

Luncheon Keynote - US Attorney General Eric Holder
SNCC 50th Anniversary Conference
Shaw University, Raleigh NC, April 2010
Transcript Video Recording #29
(Raw, unedited, no annotation)

Speaker 1 (00:50):

I, I, um, I'm sorry to be such a party pooper. Uh, and in fact, uh, we will be doing a lot of that this evening. And so getting your best voices and, you know, as Harry will tell you need to get that honey and lemon juice or whatever you guys, um, I would now like to invite Reverend for again, to introduce the attorney general,

Speaker 2 (01:30):

The top cop of our nation, The leader of justice and the courts of our nation, A symbol of American authority. Eric H. Holder was sworn in as the 82nd attorney general of the United States of America on February 3rd, 2009

Speaker 2 (02:03):

97, Mr. Holder was named by president Clinton to be the deputy attorney general, the first African American name to that post. Prior to that, he served as us attorney for the district of Columbia. In 1988, Mr. Holo was nominated by president Reagan to become an associate judge of the superior court of the district of Columbia. A native of New York city holder attended public schools there graduating from fame high school, where he earned a Regent scholarship. He attended Columbia majored in American history and was graduated in 1973. He graduated from Columbia school of law in 1976. While in law school, he clerked at the NAACP legal defense fund and the department of justice criminal division upon graduating. He joined the department of justice as part of attorney General's honors program. Let's put it in perspective And let's feel the day

Speaker 2 (03:07):

We marched until our feet hurt. We had absolutely no idea. I did not marry that our marching would need to what it has led to. We simply recognize that symbolically, we have a right to get a cup of coffee and a hot dog. We had a right at the lunch counters to be served. We knew that we had a right to be Americans. We had been forced by teachers to learn the great of this country. We, the people of the United States in order to form a book over you, establish justice. We had to put to memory. We hold these troops to be self-evident all are created equal. And in, by that created were certain in the third grade yet we never got new textbooks. All of our textbooks came from the white schools. After they had finished the books and got new books, they sent 'em to our schools. The only thing that we knew of a microscope in school was a picture of it, but we marched Julian. We March, we marched, we did not know where we were marching, but we knew that we were marching away from segregation and second class citizen.

Speaker 2 (04:29):

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Did you hear the Congressman? He is our trophy. One of us who March, who is marched to the top in this nation and who the fuck That the most powerful law person

Speaker 3 (05:03):

And we sign marching again, knows ladies.

Speaker 4 (05:36):

Wow. I wanna know who planned this, Who put me on after John Lewis, I don't have any chicken stories to talk about. I grew up in New York city, so, But thank you, Congressman Lewis. I am humbled by your words. And by those words of introduction, also want to just say thank you to all of you, but I want to recognize at least a couple do right here in the front row. And forgive me for those of you. I can seat in other parts of the room, Mr. Gregory. Hi. Thank These are folks who, as a young guy in Queens, in New York, I only got to see on television and yet you all influenced my life. Many other young people. Mr. Bond. Thank you, Mr. Belafonte. I have you on my iPod <laugh> But before that I saw you marching and I thank you. My colleagues in Washington, DC. I thank you.

Speaker 4 (07:27):

I continued to be inspired by the example of leadership and service that you all provided to all of us. The nation is in your debt nearly half a century ago, during one of the most painful and most shameful chapters in our nation's history, your courage and your restraint in the face of life, threatening violence brought out the best in a generation, the best in a generation. And on the day that Dr. King led hundred of thousands of Americans in a March on Washington and shared his dream with the world. Your words established the creed that guided those devoted to the cause of justice and the promise of equality. The creed that sustains us to this day in a shadow of the Lincoln Memorial, standing with Dr. King, you declared that you Congressman our minds, souls and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for all Were true in 1963, they remained true today.

Speaker 4 (08:49):

It is this truth. It is this truth that was there. Then it is this truth that exists. Now that brings us together here today. It is for me, an honor, an honor, you cannot begin to understand it is an honor for me to be a part of these days of important reflection and reevaluation. I am grateful to join you all in comm 50th anniversary and in celebrating the progress that so many of you here in this church help to achieve today. We also celebrate the life in mourn in the loss of Dr. Benjamin hooks. One of our nation's great civil rights leaders, Dr. Hook served our country many ways as a pastor. He's a judge, a lawyer and activist, a business. And as a veteran, his extraordinary commitment cause of equal justice health to open the doors of opportunity to many who have followed in his footsteps and his visionary leadership helped to steer the NAACP through one of its most challenging areas. As we remember, and honor Dr.

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Hook's achievements and his contribution and his, our thoughts and prayers are with hook's family. And although he has sorely missed, there is much to celebrate in the life that he lived in the example that he set and in the inspiration that his memory will continue to provide us. I have no doubt that Dr. Hooks is smiling down on us, and he's thrilled to see the large power that is gathered here today.

Speaker 4 (10:18):

Today you are so many, so many, but it is worth pausing to remember that half a century ago in the beginning, there were only a few four young men, Franklin McCain, David Rick, Joseph McNeil. He's El Blair, Jr. Four young men joined together bound by a shared hope and a bold untested idea. And on February the first 1960 at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, they put their idea into action. The next day, a picture of these young men defied and sitting in a white only area appeared on the cover of the Greensboro record above a prophetic three word caption that said it all. And I quote three words. Students begin movement.

Speaker 4 (11:27):

By the end of the day, those four students had been joined by dozens more and before, long by tens of thousands. More, this flicker of hope first sparked by a small circle of students or North Carolina. A and T's camp has quickly spread the Durham to chapel hill, to Winston-Salem and Concord and Raleigh, and soon to every state across the south because of SNCC because of you, which began in Greensboro as policy of protests became all across America. A philosophy of progress in a too long delay quest for equality and for justice. It was on this very day, April the seven, exactly 50 years ago that this philosophy became the foundation of a movement that would forever change the course of our country. On that day snicks founders adopted a strategy of nonviolent confrontation, not merely as a tactic of advancing civil rights, but as an end unto itself, by appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, they wrote in their mission statement, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities though, are profound words. And that of course is exactly what happened as their efforts expanded from sit-ins to marches from freedom rides to freedom ballots, these young leaders, so young, so young, these young young leaders created of nonviolence that has been emulated by every successful social movement in the United States of America. It all started there

Speaker 4 (13:30):

And as they met success, our society and our laws moved closer to fulfilling their promise of equal justice for all. Now, many of you know, this history far better than IRA county, you lived, you were there a part of those early days, some of you risked your lives to achieve the enduring progress that we now celebrate you war as the committee executive secretary James Foreman, once put it a band of sisters and brothers, a circle of trust with a belief in people and in their power to change their lives. I mentioned this history because there is quite simply no better guide as we set our course for the days

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ahead for, well over two centuries. Now the American people have been striving to fulfill the promise of our justice system. I have great faith in this system. It's an essential aspect of our democracies foundation, but I also realize that unfortunately, our legal system has not always reflected our highest ideals. Before SNCC helped to end segregation, our legal system undermined the very rights and privileges that it should have been protecting. Since those dark days, we have made great progress. And while we must, I think, make peace with the past, we must never forget it. And we must never dismiss it.

Speaker 4 (15:14):

Looking back on this history provides our best chance for moving forward. It also helps us to understand the persistent suspicion held by some that for example, the criminal justice system in America does not treat African Americans or other people of, of color fairly.

Speaker 4 (15:35):

And this history illuminates some of the ways in which our old legal system continues to affect present conditions in some of our nation's most vulnerable African American communities. Indeed, this history is a powerful reminder of the persistent of injustice and the consequences of civil rights violations. These consequences are perhaps most evident when examining the current state of our economy over the last two years, we have faced the most serious financial prices in generations. Certainly the recession affected Americans of every she ethnic group, class of age, closing off both blue and white collar job prospects. However, the consequences for African American communities have been far more severe than the national averages, even today, as our nation emerges from the recession joblessness for young black men, those between the ages of 16 and 24 has reached proportions, not seen since the great depression and young black women of the same age. Now have an unemployment rate of more than 26% 11 points higher than the unemployment rate for all 16 to 24 year old women. That's right. These economic disparities will have long term consequences for all Americans and they should concern each of us after all that we have worked to achieve, we must not allow this next generation to become the first generation in decades, not to keep pace with or to exceed their parents standard of living,

Speaker 4 (17:17):

But such disparities, as you know, are not limited to financial matters a little more than a month ago. The United States sentencing commission released a study that found African-American and Latino men are more likely to receive longer prison sentences than white counterparts. A reality aggravated by the crack powder cocaine sentencing disparity that Congress is fortunately. And finally now taking steps to reduce. And just this past week, just this past week, the United States district court judge at the urging of the justice, department's civil rights division ordered the Wallfall county district in Tylertown Mississippi, just miles from where SNCC planted the seeds of its freedom and balance campaign in 1961 in 1961, this judge issued an order to comply with an order from nearly four decades ago to halt practices that were encouraging the resegregation of that county schools. There is still work to be done.

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This justice department would be about that work Today's challenges remind us that we have much more to do despite the progress that we've made in creating a more equal nation. It may be 10. When you look at the diversity of the people walking the halls of Congress, or the man who sits in the oval office to think that equal justice has been achieved for all Americans. And we have made tremendous progress as a nation, but it will take more than the election of the first African American to fully secure the promise of equality for every American. And,

Speaker 4 (19:42):

And it will certainly take more than the appointment of the first African American attorney general to ensure that the and justice system reflects the values and principles enshrined in our nation's founding documents. It's gonna take more than me. We at the justice department have recommitted ourselves to this work. This is my pledge to you. We're strengthening civil rights protections in employment, in housing, in voting and with regard to sentences in our criminal justice system. And we've launched a,

Speaker 4 (20:28):

And we've launched a new initiative aimed at expanding access to justice. I believe that every American and certainly everyone in this church can play a role in advancing this work in a rekindling of the spirit that began at a lunch counter on April of 1960 and electrified this nation. I am, of course, speaking in particular to the many college students who I see here today, we are counting on you to build on stick's achievements and to use the opportunities and gifts that you have been provided to help others realize their potential and to further advance the cause of justice. And to ensure that our nation's promise of the equal opportunity is finally fulfilled. But let me also make clear this army is not disbanded. This army looks strong to me. They're still marching to be done. There are achievements to be made goals to be reached. So put on your shoes, Get on the internet now And stay as committed and active as you were back then we need you,

Speaker 4 (21:51):

But the presence of young people in this auditorium gives me great hope for our future time after time, the American people often at the insistence of our nation's young people, whether it's today or 1960, have proven that we will not be deterred by our nation's painful past. Instead, we must continue to apply the lessons that we have learned from history to Hasting our work and to open the doors of opportunity for all on this historic day. As we celebrate the 50th anniversary of sticks beginnings, I can't help but be optimistic and I can't help, but recall what we often hear, but still moves me. Dr. King's prophetic reminder that the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. I believe that Dr. King was right in part cause of the progress I've witnessed during my own lifetime and the incredible healing that I have seen as a child in New York. I cheered on the Brooklyn Dodgers and their star second

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base in Jackie Robbs. They moved to LA and I've never forgiven for that. As a boy, I watched a beautiful young woman named Vivian Malone, a woman who later became my sister-in-law

Speaker 4 (23:13):

Stepped past George Wallace to integrate the university of Alabama. As a teenager, I felt the scope of my dreams expand. As I saw Thurgood Marshall, take his historic place on our nation's highest court. As a man, I have had the privilege to serve our nation's first African American president. And now I have the indescribable honor of leading our nation's justice department as the first African American attorney general. This, This progress would not have and could not have occurred without SN Nick's work. Let me be very clear. There is a direct line, a direct line from that lunch counter to the oval office, There is a direct line, a direct line from that lunch counter to the fifth floor of the United States department of justice, where your attorney general sits

Speaker 4 (24:45):

To as I stand before leaders who I have admired all my life, I fully understand that I also stand on your shoulders. So I'm here simply to say, thank you, thank you as much as anything. The path I've Lester travel was blazed by your sacrifice, by your courage and by your conviction. And most of all, by your action, what seems almost easy? Looking back at old news real coverage from 50 years ago was I know unimaginably difficult and frightening despite this SNCC and the movement that it inspired, persevered, and it succeeded now together, we must continue moving forward on this long road toward justice and toward equality. Although our progress may still seem slow in halting at times each of us has the power and each of us has the obligation to make sure that that journey continues. This army is still strong together. We can build a more inclusive, more just, and a more perfect union. And we must, as John Lewis said, our minds and hearts cannot rest until freedom and justice exist for all to that. I simply say, amen.

Speaker 1 (26:42):

We want to thank the attorney general for blessing us with his presence. And we hope that he takes back message. Well, he, he hears the message and takes back the message to the president that you stay strong. That they're, That he, as he tries to deal with Guantanamo and other issues and the various things will buffer in, they should need, they need to stay strong. Okay. We also no at this time. Okay. Okay. Uh, Bob, thank you. <laugh> uh, this, this time we have been accused, we've been accused of being unsick like on trying to keep time trying to this, uh, this, uh, conference on time and within budget.