

# Vote grab: Kerry tabs civil rights, military record

WASHINGTON (AP) - Drawing on military themes while trying to strengthen support among a key Democratic constituency, presidential candidate John Kerry told Black veterans their sacrifices were part of an "unfinished journey" to ensure that Blacks need not fight as hard for civil rights as their forebears did when they returned home from war.

Kerry's tribute Friday night kicked off Memorial Day weekend activities designed to bolster his national security credentials and raise doubts about President Bush's performance as commander in chief.

At a salute to veterans organized by the Congressional Black Caucus, Kerry said the Blacks who had served in World War II "gave their sweat, gave their tears, gave their lives to a country that at that time believed they should sit behind German POWs at a USO concert."

"When we honor the memory of those who have sacrificed and when we honor those of you who lived those lives of patriotism, we're not just talking about the past, we're talking about the future," the Massachusetts senator said.

"We're talking about the unfinished journey to make

sure that no one else has to fight as hard as you did."

Without specifying to whom he was referring, Kerry said there were still "people in this country who don't understand. We still have people in this country who are willing to stand in the way. We still have some who call themselves leaders who appoint people to courts who challenge affirmative action and take on the ability of people to live truly equal."

Earlier Friday in Wisconsin, Kerry criticized Bush's "blustery, arrogant policies" and promised voters, "I will destroy the terrorists, but I am going to build a bridge to

every last country we can so war is the last resort."

Black voters quickly closed ranks behind Kerry in the Democratic primaries, but Kerry needs to strengthen his connections with them, said Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., chairman of the Black caucus.

"The more he does things like this, the more they feel a warmth toward him," Cummings said in an interview after the veterans' tribute.

"Early on," the congressman said, "a number of us felt that he was a little stiff, but now it seems as if he is being very, very natural, and

I think that comes from working with more African-Americans on a daily basis."

Cummings dismissed concerns raised by some Black officials and advocacy groups that there are not more minorities in the top ranks of the Kerry campaign, saying he felt there was significant representation. He said top campaign officials meet every two weeks with the Black caucus and that Kerry had hired a number of people recommended by the caucus.

Kerry clearly had a friendly audience in the veterans, but a number said they still don't know a lot about him.

"I haven't finalized my decision yet, but it won't be Republican," said Donald Christiansen, who served as a paratrooper in Korea and later was a member of Special Forces in Vietnam. "Kerry's a very good man. He speaks well. He's a veteran."

Charles Johnson Jr., 67, of Baltimore, said he expected to learn more about Kerry's policies in coming weeks.

"I just hope that at least he will offer a fresh vision of what we need to do as Americans," said Johnson, who served in Korea during the Vietnam era.

## Beech

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his raw potential and transforming it into many great opportunities. Opportunity that became a success.

He shared his story with the Sentinel-Voice in hope, even in his absence, that his words may ring in the ears of those who are now ready to make a choice.

Beech was large for his age as a young man, so at 15 he chose to drop out of school, advance his age, enabling him to join the armed forces. This choice took him into the Korean War. After a combat-related injury, he soon moved to Georgia and began working for the Air Force as a civilian. It was there that Beech rediscovered segregation. Labeled bathrooms and eating facilities were unacceptable to a man who fought for his country and was denied basic rights by that same country.

He wrote about these injustices and soon the army responded by removing all signs of segregation. Shortly thereafter, traveling through a small southern town, he was stopped by police, brutally beaten and then jailed. After his release, he decided to leave the South.

His relocation to Pasadena, Calif. began his trek up the ladder of education. Beech began working for the post office and attending high school at night. Three years later, he had earned his diploma and longed for his Associates degree. He continued his education and received a bachelors, then a Master's Degree in School Administration and ultimately a doctorate.

He taught sixth grade in Pasadena, but once again, racism continued to plague his journey. Unable to advance in Pasadena, though qualified, he moved to Inglewood, where he was promoted to assistant superintendent of schools. In 1970, he was once again instrumental in a landmark desegregation decision resulting in the desegregation of the Inglewood school system.

Beech spoke and many listened, including Bob Crawford, superintendent of the Orange County School District. After hearing Beech speak on integration, Crawford offered him the position of assistant superintendent of schools in Orange County, an ultra-conservative district. Beech soon became superintendent in East Palo Alto, Calif., a position he held for two years.

In 1999, Beech moved to Las Vegas and served with Beverly Mathis as vice principal at Booker Elementary School, leaving for the Matt Kelly staff in the same capacity. During his stay at Matt Kelly he has worked with principals Jeremy Hauser, Richard DiTondo and currently Rod Knowles.

With only a few weeks remaining, his candy jar remains full and his standards remain high for his students. His desk is filled with numbers and pictures of his adoring students. He plans to keep up with their progress.

"Most of all, I have enjoyed seeing what education can do for you," he said. "I know where I come from and I don't ever forget it. Without education, I would have never made it this far. Now I can retire and move to Atlanta with my beautiful wife, Phyllis, an author and HUD executive."

Beech has taught everything from Head Start to college and now looks forward to writing his memoirs and enjoying his grandchildren.



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