

# Mary Frances Berry fearless warrior for civil rights

By George E. Curry  
Special to Sentinel-Voice  
WASHINGTON (NNPA) — Mary Frances Berry, who just completed 24 years on the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, the last 11 years as its chair, is a tenacious civil rights fighter. She publicly challenged five U.S. presidents: Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush.

"I don't mind it being said that I battled presidents," she said in an interview with the NNPA News Service, the first she has granted since resigning from the commission last week. "The most important thing is what I was battling with them about."

Sipping from a cup of coffee at a popular Georgetown coffee house, Berry appeared relaxed as she recounted her public clashes with Democratic and Republican presidents over civil rights.

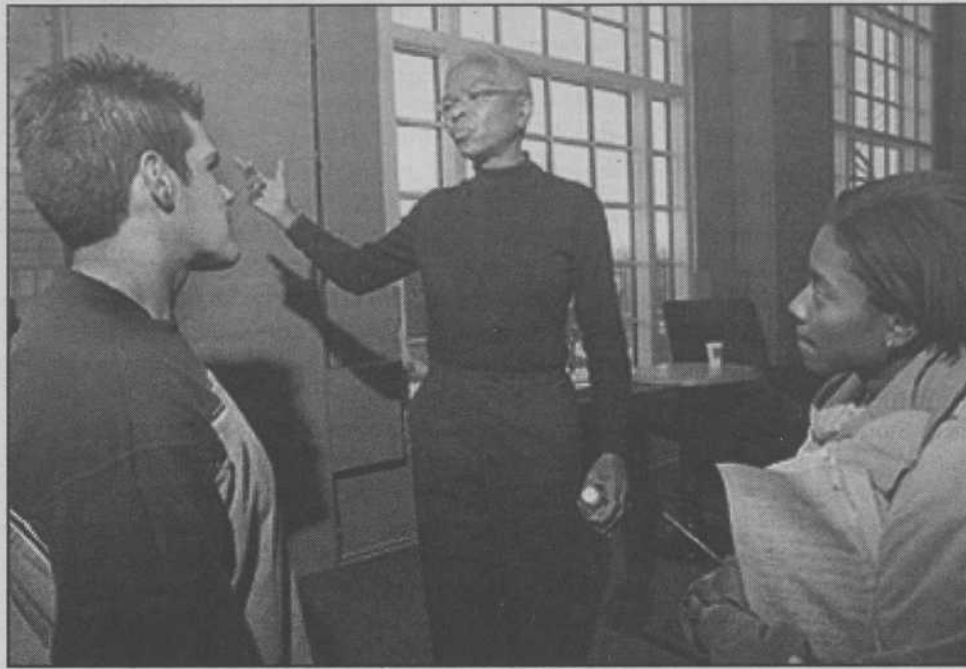
"When I was battling with Jimmy Carter, it was because of what he was doing about the Haitian refugees," she says. "He was sending them back in those boats. They were being treated like the Cubans are being treated today."

"When I battled with Reagan, it was because he was opposing all civil rights laws. With Brad Reynolds and all those people, those were some bad times. I was battling about substance. I wasn't battling because I like to get up in the morning and go battle with people. That's the way the media makes it sound."

With William Bradford Reynolds, the assistant attorney general for civil rights, leading the way, the Reagan administration not only opposed affirmative action, the Justice Department even attempted to nullify voluntary consent decrees that had been agreed to by cities and their fire and police departments.

"If you paid attention to the stuff they said after Reagan died, you would think he was the great humanitarian," Berry says. "The Reagan administration was terrible. Brad Reynolds was terrible, the people [Reagan] appointed were terrible. They never met a civil rights law they liked."

"Bush-1 was not as bad as Reagan. Bush-1 wanted to please people. His daddy gave a lot of money to the United Negro College Fund and that was mainly to keep Blacks going to those schools. John Dunn, the guy he appointed



Mary Frances Berry has agitated for civil rights change since the Carter administration.

as assistant attorney general for civil rights, wasn't nearly as bad as Brad Reynolds. Everything was low-key. The policies didn't change."

George Herbert Walker Bush appointed Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court.

Berry, a lawyer, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, and constitutional scholar, scoffs at Bush's lavish praise of Thomas, a Black conservative who had limited experience as a lawyer and judge before he was placed on the nation's highest court.

"He [Bush] stood there talking about how he had looked all over the world and found the best person he could put there. Even the guy he was talking about knew he was lying," Berry said, laughing. "Everybody in the room knew he was lying."

Berry feels Clinton has received more credit than he deserves.

"When I would battle with Clinton, it was because Bill Clinton didn't do what he was supposed to do. He ended welfare as we knew it, but he didn't worry about whether those women were going to have any money to live on. So they ended up poor, some of them poorer. They don't mind working, but they don't like being poorer than they were before."

"We had to fight him to come out on the right side of the affirmative action issue and he, too, didn't do the right thing about the Haitians."

But it is the current administration that poses the greatest threat to civil rights in Berry's view.

"[Bush's] Administration, in many ways, is more venal than Reagan's," Berry explains. "And the reason it's more venal is because it's

more subtle. These people are more sophisticated.

"For example, rather than use racial code words, as Reagan did, Bush calls himself a compassionate conservative. He does that while refusing to address the annual convention of the NAACP, the oldest and largest civil rights organizations, and meeting only once with the Congressional Black Caucus."

"Bush says he favors diversity yet instructed his solicitor general to oppose the two University of Michigan cases involving affirmative action. Last year, a conservative Supreme Court upheld the Michigan law school program but struck down their undergraduate affirmative action program that relied more heavily on numbers when assessing applicants."

Berry says while she disagrees with the message, she admires the conservative movement's political tenacity and sophistication.

"It's going to get worse for African-Americans," she predicts. "They have really figured out that, in terms of diversity, 'If you want some Black people, we'll give you some Black people. We'll give you some Black people in every kind of job. Because we know some Black people who want to do what we want to do, either because they want to get ahead or because they believe it. You want Black people? You want Latinos? You want Asians? We can give you them all day long.'"

Bush received only 9 percent of the Black vote in 2000, the smallest percentage since Ronald Reagan. This year, he won 11 percent of the Black vote, according to most exit polls.

"One of the things they've

done with the rank-and-file Black people is they know that many of the Black people

who do vote or will vote are religious," Berry explains. "What they did was to figure out [that] if they could pull the religious string, people will go crazy."

"For many Black people, all they had to do was to start talking about giving money for a faith-based initiative, give some money to some preachers, have some church social services and then pull the same-sex marriage string. All they had to do then was to have him [Bush] stand up and say, 'I'm a Christian.'"

She acknowledges, "That's very effective. If the Democratic Party doesn't watch out, they're going to eat their lunch. What the Democrats have to do to counter it is to get somebody who can be as sophisticated and talk the language, cer-

tainly not anybody like Kerry."

Berry, who is a registered Independent, says African-Americans have not been respected by the Democratic Party and it is time to explore other options.

"Democrats don't take Black voters serious enough," she says. "They want people to vote for them but they are not interested in having them help shape what they are going to do. We need a third party or something. Adhering to the Democratic Party isn't working."

For the past 40 years, Blacks have given Democratic presidential candidates 82 percent to 94 percent of their votes.

"You think about how many votes Black people give (See Civil Rights, Page 15)

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