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to the
Southern Conference of Black Mayors
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It is both an honor and a pleasure for me to be invited to address this Southern Conference of Black Mayors. As the director of an organization which has invested more than a decade in efforts to advance minority political participation, it is quite encouraging to see, with each new election season, more black mayors being elected throughout the South.

Even more encouraging is the fact that you have come together as the Southern Conference of Black Mayors. You are to be commended for pooling your resources, for organizing, for mapping out political strategies. I am convinced that your coming together can be a mighty force for good.

You have, for this conference, a creative and imaginative agenda designed to help you to be more efficient and responsive to the needs of the people you represent. I am hopeful that you will take back to your cities, towns, and hamlets some creative ideas, because first and foremost, you must produce results for the people who elected you. Since you will be getting down to the nuts and bolts of meeting your responsibilities in the workshops tomorrow, at this time I would just like to share with you what I see to be your role as part of the vanguard of black political leadership in the South.

As you all well know, the Voter Education Project operates programs of voter registration, citizenship education, and get-out-the-vote drives in the 11 southern states from Virginia to Texas. As a private, tax-exempt organization, we have not supported any particular candidate or political party in our 11-year history because we are a nonpartisan organization.

The VEP has operated and supported nonpartisan programs in most, and I dare say, all of your communities, but we have not worked in any of your partisan campaigns. Yet, when I, or other representatives of the Voter Education Project, visit other areas of the country to seek support to continue our work -- whether in California or Chicago, Washington or New York -- people tell us that they have just read of the election of another black mayor, and they shake our hands and congratulate us for another sign of progress, another step forward.

I say this to point out that your election, whether in a metropolitan area or a tiny hamlet, is a significant event, not only to foundation and corporate representatives, organized labor and church officials, and to representatives of the press, but for the average man and woman on the street. You are recognized as pioneers, as a new breed of public official, and to many you are the symbol of hope and a reason to continue to believe and work in the political process.

You are more than just mayors. You are more than black mayors. At this point in history, your burden is far greater than your role as merely another one of the 4,600 mayors in the South. It may sometimes be a heavy burden, a burden that you didn't ask for, but despite that, it is a burden which you must shoulder.

First, each of you has an obligation, a mandate, a sacred trust to dedicate your lives to the continuation of the struggle of black people. Your positions in public office were not won merely by the margin of votes cast on the day of your election. Your election was a much more costly event. To create a political environment which could see you elected to public office meant the struggle, suffering, and even death of many of our fathers and mothers, sisters, and brothers.

To win the right to vote meant facing lynch mobs and literacy tests. For black people, the right to vote cost a great price. Someone had to face hostile local officials and go to jail for the power of the ballot. Winning the ballot meant standing in unmoving lines outside county courthouses, facing abuse and hostility, losing jobs and homes, just for the right to participate in the democratic system.

To win the right to vote, old women and young children were beaten by Alabama policemen in Selma in 1965 -- lashed with bullwhips, struck with billy clubs, choked by tear gas, and run down by horses. It took this kind of courage, this kind of dedication, this kind of sacrifice to win the legal protection of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

I'm not living in the past when I speak of the struggles of the 1960s. It seems to be the "in thing" to talk today about how the Civil Rights Movement is gone. They say, "The Civil Rights Movement is dead." They ask, "Where is the Civil Rights Movement?"

Some of our finest leaders may no longer be with us. We no longer have the moral leadership of a Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Some of our organizations may have served their historical purpose. For instance, we no longer have the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee which pioneered much of the voting rights struggle in the Deep South.

I am here tonight to say something that I'm sure you already know: The Civil Rights Movement is not dead. You, yourselves -- the black mayors of the South -- are examples of the truth that the Movement is alive. We may be in a new phase, organizing conferences and strategy sessions in Tuskegee rather than marching to Montgomery, but we're still organizing.

We are the same people living in the same communities and still addressing ourselves to the same goals. We've overcome some problems, we've registered portions of our communities to vote, we've seen some success, and there's nothing dead about the spirit which gave strength to the Movement. Across the South, without the banners of major civil rights organizations, without front page headlines on daily newspapers, local people -- hard-working people in local organizations which simply refuse to give up -- have continued the Movement. The Movement today is political organizing, and that's what we were seeking when we crossed that bloody bridge in Selma in 1965. The Movement today is political power for minorities, and that's what black people were seeking in 1965. When federal registrars first permitted the black man to register, he was called a sharecropper; today, he's called a sheriff. I say to you tonight that the Movement is alive! The Movement is moving on!

The second sacred trust which you have is the legacy of faith and hope which you must maintain. You are not just politicians in the traditional sense and the eyes of the world are upon you. In the midst of political scandal, assassinations, disillusionment, and despair, your election comes like a breath of fresh air.

From your heritage you can and must bring an infusion of ethics, commitment, and morality into the political arena. We need strong moral leadership which characterized the Civil Rights Movement, and you have the opportunity to demonstrate that political office means more than merely amassing personal power. You must demonstrate your first concern as an advocate for the needs of the people you serve.

Your third sacred trust is to demonstrate to the world that your election is not merely another example of the politics of race, but that your political leadership can transcend historically-divisive racial lines. Most of you were elected by white as well as black votes. Some were elected by a predominantly-white electorate. You have the opportunity to foster interracial cooperation in working for political, social, and economic solutions to common problems in the southern region.

Since the Voter Education Project began its work in 1962, more than two and one-half million blacks have become registered voters. This is an impressive figure, but the real significance of this great mass of new voters lies in the way in which the ballot has been used. For sometime, I have been saying that there is a greater appreciation for the power of the ballot -- a greater political

sophistication on the part of minorities in the deep Southern states than in any other part of the country. I think that black people, by giving support to or withholding support from both white and black candidates, have demonstrated sophistication.

At the same time, in recent months and years white voters have demonstrated a willingness to support and elect promising black candidates.

I don't say that the millenium has come just because in a City like Atlanta black candidates such as Andrew Young and Maynard Jackson have received strong biracial support. I don't think we've seen the ultimate victory in Raleigh, North Carolina -- a southern capital city with a population of over 77 percent white where Clarence Lightner was elected mayor. I do think that these and other positive signs indicate a trend toward political coalitions which you must promote and expand. As Dr. King taught us, the destiny of all men is intertwined. We must strive to nourish political coalitions for the advancement of all human beings and not just for a particular race. In the words of Dr. King, "None of us shall be free until all are free."

You have the opportunity to be builders of bridges and the special task of building bridges to span the deep racial divisions which have plagued this region and this nation. You have the opportunity to lead -- not an attempt to amass greater economic power for a few or to leave material monuments to your efforts -- but an opportunity to provide leadership in the search for human excellence, to build the lives of human beings. The people of this country -- black and white -- are ready and hungry for such leadership, for such builders. We have the opportunity to demonstrate, that despite the exclusion, despite the oppression we have known, despite the negative conditioning we have received, we can still maintain a positive and human perspective and provide leadership for others.

You have a fourth sacred trust, and that is to inspire the nation by providing a model of southern political leadership. It has often been predicted that in many areas the South would solve its problems before other regions in this nation. I agree with this statement. In many ways we do have advantages and we do have the opportunity to overcome racial differences, protect the environment, make our towns and cities livable, and establish a true participatory democracy.

It will be a great lesson to the nation and the world to show that where the struggle was the hardest, where the opposition was the strongest, where the roads were the rockiest, we still made the greatest progress.

The South has the power to bring change to this entire nation. Here in the South, we have the power to turn this country around. I will make this prediction: Within the next decade, from the

heart of Dixie, we will send a new breed of elected officials to Congress. Already there is evidence that we will be sending more sensitive and progressive white members to Congress, but Andy Young and Barbara Jordan will not be alone as the only southern black representatives. From the Delta of Mississippi, from the Black Belt of Alabama, from the Cotton Capitol of Tennessee, and from Piedmont, North Carolina black officials will be elected to seats in the United States House of Representatives.

By demonstrating that the South is a model and you have already begun to do this, we can inspire our brothers and sisters who went North looking for the land of opportunity to return and find that opportunity in the land of their birth. There is now a degree of hope in the South which doesn't exist in any other part of the country. By preserving the ecology of rural areas of our region and developing the economy to standards of life enjoyed in other regions, we can not only stop the outmigration of human resources from the South -- we can turn the Chickenbone Special around.

In summary, you are symbols. You are the keepers of the dreams of a people long struggling to be a part of the fullness and richness of life in this nation. You are the hope of the political process and the representatives of your region. You have the best wishes of a large segment of Americans. You have a promise to fulfill, and obligations to pay.

All these things are true, but I would be less than candid if I did not paint the whole picture. You have some problems to overcome, and I would like to spend just a few moments in raising some of these problems. I think we should deal with these openly and meet the issues head-on, because by stating and recognizing potential pitfalls, we can find the resources with which to deal creatively with them.

First, there is the pitfall of power. There is the notion that power corrupts, but this need not be so. As elected officials, you will have access to power, you will have opportunity to utilize the media, you will have a forum from which to get your ideas and words across. It is my hope and prayer that you will minimize the rapping and get on with the action. This is not a time for rhetoric or falling in love with your own ego. We need public officials who can develop programs which will produce, and I think you can meet this need.

A second danger is that of being used to another's advantage. Protect your own integrity and, at the same time, don't let other people or organizations use you for their own ends. There are those who will come at the eleventh hour to be a part of your bandwagon. There are those who would prey and capitalize on the tears and sweat and blood which, over the years, have brought you to this historic point. You have made a breakthrough and black/southern politics is fast becoming the "in thing." There will be those who will seek to enrich their own coffers by wrongfully claiming a role in your success.

Another danger I see is that of being too proud to turn to others for assistance in times of need. When you reach the pinnacle as chief executives of your towns and cities, many people think that you have all the answers. You may have become mayor, but you're still human and human beings don't have all of the answers. What's more, human beings are even wrong sometimes. If you have areas of deficiencies, go out and seek the resources and the knowledge you need. There is a little song that says, "Ain't too proud to beg." It's not a sin not to have the answer, but it is a sin to pretend to have the answer when you don't. A little humility can go a long way.

In the final analysis, the electorate obviously had faith in you, you have faith in yourselves and the Movement which nurtured you, and I have faith in you. If you will dedicate yourselves further to the task, I have no doubt that we will, one day soon, see that beloved community of human excellence which we are trying to build.