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DR. J. CLAY SMITH, JR.
ACTING CHAIRMAN, EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION
ON OCCASION OF THE
TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION OF THE INDIANA
CIVIL RIGHTS COMMISSION
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA

JULY 2, 1981

THE PAST 20 YEARS OF CIVIL RIGHTS AND A LOOK AT THE FUTURE

My topic this evening is "The Past 20 Years of Civil Rights and a Look at the Future." The time frame of twenty years is of course a reference to the fact that this evening we, as a community, celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Indiana Civil Rights Commission. Some may think it unusual that in this era of anti-government feeling in some quarters, we celebrate the establishment of a government agency. But, the Indiana Civil Rights Commission is an unusual agency; it is unique because it is solely devoted to a guiding principle of our country that all men and women are created equal.

Tonight the citizens of Indiana and their guests reaffirm the American principle that persons in this country are judged on their own merit and not on the basis of their race or their color, their sex or religion, their national origin; or whether they are handicapped. We are here to celebrate the uniquely American concept that an individual should rise as high and as far as his/her own abilities and character will take them. We honor and express our appreciation to those men and women whose vision and courage created the Indiana Fair Employment Practice Commission,

as the Commission was originally known. On behalf of the community, we also express appreciation to those whose efforts have nurtured the Commission and made it a viable and effective force in the battle against discrimination.

An anniversary is always an appropriate occasion to reflect on what has transpired. This evening I ask you to recall and reflect on the civil rights struggle 20 years ago. We recall the last two decades neither to reminisce about fond times nor to open up old wounds. We remember because we know that history is the prologue to our future. If we understand our past--the successes and the failures--the days of gloom as well as the days of unrestrained joy--our agenda for civil rights in the eighties becomes clearer.

I ask all of you now--young and old alike--to think back to 1961. On July 1, 1961--that is one day and twenty years ago, the Indiana Fair Employment Practices Commission was established. The Commission's name, of course has changed over the years as a result of its increased responsibilities; but the fact that in 1961 Indiana had a fair employment law is a credit to the citizens and legislators of this state. Not until three years later did the federal government pass federal legislation prohibiting employment discrimination.

But returning back to 1961, what were you doing then? What were you doing in January of that year when President

Kennedy declared, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but rather what you may do for your country?"

I remember what the very bravest people in the civil rights movement were doing in 1961, for that was the year of the Freedom Riders. At the very time the Indiana Civil Rights Commission was beginning, a group of blacks and whites attempted to ride interstate buses between Virginia and Mississippi to protest segregation in bus terminals. While riding on buses between Atlanta, Georgia and Montgomery, Alabama, the buses were stopped by a mob. The mob dragged the Freedom Riders off the bus and then stomped, beat, and savagely assaulted these citizens. The Freedom Riders faced the wrath of the mob because they believed that a black man had the same right as a white to use public facilities.

1962 is also an important year in the civil rights movement. It was a year of integration at the university level. In 1962, a federal court held that the University of Mississippi, commonly known as "Ole Miss" had denied James Meredith admission solely because of his race and ordered him admitted. Rather than obey the court's order, the Governor of Mississippi blocked the doorway of the admissions office prohibiting James Meredith from entering and enrolling. As a result, President Kennedy federalized the National Guard and dispatched U.S. Army troops to escort James Meredith so that he would register. Although in a hostile community, James Meredith persevered and eventually graduated from the University of Mississippi.

1963 is a year associated with tragedy and sorrow. A sensitive and idealistic President John F. Kennedy, was taken from our midst. Although he was with us just a few short years, he and people like Senators Jacob Javits and Hugh Scott were able to plant the seeds of idealism in many of our fellow citizens. On the other hand, the forces of hate planted a bomb at a church in Birmingham. In 1963 the explosion killed four little girls and injured scores of other innocent children. The head of the Mississippi NAACP, Medgar Evers, was gunned down in his home.

But even in the midst of this tragedy, there were glimmers of hope. In 1963 the movement learned the meaning of simple eloquence and its own strength in the face of adversity. The strength is symbolized by the compelling oratory of the late, Dr, Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King, before the largest crowd in civil rights history and at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial stated:

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave-owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exhalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

Dr. King's message must stay with us as we meet the new challenges of the 80's and I will expand on that message shortly.

1964 and 1965 may have been the most important two years in terms of civil rights laws in the last century. The stirring words of Martin Luther King, the assassination of President Kennedy, and the sheer political power of President Lyndon Johnson and the bi-partisan concern demonstrated in the Congress of the United States by Republicans and Democrats moved Congress to enact legislation protecting the rights of minorities and women. Perhaps you recall 1964, when the Congress through the entire summer, debated a package of Civil Rights legislation. The votes were always close and dramatic. But the force in favor of equality prevailed, and as a result, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was passed. This comprehensive piece of legislation outlawed segregation in accommodations, such as hotels, motels, restaurants, gas stations, and all other places involving interstate commerce. The 1964 Civil Rights Act also outlawed segregation in all publicly owned facilities such as parks, stadiums, and swimming pools. No longer could state and local governments accept federal aid and then exclude black persons from programs supported by these funds. In 1965 the historic Voting Rights Act was passed. The right to vote became a reality rather than illusory.

I should also point out that the 1964 Civil Rights Act outlawed discrimination in employment on the basis of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and to help accomplish this goal, the act created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.