fund, the group that the Southern Conference set up in 1946 for tax-exempt purposes and to further its work in race relations, fought to create a democratic South, an effort that faced all kinds of obstacles and difficulties. Indeed the importance of maintaining white supremacy, especially the economic dominance of whites over black, was so paramount in the minds of many Southern whites that they were willing to see the entire region languish in order to maintain their way of life.

Most Southern whites considered economic dominance central to the maintenance of white supremacy and remained committed to sustaining racial segregation. Even at the

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height of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960's, most white Southerners resisted efforts to end racial discrimination. Yet, not all whites were segregationists, as the activities of the inter-racial Southern Conference to Human Welfare and the Southern Conference Educational Fund made clear. As I said, it was organized in the fall of 1938, largely through the efforts of Louise O. Charleston, a Southern white woman and commissioner in Birmingham. The Southern Conference to Human Welfare sought to help Southern whites to understand that to remove limitations on its African-American citizens was to ensure the region's greater prosperity. The Southern led Southern Conference became a welfare for its time, became the progressive movement, a movement that would respond to the NEC report with specific prescriptions to cure the ills that the report described. The Southern Conference to Human Welfare's recommendation challenged President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the Congress and especially Southern citizens, to improve the regions. The Southern Conference for Human Welfare singled out, for instance, the unequal facilities for white and black school children. The organizations membership reminded its region that a supreme court decision of Plessy versus Ferguson of 1896, that states could set up separate facilities for black people as long as these places were equal to those that were provided for whites. The problem, of course, as the Southern Conference for Human Welfare reminded, was that places for black people never equaled those places that were set up for whites, if any were provided at all.

The Southern Conference for Human Welfare also pointed out the problem with unequal salaries of black and white teachers and unequal incomes of black and white

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tenant farmers as examples of the inequity and wastefulness of a racially segregated society. Races that could not reap equal benefits for their labor could not live together harmoniously. It is important to emphasize that the ideas and ideals underlying the creation of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, have a history stretching back to the *New South* era of the 1880's. During the 1880's, a number of prominent white Southerners coined the term *New South* in a concerted effort to incite actions for Southern economic growth. In 1938, what some of the white Southerners were saying is that there was a new way to put it and that way was to be inclusive of everyone. The Southern Conference for Human Welfare became involved in many issues, even though its origins grew out of a determination to improve the South economically. From 1938 to 1948, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare's major goal was to repeal the poll tax, one of those road blocks set up in late nineteenth century America to prevent black males from voting. In many Southern communities, whites feared that if African-Americans were allowed to exercise their right to vote, they would gain too much political power. Recall that in the time of redemption, that is the return of white rule after reconstruction ended in 1877 with the inauguration of Rutherford B. Hayes as President, black men voted when they could vote at all. When they voted, they voted Republican. As a result, during the 1890's, Southern states, including Alabama, began using several tactics to deny the vote to blacks. Some states required voters to own property or to pay poll tax, a special fee that must be paid before a person was permitted to vote. Both of these requirements were beyond the financial reach of most African-Americans. Voters also had to pass literacy tests. These tests were supposed to demonstrate that a voter could

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read, write and meet minimum standards of knowledge, but like the property requirement and the poll tax, literacy tests were really designed to keep African-Americans from voting. In fact, whites often gave African-Americans much more difficult tests than the ones given to whites. With some of the speakers who will come later on, you will get real specific examples of how those tests when given in the 1950's and 1960's were really ridiculous. If you ever get a chance to visit the Civil Rights Museum in Memphis, there is a little mechanical device in there where you just spin the wheel and it points out to you a possibility of how you might have been denied the right to vote on any particular day. It could include a whole array of things as, "Well, you didn't know how many bubbles were in a bar of soap" or something that ridiculous. But those tests did continue in big waves all the way up into the 1960's and that is one of the reasons why you hear about the Freedom Schools. That was a way to try to educate voters so that they could pass the test. To ensure that the literacy test did not keep too many poor whites from voting, some states passed special laws with grandfather clauses. These laws exempted men from certain voting restrictions if they had already voted or, if they had ancestors, for instance grandfathers, who had voted prior to black males being granted suffrage. African-Americans, of course, did not meet the qualifications and thus had to take the literacy tests. All of these laws kept African-Americans from voting while not singling out the group name, which would have been unconstitutional. Even though there were some of these that were declared unconstitutional in 1950 and the time after, some states continued the practice. Alabama, Louisiana and North Carolina, were the only three Southern states that interfered with voters with the specific use of all four measures, that

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is, using the grandfather clause, the property tax, the literacy test, and the poll tax. Georgia was the only Southern state that did not use the poll tax and the poll tax remained a problem as late as 1938. Between 1938 and 1948, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, through its institutionalized Civil Rights committee, brought into formation a national committee to abolish the poll tax.

One of the key people in the campaign to abolish the poll tax was a woman from Alabama, Virginia Durr. A lot of you had an opportunity to meet her. I interviewed her for the scholarship presented in *Simple Decency and Common Sense*. She was a very colorful person in terms of her take on life. I guess you had to be in order to endure as much as some of these individuals did. She was very forceful in that campaign to abolish the poll tax between 1938 and 1948. Of course, a lot of the work included distributing literature, speakers and a whole series of educational kinds of things. The work was quite forbidding. It was not until the 1960's, with constitutional amendment, that the poll tax was finally abolished. But, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare made that whole effort part of its goal. It was a very forthright goal.

There were quite a number of other individuals involved in the Southern Conference Movement. I have mentioned Louise Charleston, a woman from Birmingham, Alabama. Joseph Gelzers was a physics professor at the University of Alabama who was also quite important for the work of the Southern Conference Movement. There were a number of college presidents, business people, labor leaders and workers and so with this cross section, a Southern Conference for Human Welfare boasted of having every segment of society represented and participating in its serious

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campaigns and activities. Two of those individuals you have probably learned a little bit about. One of these people was Mary McCloud Bethune, who was founder of what we came to know as the Bethune Cookman College, and her dear friend, Eleanor Roosevelt. They became true pals in a lot of the work in the 1930's all the way up through the time of Bethune's death in the 1950's and Eleanor Roosevelt's death in the 1960's. Both of them were present at the meeting in 1938. When local racial moors intruded at the Southern Conference meeting in November of 1938, Governor Roosevelt responded defiantly. Although whites and blacks had separate accommodations and ate separately because of Jim Crow laws, they sat wherever they wanted at the opening session on November 20th and even until late afternoon on November 21st. None of the participants at the conference had complained, but when the police department learned of the integrated seating, an order came to the Southern Conference for Human Welfare from the city commissioner, Theopolus Eugene Bull Conner, the "Infamous Bull Conner," we liked to call him, that the audience had to segregate, that is, whites on one side of the aisle, and blacks on the other side, or the group would lose use of the city auditorium. If the Southern Conference for Human Welfare continued to use the auditorium and the audience remained mixed, the commissioner threatened to arrest the Southern Conference for Human Welfare Conference attendees. Doubting that any local official would dare arrest the first lady, Eleanor Roosevelt sat with the blacks until the police requested that she move. But, even then, she did so restively and continued to make her point by placing a folding chair in the aisle just beyond the center. She sat there during all of the sessions she attended. For the remainder of the conference, police came to enforce the segregation

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ordinance, sometimes creating such anxiety that some participants would not even cross the aisle to speak to a friend of the other race for fear of being arrested.

As I said, I met quite a number of people who were part of the Southern Conference Movement. One of those individuals hailed from South Carolina, Modjeska Simkins. I met Mrs. Simkins when she was, I think, in her late 80's and she lived to be in her 90's, and a lot of these individuals became very good friends of mine. Modjeska Simkins, when she was alive, loved to share the story about Eleanor Roosevelt and that seat in the center aisle and, as Mrs. Simkins would tell the story, she would say, "Eleanor Roosevelt sat that chair in the middle aisle and she put one hip on one side for the whites and one hip on the other side for the blacks." She would just really roar in laughter about that particular incident. These individuals did have a sense of humor about life and I think it was one of things that kept them going. They had to have some sense of humor to endure.

Conner's interference resulted in the Southern Conference for Human Welfare adopting the resolution condemning segregation. And also, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare promised to hold all of its future meetings in cities where segregation was not an issue. To that end, the group met in Nashville, Tennessee; Chattanooga, Tennessee; and New Orleans, between 1940 and 1948. It was in 1948 that the Southern Conference for Human Welfare, as it had come to be called, dismantled and the Southern Conference Educational Fund, the institution that had been formed in 1946, continued its mission. Far too late in 1938, the Southern Conference for Human Welfare came to accept that racism and economics were related one to the other. The weak-hearted left the

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movement when the Southern Conference for Human Welfare stood its ground, but a courageous few continued to work with the Southern Conference Educational Fund for the next thirty plus years. It is really the work of the Southern Conference Educational Fund that came to make the many issues of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare a reality.

What about this issue of Simple Decency and Common Sense? If we have been listening lately, we hear the words, *common sense*, quite often. Former President George Bush talked about the need to use common sense to address the crimes of inner cities. Other politicians used the words to address many issues. Even a commercial in Texas and some of the other states around talk about common sense bank loans. It is possible that I hear the words more often because they are part of my book title and are quite important in my assessment of two Southern interracial organizations. The Southern Conference movement then refers to the Southern Conference for Human Welfare and the Southern Conference Educational Fund, and their efforts between 1938 and far into the 1970's. These organizations offered a program of what they called Simple Decency and Common Sense to rectify the South's imbalances. This rectification called for identifying the poor economic status of black people as a Southern problem and then also included black people when the solutions were sought. Neither organization formally termed the effort of transforming the South as simple decency, but several individuals linked the concept with the Southern Conference Movement, often speaking of a simple decency and common sense approach for bringing about reform. The Southern Conference Educational Fund President, Aubrey Williams, a native Alabamian and New

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Deal administrator with the Roosevelt administration, wrote in 1950, "We need to take some chances in behalf of decency." In October of 1955, the Southern Conference Movement monthly publication, *The Southern Patriots* headlined, "New Orleans integration petition proves decencies stressed". Black leaders said it best when they protested senate on un-American activities hearings in the 1950's. Thirty-two leaders collectively from the South border states and the District of Columbia, in March of 1954, demanded of Mississippi Senator James Eastman that, "As an act of simple decency and common sense, you make appropriate apologies to those individuals whose names have been sullied in the press."

What had happened in the un-American activities cases of the 1950's is that largely white Southerners who had struggled in the efforts with African-Americans were redbaited, that is, they were accused of being communists, so it would interfere with the work that they were doing with black people. Well, the remainder of this letter could apply to some of our present day crises for the leaders continued, and I quote, "In the opinion of the undersigned, the action of your subcommittee against the Southern Conference Educational Fund is an attack upon the Negro community of this nation. This organization has spearheaded the fight against segregation in the South. When your statements and those of your fellow committee members smear the fund, the leadership, you are also disparaging the hopes and aspiration of Negro people. It is ridiculous to impute this loyalty of the Southern Conference Educational Fund. Its Board of Directors, composed equally of Whites and Negroes includes many distinguished civic leaders in Southern States. Its sole concern throughout the years has been with the evil effects of

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racial segregation in education, hospital services, transportation, and other public facilities. Its goal of harmoniously ending all racial barriers is our goal. How can you presume to sit in judgment on the patriotism of an organization which shares with vice-President Nixon the conviction that every act of racial discrimination or prejudice in the United States hurts America as much as an espionage agent who turns over a weapon to a foreign country.” Reverend J. Echols Laury, of Mobile Alabama, signed the letter.

In 1958 one supporter said, I certainly want to support the cause of decency in the South. As we continue to hear the words, common sense, in our time, I hope we will begin to also see signs of simple decency that ought to be placed right alongside of common sense. My grandfather used to tease me all the time when I was so interested in being educated. He used to say, "Well, you learn a lot of things in school but they don't teach you any common sense. The Southern Conference Educational Fund set out at many meeting to challenge these issues of racial justice in the 1950's. Though hardly because of its efforts alone in the 1950's, the Southern Conference Educational Fund observed the beginning of the fruition of its dream. Segregation was ending and eventual demise of overt racial discrimination was within sight. The most important of these breakthroughs, of course, is the Supreme Court decision in Brown versus the Board of Education in 1954 and then the Montgomery Bus Boycott of 1955 and 1956, all made evident that blacks were taking charge of the struggle for civil rights.

While individuals in the Southern Conference Educational Fund came to realize that the struggle for equality was changing in make-up, black civil rights leaders continued to welcome the help and support of whites sympathetic to their demands for a

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just society. The Supreme Court decision in *Brown* ended a long struggle for blacks and white liberals and for the first time since the *Plessy* case of 1896, segregationists were placed on the defensive. The *Brown* decision embraced only one aspect of racial equality and that was public education and so blacks had yet many other obstacles to overcome, mainly those blocking the way to equitable economic and political opportunities. Resistance and oppression dominated the Southern scene after the *Brown* decision and added to the already difficult task of blacks and their white Southern counterparts in the Civil Rights Movement. Mississippi Congressman, John Bail Williams, labeled May 14, 1954, the day that the Supreme Court announced its decision, as Black Monday and two months later he joined other staunch segregationists in forming the first white citizens council in Indianola Mississippi.

Throughout the 1950's, Southern legislators proceeded with various means to evade school integration, the most noble example of which was the Southern manifesto, whereby Southern senators and congressmen pledged to use all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision. We heard a little bit about that last year with the campaign from Al Gore because his father was one of the Southern politicians who refused to sign the Southern Manifesto in the 1950's. The legislators and the white Southern majority proved quite successful in various strategies to prevent school integration. As late as the mid-1960's, most public schools in Alabama, South Carolina and Mississippi had not been integrated. Most white Southerners, accustomed to the use of violence to maintain their superior status, proved no exception to this rule in the decades of the 1950's and 1960's. Indeed, the reason why historians labeled this period

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the second reconstruction is due partly to the many violent acts on black and white sympathizers by advocates of the status quo that occurred more intensely during the 1950's and 1960's than at any other time after the civil war. Moreover, not since Reconstruction had Southerners so avidly tested the strength of state's rights versus federal authority. While the educational fund continued to expect that it could change the mentality of most white Southerners through public awareness and condemnation, a few black leaders anticipated a massive resistance from the segregationists. In the aftermath of the Brown decision then, blacks experienced both new hope and dread for pensive moments based on the reactions of diehard segregationists. Roscoe Dunjee, editor of the Oklahoma City's Black Dispatch and Educational Fund board member, pointed to evidence of developments in his state and concluded that in the mid-1950's the South faced its darkest hour and that, 'The era presented the most challenging moments simply because white reaction will try to join with Negro Uncle Tom's to defeat our objective.' The NAACP leader, Roy Wilkins, agreed with Dunjee's assessment and he also warned of the dark before the dawn. Wilkins reasoned that a great many white people in the South experienced "a tremendous shock" not because the NAACP and other civil rights organizations advocated the abolition of segregation but because, Wilkins said, "For the first time since Reconstruction, they are making absolutely no headway with the old tested and tried technique through which they have managed to stave off and defeat similar efforts in the past." Wilkins previously observed that more blacks, than in the 1950's, had been easily intimidated by white violence and threats.

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During that period, Wilkins said, “Whites only had to make their feelings known and to pass the word out to their colored people and a movement was stopped in its tracks, except for a persistent minority.” Now that African-Americans loudly proclaimed that segregation had to end, Wilkins believed such actions has resulted for the first time in the so-called upper class white people bonding together in organizations like the White Citizens Council and similar groups to fight desegregation and that “Their own colored people and the NAACP.” Prior to this time, in Wilkins assessment, they had never had to organize, not in such a concerted way, but Wilkins and Dunjee saw the end of the White Citizens Council Movement as soon as it started because, as they understood it, although it was enjoying temporary success, it was doomed because it had to come out and openly use methods that would draw to its condemnation nationally. Also, Wilkins and Dunjee summed up the importance of the Brown decision when they predicted the demise of the White Citizens Council Movement because, in the ultimate court tests, the White Citizens Council cannot win now. As I said with the Brown decision, at least the law now was on the side of people who wanted to bring about desegregation. They did not have the confidence that the white Southern majority would slowly convert to the Southern Conference Educational Fund, but at least Wilkins and Dunjee valued the silent condemnation and non-cooperation of important segments of the white Southern community.

The idealism of the educational fund in its efforts to make the American public aware of the horrors of segregation and discrimination remained a significant part of the Civil Rights Movement. And, of course, there are many stories that could be shared

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about the way in which the White Citizens Council and other organizations would be condemned. For instance, there were so many bombings in Birmingham that the city became called “Bombingham” as opposed to Birmingham.

The historian, Gilbert Osaski lists between January of 1955 and January of 1959, Alabama alone saw over fifty-five acts of violence on the part of whites against blacks, over half of which occurred in Birmingham. A similar kind of story can be told in Mississippi and some of the other places around the South. There is the infamous case of Emmett Till, who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955. There are numerous horror stories about that. In a march in April and September of 1956, attention centered on Autherine Lucy, when the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa, after a three-year court fight, admitted her as its first black student. The disruption at the school caused by mob violence of white segregationists, far from outside of the Tuscaloosa area, compelled the University’s board of trustees to expel Lucy for her own safety and because she accused the University of conspiring with the white mob against her. The end result, that is, in 1992, Autherine Lucy earned her Masters Degree from the University of Alabama. She and her daughter graduated together.

For the rest of the 1950’s, Fred Shuttlesworth shared many stories of violence from the Birmingham area and he of course will tell you more of those stories when he is here. Obvious other horrific episodes of the 1950’s, the long decade of red-baiting, the Little Rock incident and so many others, show the light of the horror of the Civil Rights Movement and what people had to endure. White leaders of the educational fund paid for their alliance with blacks in the Civil Rights Movement. Its president, Aubrey Williams,

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did not escape economic reprisal. In 1957, he said he had to end the publication of the *Southern Farmer*, a monthly that came out from Montgomery. Williams concluded, "They had me labeled as a bad guy from the start and I have never been able to convince them that I was not even as radical as Thomas Jefferson." Later in 1957, he went on to say to his close friend James Dombrowski, who was for a long time President of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, "I can't get the straight of this. I do not want to believe that it is due to the Birmingham news article," which reported of his activities in the Southern Conference Movement and/or "my stand on the Little Rock debacle, but it comes and just at this time." In other words, he was saying if they had some problem with me, they could have done this at any other time.

Economic interests were just as important to the majority of Southern whites as the continued hope to maintain white supremacy. Whites hoped to rob blacks of a chance of an education that would help them obtain better jobs. Whites were ahead economically and the Southern white majority would see to it that the situation remained that way. The question of integration over economics or vice versa plagued the entire Civil Rights Movement. Blacks were becoming more aware during the debacle of the Little Rock situation or other massive resistance incidents of the importance of economic security, which had been a major concern of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare when it was first founded in 1938. When the Southern Conference placed emphasis on equal economic opportunities in the late 1930's, few liberals, black or white, developed means for achieving that specific goal. The Little Rock incident, because the school desegregation effort created so much attention, caused many blacks to question whether

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the integration of schools was the most important aspect of African-American's fight for first class citizenship.

P. B. Young, publisher and editor of the Norfolk, Virginia Journal and Guide newspaper and also a black leader who sought only integration as recently as the 1950's, believed that equal opportunity in employment constituted the most essential step to first class citizenship. The cycle was catchy, however. In order to obtain high status jobs, blacks needed education and training of high quality. Segregation also needed to be abolished for it, like inferior education, prevented blacks from progressing to their full potential. Consequently, Young saw the Brown decision as the removal of the basic reasons for legal segregation and believed that it would enable blacks eventually to acquire better homes and also better jobs. Although integration was not entirely a school question, it remained the center of attention for the rest of the 1950's in terms of the Civil Rights Movement. The debate shifted back and forth but by the late 1960's, black leaders decided that equal economic opportunity was the key to equal treatment in all aspects of American society.

By 1960, when the sit-in movement and freedom rides had taken the Civil Rights Movement yet to another level, and people like Virginia Durr and her husband encountered almost daily insanities, the situation grew so desperate that when the New Yorker carried a story about the Durr's from Montgomery, most people knew from reading the story who the Durr's were. This led to a letter campaign that came into the Durr's, so they got a lot of support from other sections of the country. One of the supporters wrote Virginia Durr, she called herself a friend at a distance and she said, "I

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hope this letter will offer a bit of friendship to give you some feeling that your courage is not wasted. It spreads more seeds than you may ever realize and it enables you to live with yourself. I wonder how many of the people who snub you on the streets envy you that.” There were a lot of other people who believed in and wanted to see the Southern liberals and African-Americans succeed. What was it about the few white Southerners that drove them to ally with blacks in the struggle?

One liberal, white Southern, Anne Braden, who was born in Birmingham, Alabama and later moved to Louisville, Kentucky, described the intensity of the Southern white majority as neurotic and segregationists described that of the liberals in the same way. So, each side was calling the other neurotic. Anne Braden said that she, “grew up in a sick society and a sick society makes neurotics of one kind or another, on one side or another. It makes people like those who could take pleasure in killing and mutilating Emmett Till, and it makes people like me,” she said. Braden also believed that when a supreme court outlined its decision on the effects of segregation on the black child, it might have included some discussion about what segregation did to the white child. If neurotics were what liberals ought to be called, Braden concluded that even if the name applied there, there were many neurotics like herself in the South and that the answer did not rest with the group who called themselves, “Saner and more practical and more moderate,” who insisted that change occur at a slower pace. She went on to say, “As long as segregation remains a fact in communities all over the South, there will be people like us who are compelled to act.” Braden’s metaphor for an integrated and just society depicted a world without walls. She saw the Interracial Movement and the Southern

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Conference Educational Fund and others as a tearing down of the wall of segregation and discrimination.

The other thing that people like Braden came to understand is that when they did their work, there was always not the support that came from the white community, as they felt was always there for black people in their community. One of those persons who put into words his expressions about that was Aubrey Williams, who was president of the Southern Conference Movement, and also Virginia Durr. They talked about the bitterness that they felt within the struggle because they did not get very much support from the white community. Williams' disillusionment, partly due to his physical condition by the late 1950's, he was dying from cancer, and partly due to a resentment of support that he sensed that blacks shared from their own, as I said, overwhelmed his views of the Civil Rights Movement by the late 1950's. At that time what he said was that he really would like to see more support. I will just share with you part of what he wrote in terms of his assessment of some of the blacks and whites of that struggle. One of the things that I described that what historians do is that we read other people's mail, so I'll share with you part of his letter also. He said, "There are three kinds of leaders." There are the shark troops. There are the expendables. These bear the burden of making the attacks upon the enemies of free men. They must also take any new ground gained from mankind. Modjeska Simkins belonged to this group. Then there are the Proclaimers, wherein once new ground is taken, they view the situation as having been accepted by society. They emerge and give voice and sanction to the new areas of rights and justice. These are the Ralph McGill's and the Harry Ashmore's. In this sense, he is

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calling them actually moderate, which is not such a good kind of thing. Then there are the politicians who, once the additional ground has been won and the Proclaimers have set their seal upon it about face and to make legal what they had only recently denounced as the wild schemes of radical and impractical idealists.

Modjeska Simkins has been for the span of her life, of the shock troops and the expendables, though she is still far from being expended. One might steal a title from a Broadway play now in favor, *The Indestructible Molly Brown* and say, "No more appropriate title could be found for Modjeska". Judging history by how advances have come about in our time, one begins to doubt the validity of their nomination and credits of and for fame. For if we are to judge the probabilities of who will go down in history as the leaders of those forces who secured the final friend of the Negro. It will be some President of the United States or some individual who have become a symbol. It will not be the Modjeska Simkins' or the E.B. Dixon's, (I have not mentioned him but you will hear about him later and his connection to Montgomery) or James Dombrowski. Yet these and others like them are the people that made it possible for the Ralph McGill's and the Harry Ashmore's to voice an acceptance of the ground taken.

I do not value Ralph McGill less because I value Modjeska Simkins more. I do not deny the importance of a Hubert Humphrey but I do say that without a Modjeska Simkins, he nor others like him would have done what was able to be accomplished or attempted to do what was done. In a sense, the Southern Conference Educational Fund leaders can be likened then to the abolitionists, who could not take credit for the Emancipation of Slaves, though this group were the ones who made the abolition of

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slaves there sincere purpose. But abolitionists, few in number, as the Southern liberals of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, predicted slavery's end and published large quantities of literature with such announcements. Not unlike the abolitionists, the Educational Fund fulfilled a certain mission by the role it played in the Civil Rights Movement. So, the Southern Conference Movement made a difference in the lives of black people and white people that may not be known outside of Alabama, or the South. I believe that their message if practiced could help us resolve many of the problems of our present time. We have to become more inclusive.”

Linda Reed will be more than willing to entertain questions at this moment. We now open the floor for questioning.

Linda Reed: Some other people that are up here probably can help me keep track of whose hands are going up.

Q: For The December 4th lecture that is going to address the future and the past of the Civil Rights Movement, I would like for you to share with us, your opinion about what is happening in South Africa, as far as reparation is concerned with slavery, and having new individuals in the scene here in America, such as Clarence Thomas, J. C. Watts and Alan Keyes. In what direction do you see the Civil Rights Movement taking in the 21st century, being that we have reparation and we have extremely conservative wealth knowing black individuals?

A: Thank you for your question. As I emphasized with a lot of what I said this evening, as the Civil Rights struggle grew, it came more and more to that question of economics. I think in the 21st century, the question is still a matter of economics. We have a larger

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number of African-Americans for sure who are of a different class; people who have really good jobs and very high incomes. Then you have a large percentage of African-Americans who do not do well because of poor education, which is one of the concerns of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. They also do not have the opportunities because of their lack of education. Also in assessing the economic status of the country on that issue of reparation, we have come to understand that the institution of slavery was very important for the development of America and North America, as we have come to know it. Now people are bringing that into question and wanting to look at it. Some organizations and individuals feel that there is a specific part of that which should go to individuals. There are others who have seen it in such a way that it could be institutionalized. For instance, institutions that would educate a larger number of African-Americans and perhaps would have specific kinds of financial backing and that kind of thing. That question of economics is still a very important one. So, on that question of reparation, we have seen how divisive it became for the conference in South Africa. The question still is quite central, that is the issue of economics is still quite central to many of the other discussions about how we can all move forward. As many members of the Southern Conference Movement came to explain it, they had a very practical, or common sense kind of way to approach it. People who could not reap the same types of benefits from their labor will not feel that they had been included or feel tied into a productive community etc., that is tied into crime and all other kinds of things. It was important for the Southern Conference Movement. I don't know what some of those individuals would say about reparation but I would think that many of them would

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support the principle of it; there is some kind of way that people who are descendants of the institution of slavery could benefit in some kind of way. It is a very long and debatable kind of issue. You see some of those same kinds of issues tied with discussions on affirmative actions. That was a very important question and I do thank you for it.

Q: Am I correct to assume that there was a FBI surveillance of the Southern Conference and if so, were you able to have access to those records?

A: Yes, the FBI was very busy because of J. Edgar Hoover who served as its director for a very long period of time. When did he get in there? It was a long time back. To answer the question specifically, Lillian Smith, who I did not mention in the talk this evening, was a very active member of the Southern Conference Movement. She hailed from Georgia. She brought out a periodical on a monthly basis. She believed in all of their efforts and activities. She was a Southern white woman. Because of that, as early as 1931, the FBI started a file on Lillian Smith. You can ask for the records but of course the records are sanitized. You really don't get a chance to see all of the notes that the FBI kept on these kinds of individuals, both white Americans and black Americans. You would get part of a statement at the top part of the page, most of it blacked out, and maybe you would see something written at the end. It wasn't something that I could make a lot of sense of. What I gathered from the work that I am doing on Fannie Lou Hamer and having seen the papers of Paul P. Johnson and seeing some of the notes of the people who were active in taking the notes, with that, you can get kind of a clearer sense of what kind of the things the FBI was involved in. With the records of other collections

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that were not sanitized to the extent of the ones that you get from the FBI, you came to understand that they sent infiltrators to meetings, for some of the support that came in, in terms of clothing, funding and that kind of thing, to Southern States. The FBI would interfere with some of that material being delivered. There were very deliberate ways that the FBI interfered. There is a whole effort called COINTELPRO, where the FBI paid specific individuals to be in meetings and report back as to specific kinds of things that organizations and individuals were doing, even to the example of a person like Fannie Lou Hamer who was very poor, but there is a FBI file on Fannie Lou Hamer. So, for almost all of the organizations and individuals, there is a FBI file that one could get a hold of to try to discern some kind of information. It is very difficult because so much of the pages have been blackened out before it was sent out to the researcher.

Q: I was wondering whether the utilization of common sense, is that more pertinent to political matters or social culture commonality? How would you see that?

A: Common sense in the way that a lot of the individuals that we're talking about from the Southern Conference Movement, for them, it is something like "Can't you see it, you know, it is right in front of you. Why is it so difficult that you have such a hard time seeing this the way that we see it?" A lot of these individuals were very religious. They were members of churches and they were church leaders. Part of their message was "We're supposed to love our brother as we do ourselves. They placed part of their emphasis on the individual level and in that sense you would not mistreat your brother or your sister. Common sense would tell you, "Why would you continue to do this on a regular basis?" It is something that is very fundamental to them that they are practicing

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on a regular day-to-day basis. They would like to see other Americans, including white Southerners who believe in white supremacy, to take their approach to life. To them it is right here. All you have to do is open your eyes. I hope that helps. I am not sure if that is what you were asking.

Q: What was the role of political parties in the activities of the Civil Rights Movement as they were played out in the 1950's and 1960's.

A: Now that is a very good question. For the most part, the South of the 20th century remained the South of the 19th century in the sense that the Democratic Party, for a long time, was the same Democratic Party from the Reconstruction period. It aligned itself with white supremacy, white rule, and that kind of thing. As late as 1958, that was still the case. When Harry S. Truman insisted on presenting a Civil Rights plank in his platform of 1948, I don't know if you've had this in any of your history classes, but members of the Democratic party were so concerned that Strom Thurman, a young George Wallace, a man who eventually became the governor of Mississippi, marched out of the convention while the band played Dixie, to protest Harry Truman's support of Civil Rights. So, that gives you an idea of how strong this was aligned with the Democratic Party as late as 1948. It is really hard to try to condense all of these different history lessons but I am going to really try hard. In 1964, there was the development in Mississippi, a third party called the Mississippi Democratic party, which challenged the all white delegation from Mississippi. With that challenge, led famously by Fannie Lou Hamer and some of the people who supported her, like people from the Southern Conference Educational Fund and that organization. The Democratic Party promised that

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it would be very inclusive in the conventions after 1964. The Democratic Party kept its promise. The Republican Party up to this time had been the Republican party of Abraham Lincoln. Of course there was a shift from the Republican Party for African-Americans in the 1930's when more African-Americans voted the Democratic Party. In the 1960's and thereafter, there was almost a total flip of what the parties represent. As the Democratic party became more aligned with the types of issues that the Southern Conference Movement stood for such as equality, and exclusiveness, more and more of the politicians who had aligned with that party very strongly, started to align themselves with the Republican Party. To make a long story short, without other kinds of lessons that I don't want to go into, there was a parting of the ways almost on the issue of racial discrimination between the parties. Now in our time, the Democratic Party is seen as the party more of what the Republican Party was at first. That might seem a little confusing but essentially that is how it was. The parties were quite important in terms of how things occurred. When people were encouraging individuals to vote and to be registered to vote, for a long time, it was to the Democratic party, but that party was changed in the terms of not being the party that it had been in late 19th century America.

Q: Perhaps you have mentioned this and I just missed it, but what role, if any did the Southern Conference play in some of the major events in the state in places like Birmingham, Montgomery and Selma, or were those kind of activities beyond the mission of the Southern Conference?

A: No, they were as active as anyone could be. One of the key roles that the white members of the Southern Conference Educational Fund played, especially in the city and

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campaigns and some of those other efforts where people ended up being arrested, they were in the behind the scenes efforts of raising money so that once people were arrested, they would have funds to be released from jail. Some of them were out on the front lines, like in the Selma march and other key instances of voter registration and that kind of thing. Just like we heard some of the horrific stories about African-Americans, there are similar types of stories about white Americans who also lost their lives in the process of trying to create a democracy that was suppose to be in existence already.

Q: How did the older generations like Virginia Durr, Anne Braden and some of them identify with some of the student organizations and student leaders in the 1960's?

A: I guess the best way to give an example is to use the example of Anne Braden, who is an older woman; she is in her seventies now. Just last year, many people celebrated her 75th birthday. Martha Norman is a real good friend of hers. Anne Braden is white and Martha Norman is African-American. Martha Norman was one of the student workers in SNCC in the 1960's. They are just like regular pals, except Anne still does not really appreciate some of the music that some of the students listen to. I say that because I invited Anne Braden, Martha Norman, Lawrence Guyot, (who I didn't talk about tonight either) and Ed King, a white chaplain at Tugaloo College in the 1960's, to visit the University of Houston. All of these people were involved in the Civil Rights struggle in their respective areas. I picked them up from the airport and I took them back to the airport. We were on our way to take Lawrence Guyot to take his flight. Anne and Martha were going to leave later. We were all in the car. Martha and I started talking about the music from the 1960's. Now of course, I was just a kid when they were doing

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all of this stuff. Up until we started talking about the music, Anne was right there with us. She was really hanging out. We started talking about the music and Anne went to sleep. I said to Martha, “You know, she just really does not like some of the stuff that we like.” Martha said, “Yea, that’s right”. But they got along just fine. They appreciated their differences. The older people were very nurturing of what the younger people were trying to do. Of course we know that it is really the support of Ella Baker, an older African-American woman, who nurtured, talked with, discussed, gave advice, and mentored young college students so that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee could come into existence in the first place. For many of them, it was no big deal. For some of them, just like in our time, some of the older people would say, “I just don’t know what these young people are doing.” I think that is going to always be the case. For them, there is a great amount of appreciation in sharing.

Q: The time between Reconstruction of the 19th century and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950’s and 1960’s is a very long time period. How was it that things became worse and worse?

A: This is a very interesting question. It gets us back to understanding that this is why many historians termed the Civil Rights Movement *The Second Reconstruction* because things did get worse and worse. We also have to understand that the Civil Rights Movement has always been an ongoing process. If you could appreciate the interpretation that Vincent Harding, historian, who in a book called *There is a River*, uses the river metaphor to help us understand that from the shores of Africa, people of African descent have always been involved in the struggle for freedom. When we get to the

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1950's, we are still talking about a struggle for freedom. Although slavery had been abolished universally in the 1860's, reconstruction had been something that was provided to try to ensure democracy for all Americans, including African-Americans; America still had not lived up to its promise of democracy. Reconstruction from the 19th century is viewed as a failure. It put into play some things but it did not uphold the promise. As a matter of fact, things gradually eroded. What types of examples do we see that things became worse and worse? With the Brown decision of 1954, the Supreme Court justices argued the fact that African-American students were allocated to separate institutions, that this was something that was harmful psychologically. These were individuals who were told on a regular basis, "You are going to be relegated to this poor school. You are going to get used books. Sometimes you might not even get a book. Sometimes you will not have buses to ride to school." They said this was psychologically harmful. I guess that is one of the examples of how bad it could get. The NAACP had led court cases in the 1930's and 1940's for the equalization of black and white teacher's pay. Even with that, people had seen in some communities the small victories. As more and more people saw that there could be some breakthroughs and there could be some changes, they were more willing to try to push the envelope to see what other kinds of things could be opened up. Instead of saying how bad things did become, I would rather see how people saw opportunities for things to change more and more. So the momentum grew as opposed to things just getting worse and worse.

Q: (Inaudible)

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A: That's a very good question and also a way for me to tie in some of the things I said about the New Deal. The one big, big part of the historical picture that I left out was the Great Depression of the 1930's. With so many Americans suffering in the 1930's, there were many people who wondered why didn't more Americans turn to Communism and just simply dismantle the kind of government that we had because this was a government, especially under Herbert Hoover, that did not seem to sympathize with the average American who had lost a job and were suffering because of issues of economics. And so, in some pockets of America, the Communist party did increase in membership. The belief was that because African-Americans had suffered so drastically and continued to suffer that more and more of them were turning to the communist party. If there were whites that sympathized with them, then these of course were individuals who were part of the communist party. And also, there was this message that was part of a federal campaign that African-Americans certainly could not understand their hardship, that if they came to these conclusions that they had to have direct action campaign then, of course, it was the communist party who told them this kind of stuff. It was all in a cycle that went hand and hand but the tie in was two problems from the Great Depression, which also got back to the issues of economic hardship. As they say in the Bartels and James commercial, I do thank you for your support.

I want to first encourage you to be sure to turn in your program evaluation forms. We do have refreshments at the back and we certainly want you to take advantage of the refreshments. I would also like to say thank you to all of you who came out tonight. Thank you for those individuals who played a very important role in getting you to come

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out tonight. Be sure to take note of your brochures or your posters to be aware of the upcoming lectures. Of course, the lecture next week will be on the campus of UAH and Diane Nash, who was one of the activists involved with the Civil Rights Movement from the Nashville area, but as some learned from the inaugural lecture, she and her husband played a very important role in Alabama as well. I hope that, as I said at the beginning of the program, all of you will make every effort to attend as many of these lectures in this important series as possible. Thank you and good night.