

The Civil Rights Movement in Alabama

Alabama A&M University

Early Years of the Movement (Part II)

Speaker: J.L. Chestnut, Jr.

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. The faculty includes, 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 us give these people a show of appreciation.

Introduction: The thing that has always fascinated me about the civil rights career of J.L. Chestnut Jr., is the extent of which it is rooted in ordinary light and then the experiences of ordinary people struggling against poverty and injustice. Mr. Chestnut's autobiography, *Black in Selma*, published in 1990 with Historian Julia Cast, is a reminder of how history really operates. Here, one is far removed from the well-ordered narratives of human freedom favored by Hollywood authors and writers of fiction or those who devise stories where battles are fought and won, where dramatic conflicts are resolved easily and quickly in time and space. Instead, Mr. Chestnut introduces us to a far more complicated vision. One marked by the passions of political combat in a small southern town and by the endless quest for dignity among those that he calls "The little and forgotten people of this world." His life shows that the struggle did not begin with the Civil Rights Movement and it is not over today. Born in Selma, Mr. Chestnut's early curiosity and his remarkable powers of observation and memory as a child, particularly of people and events within the black communities and its relation with the white power structure and with the police, is owed much to the example of his own parents. He had a hard working and resilient father and an educated, fiercely independent mother. She spent forty years teaching school and was never hesitant about speaking her mind.

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Mr. Chestnut told me this afternoon that his mother, now age ninety, is still very quick to speak her mind about affairs of the world. After graduating from Knox Academy, Selma's black high school, Mr. Chestnut went on to Dillard University in New Orleans and from there to Howard University in Washington, DC where he earned a degree in law. In 1959, he came home to open an office as Selma's first black attorney. Though eventually merging as one of the South's leading civil rights lawyer, his early years of practice often encountered the same barriers that confronted Alabama's other black lawyers. I think at that time there were only nine in all. He had to overcome the racism of white judges. He struggled to maintain the semblance of a professional life, even having to fight for the right to be able to sit within the railing of the courtroom alongside the black sharecroppers and laborers, who made up the bulk of his clients, are just a few examples. Nevertheless, Mr. Chestnut's courage and legal skills and his long fight for the right of Dallas County's black residents earned him the respect of poor blacks and poor whites alike. Soon, he had become a leader of the black community and its dealings with the power structure from the sheriff to the mayor, the courthouse of bureaucracy and eventually to George Wallace himself. Mr. Chestnut headed the NAACP legal team that oversaw Alabama's reluctant implementation of the Supreme Court's decision back in 1954, which ordered the desegregation of schools. In 1963, he helped the young freedom writer, Bernard Lafayette, the first civil rights worker to come to Selma, persuade his fellow Selmians to overcome their fears in order for them to attend mass meetings aimed at voter registration. The importance of this was reflected in the fact that at that time, out of one hundred and fifty counties, only fifteen thousand black residents were registered to

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vote. That was the start of the Selma movement. The subsequent emergence of Selma as a symbol for the national black voting rights campaign during the 1960's is owed much to the health and advice that Mr. Chestnut was able to provide the civil rights organizers. He represented many of them locally, including Martin Luther King Jr., James Foreman, John Lewis, Ralph Abernathy and Joseph Lowery. After the event of Bloody Sunday, on March 7, 1965 and long after the reporters and network television camera's coverage of the violence on the Edmund Pettus Bridge disappeared, Mr. Chestnut continued to fight in combating local job discrimination and winning the rights of blacks to sit on Dallas County juries. Following the Selma to Montgomery March, in passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Mr. Chestnut emerged in the words of Julia Cast as "a leader in the long march. The process of turning the possibilities opened up in 1965 into a real grass roots change long after the national spot light and national civil rights leaders had gone elsewhere." Eventually, Mr. Chestnut would try more capital cases than any other attorney in Alabama and the firm he was head of would become the largest black firm in the state. His list of cases defending the political and economics rights of African-Americans, Hispanics, native Americans, and women continues to grow. Mr. Chestnut has been active in speaking out in countless public forums across the nation, from ABC's Good Morning America, BET's Lead Story to CBS Nightline, to name just a few. The subtitle of Mr. Chestnut's autobiography, *The Uncommon Life of J.L. Chestnut Jr.*, is amply named, I think. I believe it will provide an endearing testimony to what he has achieved. That achievement in the words of the San Francisco Chronicle, has been to give "a vividly human face to the men and women of Selma, who struggles, hopes,

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contradictions, optimism, cynicism and general thrashing about helped shape today's south." This symposium on the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama is honored to have as our guest tonight, J.L. Chestnut Jr. Join me in extending a warm welcome.

J.L. Chestnut, Jr.: Good evening to you. I want you to know that I cannot hardly wait to get back home and let my dear wife know that I have been hobnobbing with the president, the Provos and the president of UA in Huntsville as well as two or three Ph.D's. My wife is always saying I am nobody, but she does not know a single college president. You just wait until I get back there. My dear friend, the president of this college who comes from my neck of the woods, is a fine, fine man. This institution has really grown since the last time I was here last. It is a great honor for me to be at this historic institution. I was overwhelmed at the University of Alabama in Huntsville and how it has grown to seven thousand students, I think. It is a great testimony to the people of this area and I am honored to be among you. I want you to know that I sit on the trustee board of the University of South Alabama, USA. Last year, I spoke at the University of Alabama Law School in Tuscaloosa. Fifty years ago, when I went off to law school, I could not even get into the University of Alabama University Law School except as a janitor. What has occurred since that has brought us to where we are here is part of what I am going to talk about. What was the "there" and what is the "here"? I will try to shed some light on those questions.

First, I would like to take a moment or so to read the opening paragraph from a deliberately, provocative and controversial weekly newspaper column I write, which Kay Turner is well aware of this. The paragraph, I think, says a lot about the current

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mindset of most of the people my age, that struggled in the front ranks of the movement during the dangerous sixties. Three months before the unspeakable bloody tragic murder of thousand of innocent souls in New York and Washington, I wrote and published the following paragraph in several newspapers. It begins by stating, "In significant ways, the United States of America is a great force for good and progress in this really chaotic world. I am convinced that no other country would have created a marshal plan or spent billions of dollars to economically resurrect or vanquish folk, after a five-year bloody world war. What nation other than this one would have fought and awful Civil War of the emancipation of slaves of color. I dare say not one. America is in a class by itself." I wrote those words because they are true.

I am the great grandson of slaves, but my lawyer states that this nation equals any America. I was a soldier during the Korean War and I was prepared to die if necessary, in defense of a democracy that denied me. Moreover, I did not accept the city rationale in Washington for the war. How does one stop the spread of an idea of communism with an army? Indeed, the Koreans had every right to be communist if that is what they wanted to be in their own land. Yet, if my country went to Korea to fight, I would fight for my country. Less than ten years later, my country went to Vietnam and made the same mistake. We reaped devastating results. However, if one listens to George W. Bush, one might think that only good comes out of America and that all of the evil in the world is elsewhere. The president described the tragic New York and Washington outrageous, as unprovoked acts of war and as a war between good and evil. We all can easily see the unmitigated evil of the terrorists but the young president overstates our

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good. I understand his role to try and unify the nation but unity, like peace, must in the end rest on truth. A false foundation will not support either in the long run.” That is pretty much where my mind is after all of these years of the struggles in Selma and elsewhere.

Let me leave where I am now and let me take you back to 1958, Selma, when I was foolish enough to come back and establish a law office. It was the first time a black was crazy enough to do that in Selma. As you heard a moment ago, only one hundred and fifty-eight blacks, out of twenty thousand, were registered to vote. Each one of those people had to be vouched for by a white person. If a white person did not feel that old Ned was all right, then old Ned did not get to register. There were black and white water fountains, rest rooms, churches, and schools. My mother, my wife, and other black women could not try on a pair of shoes right a hat in some cheap department stores downtown. Not one black person anywhere in the State of Alabama had ever served on a jury, not one. The police were a law unto themselves in the black community. When they came to knock on your door, if they bothered to knock at all, you would say, “Who is it?” They would respond, “The Law”, and they meant it. They did whatever to whomever whenever. If you asked any questions, they would find you floating in the Alabama River. This was just a few years ago in 1958. I saw black men literally lynched for not saying sir or ma’am to a white person or yielding the sidewalk. The only jobs blacks had in downtown Huntsville, Selma, Birmingham and Mobile were as janitors, messengers and delivery people. There was a blanket of fear over this state so thick that you could almost cut it with a knife. Black folks had to be careful about what they said to

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each other. You never knew what someone would go downtown and claim you said. You could loose a hell of a lot more than a job. As a lady said to me at Harvard University, "If it was that bad Mr. Chestnut, why did you go back?" I said, "Hell, that's why I went back". I had no idea that a Civil Rights Movement would explode in the streets of Selma. I just hoped that we could make some modest achievement. I hoped that we could pull our resources as black folks and set up a few credit unions, maybe open up some grocery stores and other types of businesses. If we were lucky, I thought we might be able to get the white police out of black Selma. That is about as far as I thought we could go. I was born and raised in Selma. I had not seen anything that would suggest the Montgomery Boycott or anything else such as a massive Civil Rights Movement in the streets of Selma or in Birmingham for that matter. I though when the white man said it was over, hell, it was over.

The Civil Rights Movements exploded in the city of Selma. I will never forget March 7th, even if I live to be three hundred years old. I had never seen anything like that in the army. I went across the bridge early on what we called Bloody Sunday, to tie up the one telephone that we did have over there. The reason I had to tie up the telephone is because I represented the NAACP legal defense and education fund. Even though Martin King and Reverend Abernathy were putting all of these folks in jail they were not paying for it; my bosses were paying for it. I had to explain to them what was going on. In fact, we did not even believe in all of this marching. We said that we should find two or three obviously qualified black folks, send them down to register and when they turn them down, you have a perfect test case; go to court. Martin repudiated all of that by sending

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five hundred people out. I went across that bridge early just in case. We did not even know there would be a march. What spurred it all off, Jimmy Lee Jackson, a young fellow, had been shot dead by the state troopers in a demonstration in Marion about thirty miles from Selma. All the boy was doing was trying to protect his mother. People were so upset, they fiercely said, "We should take his un-embalmed body and march all the way to Montgomery and put it on George Wallace's desk. Obviously, we could not do that. It evolved from that into the march to Montgomery. George Wallace said there would be no more marches and that he was up to here in marches. We said we did not care if he was up to there, we are going to march. We had this conflict. The question was rather or not there would be a march _____ said, "If Martin King is in the march, we are not going to be in it. We have been in Selma for two years getting our ass whipped, going to jail, bleeding and getting no credit for it, but Martin comes in, makes one speech, goes out to Los Angeles, and raises ten thousand dollars. The hell with it! We are not going to march." I went over there just in case. I was over there looking at the carnival at the other side. On the other side, there were four hundred state troopers decked out in riot gear. They had billy clubs the size of baseball bats and tear gas. They were backed up by another one hundred deputy sheriffs and posse men on horses. They were decked out in tear gas mask also. I said to myself, "Who the hell are you all expecting...the Russian army or something?" They were over there as usual, arguing with each other about who was in charge. The truth of the matter was none of them were in charge. I looked back and there was John Lewis, who is now a congressman from Atlanta, leading a little group of people. Martin Luther King was not in that march. He

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was in Atlanta, preaching in his church. You have seen that clip a many of times on television of John Lewis and his group coming face to face with all of this, all might of the state of Alabama, stretched out across that highway at the foot of that bridge on the Montgomery side. I heard a white boy say, "Turn around. Go back to your church. This is as far as you will be permitted to go." John kneeled and begin to pray and the others behind him did likewise. Then, something went off like a tear gas canister; I do not know what it was. Then, there was absolute deadlock; tear-gas everywhere. People were screaming and hollering. You could here ribs cracking as horses rode across folk's breast. I saw grown men with these baseball bats coming down on the heads of women and children, splitting them like watermelons. I had dropped the telephone because I was trying to pull some of these people out of the highway. I could hear New York saying, "What's happening...What's happening?" It was a horrible day. Blood was everywhere. I remember walking back across that bridge, literally crying. What is this all about? Martin keeps talking about the power of the public opinion. What public opinion? They were beating my folks to death in the middle of a public highway, at high noon and no one cared because they were black. What public opinion was this? At that moment, I did not think that America could be saved. I did not think that white people were worth saving. The thing I did not know was that people all around the United States, black, white, brown and red people had watched that ugly bloody scene and they did not like what they had seen. The President of the United States had watched it spell bound. Three weeks earlier, he had met with some of us in the White House. We asked him to present to the congress a voting right bill. He said, "I can't do that boy. I just got you a

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public accommodation law wherein you can buy a hamburger wherever I can buy one. You can stay in the Holiday Inn. Go home. Be quiet. Be grateful. Be thankful.” We went home and turned Selma inside out and upside down and the result of it was at the bottom of that bridge. There he was, the President of the United States, looking and he did not like what he saw. The next thing he was doing was standing before the congress of the United States with the bill in his hand, insisting that the congress pass the bill and pass it now. He ended that refrain with, “We shall overcome!” Later on, Martin King told me that he was watching it with his wife Coretta. He said that when the President of the United States said, “We shall overcome,” he said a tear trickled down his cheek. I said, “Martin, my friend, no tear trickled down my cheek”. He said, “Why?” I said, “Do you not understand? You are no longer the number one Civil Rights leader in America, hell, Lyndon Johnson is.” This is the man who said three weeks ago that the country would not stand for two civil rights bills. We were in deep, deep trouble.

From that moment on, every time the president of the United States could, he wanted to preempt out our movement. He was never able to do it. As I was telling some of the professors today, if it had not been for Lyndon Johnson, I would not be here today; I would have been six feet under. Lyndon Johnson was able to get his bill through. Then they took postmen and other federal workers and sent them to Dallas County, Alabama to Terry County, Alabama and to Wilcox County, Alabama and said, “Register those folks.” In six weeks, we went from one hundred and fifty registered voters to ten thousand. That has not happened anywhere in the history of the human race. The struggle was hardly over. The struggle is not over in the year 2001. It is not over as I

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stand here speaking to you. Well, why not? For a whole lot of reasons. First, as much a hundred years earlier, poor, uneducated slaves were set free to compete or parish. They had no money. They had nothing.

First of all, in 1966, we had ten thousand new black voters who knew next to nothing about politics or voting. We were opposed by people with centuries of experience in politics, government, and voting. Second, we had no control whatsoever, over the economy. Their political adversaries employed most of the ten thousand new voters. Even worse, they had been brainwashed for centuries by being told that voting and politics were white folks business. If you want to stay out of trouble, stay away from voting and politics. Alabama was a one-party state, the Democratic Party. It continued to back every incumbent who was white. The best we could do every now and then was get together and elect what we call the lesser of two white evils. That took place for the next ten years.

We went to see Jimmy Carter after he was elected. We said to Mr. Carter, "We went to the poles, but every time they count the absentee ballot box, we lose." Mr. Carter said, "Well, that is a state problem. We will not deal with that our first term. We will deal with that our second term." As you know, he did not get a second term. In 1980, Mr. Reagan came to town, not only were we not getting any help but also Mr. Reagan prosecuted us. Mr. Reagan's justice department under Mr. Edwin Meese brought at least a hundred and fifty indictments against carefully selected black leaders and charged them with something called boast fraud, something that Mr. Reagan did not know what it meant and hell, I did not either. We went up to see Mr. Meese and said, "Why are you

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doing this to us? Everything we know about the absentee ballot box, we learned it from whites. We are doing just what they are doing. You have not indicted a single white person. Here is the evidence.” We showed to him how whites were doing the same thing. Mr. Meese was writing furiously stating, “We are going to look into that.” I never heard another word from Mr. Meese. Finally, we circled in the court and defeated every one of these indictments, except for about two and those two were thrown out on appeal. We begin to elect black folks to office and that was not the end of the battle. The battle was not over. The battle is not over yet. The battle will not be over in my lifetime or yours.

I filed a lawsuit and charged systematic exclusion of black folks from the jury box and won. We had blacks come into the jury box. Some of these counties are seventy and eighty percent black. We came up with a jury with eleven blacks and one white. The white, every time would be selected foreperson. Because of three hundred and fifty years of slavery and another one hundred years of near slavery, the mere fact that I won a lawsuit and was able to put them in the jury box could not erase four hundred and fifty years of discrimination. It is a slow process. That is why it is not over. We put an all black jury in the box. There was a white lady, whose leg was broken in a car accident. She received two thousand dollars. A black woman in an identical situation would receive two hundred dollars from an all black jury. After three hundred years of slavery and one hundred years of near slavery, we have these fools on television talking about it is over. We are about a third of the way, at best. Do not you fool yourself. As I say to you, after almost forty years since the bridge, black folks now take in and spend close to

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nine hundred billion dollars every year and we do not spend it with each other because we have been taught to not do that since the first slave ship stopped here. That is one of the reasons why people with nine hundred billion dollars have so many folks on food stamps and living in public housing. Everyday, we spend at least a million dollars in supermarkets. We do not own one single supermarket. The NAACP and my so, so, so fraternity and my wife's so, so sorority spends tons of money in white hotels arguing about poverty and racism. We do not own a single one of those hotels. If we bought one of those hotels, that would do far more than addressing poverty and racism than these so called symposiums that we have on the subject.

We have come a long, long way against insurmountable odds. It is a miracle that we have even survived. I argue all the time all around the country with all kinds of folks. The argument is rather or not if the glass is half full or half empty. If you are white, you are more likely to argue that it is half full. If you know me or ever heard of me, you would argue that it is half-empty. We all have to agree that there is some water in the glass. It is wrong to argue that over the last forty years, we have not made meaningful progress. It is just as wrong to argue that that progress equals victory. We have to be realistic about the whole situation. I was arguing with a fellow. You have probably seen him on television. His last name is Armstrong. I forgot what his name. He called me a liberal. He was bragging about how conservative he was. I said, "Boy let me tell you something, I don't care nothing about black liberals or conservatives. A black conservative to me is someone carrying water on a political reservation run by George Bush and two or three other powerful Republicans. A black liberal is someone carrying

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water on a political reservation ran by Bill Clinton. The hell with both reservations!" I am a black man trying to deal with truth.

People like me made people like Armstrong possible. If we knew that would be _____. There must be accountability in the black community. We are the only people you can say anything about, do anything to and there are not any consequences whatsoever. The reason that we attack and undermine each other is because there is no penalty to pay. That has to change. Sooner or later, we are going to have to deal with the Armstrongs whether they all want to do it or not. We are going to have to do that. We cannot fight on the serious front and have all of these little yard dogs laughing and yapping at our heel. We have to be loose so we can concentrate on the real struggle. I will say this. I am going to be frank with you. I would not have said this if we did not have all of these white folks here. I am just telling you all the truth. I learned in the Civil Rights Movement that black folks are just 10 to 12 percent of the national population. We will never get it done by ourselves. Nothing really happened in Selma until white people of goodwill came. They came not just from the North, but other parts of the South and locked arms with us in the streets of Selma and said, "I am ready to march, go to jail, die or do whatever is necessary that rights will prevail." White folks died in Selma. White folks died in Mississippi, Georgia and other places finding that this country could be free. So, I do not want and I do not agree with these separatist ideas. I think it is not only self-defeating but foolish to say, "We don't want no white folks in this and we are going to do it ourselves." You sure will do it yourself. We need all of the help that we can get. Last, I would like to say to white folks that we freed more of you all in 1967

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than we freed people that look like me. I had white people come up to me and whisper in my ear in Selma and they would say, "Keep up the fight J.L." They are still walking by fear.

Do you know what it is in the year 2001 for someone to call you a nigger lover? You might as well pack up and leave. This is everybody's struggle. We have come a long way and we have overcome many obstacles. We have a long way to go, but we are on our way. Nothing can stop us. I know from experience. I have been to the well many, many times and I know that when good people lookup, rise up and decide to stand up, we can make mountains move and trees tremble but we have to do it together.

Closing: Attorney Chestnut will entertain your questions. Before we do that, let me remind you that the yellow sheets that you have, please fill those out. Those are our evaluation forms. Some of our grants or rather some of the folks need that. Please fill them out and give it to some of the young people that are in the back. Attorney Chestnut will now entertain your questions

Q: (inaudible)

A: You were around in the sixties, I know? Then you know that even then they were only relatively a few of them. Young folks, my children's generation and my grandchildren have the impression that 85 percent of black America was on the march in the 1960's. There were a miniscule number of us on the march. I think we can increase our numbers, but it will always be small. That does not matter. Jesus Christ only had twelve, only one of them was a trader. If you are prepared to be free or die, I do not need an army. I just need a few of those type people and you can change the world. We want

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to give everybody the chance. Do not be disheartened when you look back and see that there are not many behind you.

My wife and I were born in Selma. We were sick of that little place. We both sat down and talked about it. We both concluded that in six months to a year, we would either pack up and leave or we would be dead. We had to consider that, to not consider that, for us, that would have been crazy. I do not know of anyone in the Civil Rights Movement back in the sixties who came in because they wanted to commit suicide. I also did not know anyone in that movement who was not prepared to die, if necessary; what is now going on is a lack of dedication.

Let me tell you about my son who is a lawyer. I raised him in my house. All he thinks about is the house on the hill and the BMW. There is something human about that. There are only going to be relatively few people who are going to rise above that and see a greater truth and a greater need and be prepared to die for it. I was telling some professors today. Martin Luther King my fly, my friend and more of my leaders than he ever saw was the most morbid man I ever met in my life. You could not talk to him three minutes before he brought up death, his death, and everyone else's. Every since the Montgomery Boycott, death had stalked him. It stalked him all the way to that balcony in Memphis. If he said it to me once, he said it one hundred times, "They are going to keep coming back for us until there is not one of us left." The only reason that did not turn out to be true was because of Lyndon Johnson. He put so much pressure on John Edgar Hoover, that every time the Klu Klux Klan met, two thirds of the meeting were either FBI informants or under cover people...had that not been the case, every one of us would

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have been dead. Lyndon Johnson saved our lives. Even though he used to call us niggers, but he saved our lives.

Q: There are many people here who are facing tremendous violence. Let me give reference to the Muslims. Muslims are like the rest of the people who want to be free, live their own lives and not be murdered or challenged about the way they live their lives. I hope all people who are suffering for this reason will join together and try to make this country the kind of country it ought to be. It is really bad that we do not realize that there is a better way. We could be benevolent instead of a tyrant around the world. I hope that everybody around the world will try. I certainly want to work on this because I have been aware of this for a very long time.

A: The truth is that there are powerful forces in this country who do not want this to happen, the very thing you suggest. They have been fighting for years to keep that from happening. It has always amused me that poor white Southerners went off in the Civil War, fighting to preserve slavery and they were damn near slaves themselves. It has always puzzled me that in Alabama some of the poorest folk I know are against labor unions and wants to exalt so-called write-the-work laws. This is the result of what I call mainstream brainwashing and it is out there. People like you and lots of people who want to see a better world, there are powerful forces who only want to see a better world on certain terms. They are prepared, if necessary, to destroy America, to keep it from happening. It is a sad commentary on our time, but it is the truth. I was also telling the professors this afternoon that my ninety-year-old mother and I was sitting in her house the other night watching television; nobody but us. This is a woman that I love with all of

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my heart. She had cultivated powerful white people all of her life. _____ knows her. She said black folks cannot do anything for her because they are in the same boat. She does not even like white people who are not powerful. She does not have time for you all. We were sitting in her room and President Bush was on the television. The president said, "This is a terrible tragedy. Thousands of innocent people have been slaughtered. It is unprecedented. It never happened in evil." My mother looked around to make sure there was nobody in there. She knows there was no one else there but us, but this is the way she has been living with white folks. She looked around to make sure no one was there and then she looked at me and said, "Is he too young to remember Hiroshima Nagasaki? Does he remember the atomic bomb?" I said, "Yes, he remembers. That is not a truth he wants to deal with." She started to say something else to me and she changed her mind and did not say it. The thing that I was looking at there, as I was talking to these professors, that goes beyond the 1960's. That goes all the way back to slavery. Do you understand it? That is what that is all about. Who would corrupt the mind of people for centuries except they have diabolical design. These are the folk who prevent the kind of world that you and I want from happening.

Q: First of all, thank you very much for making myself as well as the multitude of other people here aware who are our age because so often we do not actually see what you guys went through back in 1958, even though it is still currently going on. My question, however, is where do we go from here? As a person in my generation, what steps do we take to further the goal of equality and freedom?

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A: I think that we have to give as much attention to the economics of freedom as we have given to the politics of freedom. The economics of freedom are far more difficult to achieve than the politics of freedom. We have to learn how to pull our resources. We have to learn how to reward our friends with our money and punish our enemy. We should not be putting money in the First National Bank if we cannot make loans at the First National Bank. We should not be putting money in the People's Bank if no one down there looks like us. I think we have to strike on the economic front and we have to hit as hard as we did on the political front. America is the citadel of capitalism and spending every dime we get is a recipe for bankruptcy in the citadel of capitalism. I do not like to deal with our dirty linen in front of white folks, but I am going to go ahead and do this. There are some things in the black community that we really need to clean up and only we can clean them up. I am sick and tired of some of these black preachers, in an automobile long as from here to there, two telephones, wearing a \$1500.00 suit, riding pass us and will not speak and raising all of that off people on food stamps; that is wrong. We cannot free a people tied to that. It is everywhere in a black community. We need to take a look at these so called black radio stations, so called. We do not usually own them. We just get on them and act a fool. My partners and I just bought two radio stations in Selma because there ought to be some other voice to the Selma Times-Journal. If you listen to some of these so-called black radio stations, what you here will make a grown man blush. All day long they are preaching to our children that SEX spells love and it does not. It spells more poverty, more disease, more everything that is wrong. I am going to stop there because the whites folks are sure enough getting interested.

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Q: I am a public school educator in the city of Huntsville and I work in middle school. It just breaks my heart. I grew up in Birmingham in ****. It is just devastating because we are not educating blacks nor whites to the truth. I want to know where do you think education fits in at that level because that is the future. My day is over with. It is that generation that will have carry us as America to where we want to be.

A: I agree with you. We are still teaching children that Columbus discovered America, though the Indians was on the beach waiting for him. In America, the truth can get you killed. Let me give you all some truths that will shock some of you. Do you know who trained and equipped some of Usama Bin Laden? He was our close friend as long as he was killing Russians. Do you understand that these misguided misfits who took these planes into those buildings, in their own minds were retaliating against this country for wrongs they felt had been done to them. Do you realize the truth will get you killed? So, how do you teach it? Do you realize that beginning in 1980, for eight years, Ronald Reagan prosecuted underclass, illegal wars on virtually every little country in Central and South America. He destroyed villages, destroyed families, killing children and women. Do you know that it is beyond rational dispute that all of the North help finance those wars with drug money. We do not come with clean hands. That is why the truth is so dangerous. If you start speaking or telling the truth, get ready to suffer; it is coming. I have spent a lifetime suffering because I believe in people and I love people. When I look in the mirror and shave every morning, I want to see somebody I halfway like. I do not want to be ashamed of me. I have seen some awful things in my time, things that would make you cry. The innocent suffers, truth be damned. I am going to say this and then I

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am going to hush. While President Bush and clergy from all denominations, black, white, red and everybody were appropriately gathered in the National Cathedral to show national tolerance, unity, prayer and hope, two of president Bush's strongest supporters wrote Reverend Jerry Falwell and Reverend Pat Robertson was on national television saying that the trade center and the pentagon because of homosexuals, homosexuality and abortionists. Now, how crazy can you be? That is loose in this land and it has been loose in this land for a long, long time. These people have power. They have the airwaves. They have television sounds and all that. They feed that to a misguided public all of the time. I hear stuff from intelligent, educated people and I say to myself, "Did I hear that right?"

Q: I must first start off by saying that I have immensely enjoyed everything that you have told us tonight. It encourages me as a college student to go forth and do well. The question that I want to ask you is despite all that you have experienced, what has reaffirmed your faith in America in all that you have done and what has kept you going through all of these years?

A: As I mentioned earlier, my dear mother and my late father actually loved people. They transferred that to me and to my younger sister. I cannot put up with suffering. I do not like to see anybody mistreated. When you have a sense of people, you want to try to help improve the human condition. I learned a long time ago in Sunday school that I cannot love the Lord until I first learn how to love you. I also learned that no matter what someone else does to me, I cannot afford to let that person make me hate them. I read where Booker T. Washington said, "The only way you can keep a man down a ditch is

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you have to get down there with him.” Throughout my life, there has always seemed to be somebody there who cared and said, “Look here boy, you don’t want to go that way; go this way.” There were a lot of people who did not care. There was always one or two who cared. I went to these segregated public schools in Selma, Alabama. The building I went to school in had been condemned twenty years earlier when my mother was a student there. The ceiling would fall down while we were in class. The whites had a brand new school on the main street in Selma. The superintendent would come every year to explain to us why there was no money for a new school. I wanted to do him some harm. I talked to my father about that. My father talked to me about not getting down in the ditch with the superintendent. I will say this. Nobody believes more in prayer than I do. I pray everyday. I am not ashamed of that. I pray at night. I pray driving along the street. When I get through praying, I get up off my knees; I am ready for battle. I guess. I am having the time of my life.

Q: (inaudible)

A: I will relay your message verbatim.

Can I take two minutes and say something about fees that I think that you ought to hear? Three years ago, three of us brought a law suit in Washington, DC on behalf on twenty-thousand black farmers from Maine to Florida and from New York to California. We charged that the United States Department of Agriculture had discriminated against black farmers by one, not giving them the loans that were entitled to and two, if they got the loans, it was too little too late. It forced farmers out of business. Fifteen years ago, there were thirty-six thousand small black farmers in this country. There are about eight left

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now. The judge said to me, “Mr. Chestnut, how much money are you talking about? Are you talking about 20,000 farmers all over the country?” I said, “Yes your honor.” He said, “Well how much money are you talking about. I said about 2.5 billion dollars.” The government laughed. The reason they laughed is because black folk had never gotten any real money from the federal government. You get social security and small business loans, but you do not get any real money from the government. There was no precedent for that. As I talk to you now, the government has paid fifty thousand dollars to about nine thousand black farmers who had no records whatsoever. Once they paid them the fifty thousand dollars because it was income, the government wrote a second check for 12,500 dollars for taxes and paid that to the IRS. In addition to that, if the government had some land that it had foreclosed on a black farmer, they had to give it back. They are in the process of doing that right now. Do you know how much black lawyers charged the black farmers? Zero. It cost my law firm 1.5 million dollars to process the case. We said at the end of the case, we will come back to the court. If we win, the court can order the government to pay us. We don’t want little farmers paying us. They didn’t create this mess. The government did. Now, the government is now paying us. Now, we are arguing with each other.

Q: First of all, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation for you sharing that delightful and wonderful lecture that you shared with us. I also wanted to comment on how one, the truth is not out there often and it is not often set out as eloquently as you put it. First of all, you do not have to search for the truth. There are books and research and a lot of that is for us today. If you do teach us from our elders, we will receive that

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information and we will take it and run with it. I do not want you to feel as if the cause is gone; the cause is lost because there are still people out there that feel that it is not over. We hear you when you call upon us to step up to the plate. I know soon that you will have to sit down but just know that our generation is not all lost. We are out there. We are waiting for you and that is all we need to see a little direction and we are in it. Along the path, we as children, we learn from our elders. In some way and somehow, it was mistranslated that after the Civil Rights Movements and after desegregation, everything was okay. Now, today our generation is driving around in luxurious cars paid by our student loans and things like that. I just want to know how do you feel about our generation kind of dropping the ball as far as the revolution is concerned and as far as things of that nature of the Civil Rights Movement is not over. We still have things to fight for. Like you said, it is only one-third of the way to its final destination and I do not see it in **. Where do you think we dropped the ball? So, thank you, thank you for coming to our campus.

A: I am going to answer that quickly and then I am going to let you all go. We all have to work together, as I have mentioned and went into that, and try to bring those along who will not come. Some will not come regardless, but you will get some of them. In 1964, every major black Civil Rights leader in the country was in jail in little Selma, every one of them and the movement was dying because there was no one to lead it. We had been trying for two weeks, habeas corpus and everything trying to get them out. One judge told me, "No way. We have the head of the snake. All we have to do is hold it long enough and the tail will die. Then, Malcom X showed up in Selma in front of my

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office before he went on down to the Brown Chappuis Church. I was glad when he went on down to the Brown Chappuis Church. He stood up in front of my office and he said that he had come to Selma to take over the movement and that from now on it would be going in a different direction. The only reason they were going to turn the cheek to see which way the rascal went. I looked up and there was Martin and Ralph walking down the street. The white folks put them out the jail. That is a true story. Malcom X could not have organized a march in Selma if he life depended on it. He did not speak the language or walk the walk. He was from Harlem and he knew that, but he also knew that the white folks did not know that. If they knew it, they were too scared to take a chance. It takes all kinds. Everybody brings something to the struggle.

Speaker: You have been trying to ask a question for a long time.

Q: (inaudible)

A: Let me go at it this way. Sometimes, we do not see what we think we see. Sometimes, it is not so much the mentality as it may be other things. Let me give you an example. In the same black farmer suit, there were serious problems. The statue of limitations had run. The statue of limitations said that if you have a lawsuit for discrimination against the government you had to bring it within two years. These farmers had not brought in any lawsuits within two years. The justice department told the president, "They are over with .Do not worry about it. We will file a motion to dismiss on the basis of the statue of limitations. The justice department thought that the President of the United States had the same mentality that they did because they were all in the government. The president did not want it to go away. He said, "Well, I do not know.

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Let me think about it.” While he was thinking about it, we went around and brought black farmers. We back to the 1960’s. We brought black farmers from all over the United States to Washington. They came in fifteen-year-old pick up trucks. They had little brown bags of cold chicken. That is all that they could afford. They slept five and six in a hotel room. We were up and down Pennsylvania Avenue. One fellow brought his mule. The biggest and the ugliest mule I ever seen in my life. The mule’s name was Trouble. We were up and down Pennsylvania Avenue threatening to shut the government down. The President of the United States was in the White House looking out smiling and Al Gore was close to having a miscarriage. He was trying to run for president and that was part of his political base out in the streets marching, so the president had the pressure that he wanted. So, he called of all people, Newton Gingrich. That is what I am saying. Everything that everything that looks a certain way is not. He called Newton Gingrich and said, “I need you to help me.” Then he told us, I want you all to go up tomorrow to the speaker’s office and talk with him. We are going to see what we can do about this Statue of Limitations”. I said, “Oh Lord, who in the world want to be bothered with Newton Gingrich?” We went up there. He said, “Come in. Come in. Then he said, “Look, we saved the Japanese. We did you all wrong. Stop believing that.” Newton Gingrich drafted it alone. He had his committee to do it. He went down on the floor of the house himself and insisted that amendment, about 3 paragraphs, be added to that federal budget and it passed. For the first time in the history of the country, the government waived the law and said it did not apply to these minority farmers. What am I saying? I am saying that everything is not as it appears. There are people out there with

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a mindset that you cannot read. There are a whole lot of people we may think got that mindset; they do not have it. We just have to reach them and talk to them. We cannot give up. We have to keep pushing up.