

Civil Rights

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new law, many of its promises remain unfulfilled.

"We now need to see that it's fully implemented and that it's enforced and we need to work to get in the economic positions so that our families can take advantage of some of the opportunities that opened up," Height says. "We need to have more opportunities for training and development for young people so that they will be prepared to fill the demands of the jobs... I think they need to get out and vote. They need to realize that they have gone through open doors and they have to help keep them open."

Among the promises of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the withholding of federal funds to any school or institution that discriminates on the basis of race, national origin, religion or gender. It was also enacted to ensure that people have legal recourse if they are denied access to public accommodations or employment.

However, problems remain.

"I discover whenever I go and visit the Black Belt (a soil-rich region of Alabama) for any business for the Civil Rights Commission, that there is still Jim Crow," says Mary Frances Berry, chairwoman of the U. S. Commission on Civil Rights. "There are still places where Blacks have been segregated in 2004. ... Even the schools, as we know, are mostly still segregated. Two-thirds of Black children go to schools that are mostly Black. Title 6 (of the Civil Rights Act) also promises quality education for our kids. We know that that hasn't happened. We still have major issues."

Even so, no one can credibly deny that there has been progress:

- Since 1964, the high school graduation rate for Blacks has increased from 20 percent to 70 percent. The college graduation rate jumped from 5 percent to 15 percent. (The White graduation rate rose from 50 percent to 82 percent over that same period. At the college level, the White rate has increased from 10 percent to 28 percent);

- From 1967 to 2001, the median income for Black families went from \$26,570 to \$43,938 (In the same time period, the median income of White families grew from \$40,943 to \$69,856);

- In 1972, when the Bureau of Labor Statistics began keeping track of employ-



Emblematical of the Times: This picture of a burned-out Greyhound shows the volatility activists were often met with.

ment by race, the percentage of unemployed African-Americans was 10.4 percent. Currently, the unemployment rate for African-Americans is 10.1 percent. (White unemployment was around 5.5 percent and has now dropped to 5 percent).

- In 1974, the percentage of Black families living below the poverty level was about 32 percent and White families were at 8 percent. Currently, the percentage of Black families living below the poverty line has dropped to about 27 percent while the percentage of White families in poverty has remained virtually unchanged.

"I guess one would have to say we obviously are better off than we used to be, but we still aren't as well off as we should be," says Berry.

President Lyndon B. Johnson's work in getting the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed, as well as the subsequent passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, arguably makes him the president who had done the most to bring about equality in American society.

Although President George W. Bush held a 40th anniversary celebration at the White House last week, he is quickly gaining a reputation in civil rights circles as one of the worst presidents for Black America.

"I find it particularly appalling that because he is in the White House, Bush is having a celebration for the 40th anniversary of the Act," says Berry. "That doesn't make any sense because he hasn't done anything to try to implement anything. And if he got re-elected, he wouldn't do anything. This has not been his focus, not an emphasis in his administration."

Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission from 1977 to 1981, agrees.

"The Justice Department, which enforces some sections

of the 1964 Act in the Civil Rights Division, has virtually ceased enforcement," Norton said in a statement. "Between 1980 to 2000, under Democratic and Republican administrations, the Division averaged 14 employment discrimination cases annually, based on race, sex, religion or ethnicity. In the first two years of the Bush Administration, however, the Justice Department filed only two such cases.

Even worse, civil rights activists say, Bush is packing the courts with far right judges.

"Conservative courts are a danger to civil rights," says former U. S. Rep. Andrew Young of Georgia. "I think the majority of people in America have got to realize that American democracy has got to be fair. It's got to be fair to women. It's got to be fair to Blacks. It's got to be fair to the handicapped. It's got to be fair in order to succeed."

In addition to serving in Congress, Young was also a top aide to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. during the height of the Civil Rights Movement, served as mayor of Atlanta and Ambassador to the United Nations. He draws on all of those experiences today when he looks at the nation.

"The difficulties now are socio-economic as well as racial. Politics is about the dividing of the money. They don't want you represented where the money is," Young explains.

"The Civil Rights Act gave us hope in America. It meant, as Martin Luther King said, that America can live out the true meaning of its creed and that this nation can be a nation of all of the people."

Forty years after passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, activists say, Blacks are still waiting for America to live out the true meaning of its creed.

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