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Burke

John Lewis[†]

I am honored to be here today to pay tribute to a distinguished graduate of Yale Law School, a soldier in our country's struggle for civil rights, and a truly great American.

Long before we met, I knew of Burke Marshall. I knew of his reputation.

As the Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights during the Kennedy administration, Burke served as a vital link between the government and those seeking to bring about change.

I knew of Burke Marshall's sense of commitment. I knew that if he told you something, you could go to the bank on it. You could believe in it.

Burke Marshall is a man of conscience, a man of conviction, and a man of moral commitment. In the civil rights movement, we saw him as a key part of a sympathetic administration. We saw him as an ally. During the early years of the Kennedy administration, when we needed to talk to someone in Washington, we would talk to Burke Marshall.

Civil rights leaders and participants in the civil rights movement referred to him—not as the Assistant Attorney General, not as Mr. Marshall—but as Burke. When someone said Burke, you knew who they were talking about. They were talking about Burke Marshall.

In times of great struggle and conflict in the South—during the Freedom Rides of 1961, when young people were being beaten by angry mobs in Montgomery, and when fire hoses and dogs were being turned on people in Birmingham—people always said “Call Burke . . . Call Burke.”

When I would sit at a meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr. and A. Phillip Randolph and James Farmer and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the National Urban League, they would say, “Call Burke. We need to talk to Burke Marshall.”

When we were planning some major demonstration or some major nonviolent campaign, people said, “If something happens to us, if we get thrown in jail, inform the Department of Justice. Inform Burke Marshall.”

And this man, Burke Marshall, responded to the call.

He was part of a great and noble effort. He was more than an able advisor to Robert Kennedy and President Kennedy. He was more than an intellectual with a great legal mind. Burke Marshall was a fearless warrior, with a sense

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of compassion and sensitivity that fought to bring down the walls of racial segregation.

He is a builder. He is an architect. He is a contributor to the progress and success of the civil rights movement.

Burke Marshall is one of those rare individuals whose great contribution to the cause of social justice will have a lasting impact on our society. With a sometimes quiet, unintrusive, but always deliberative, spirit, Burke Marshall helped usher in a nonviolent revolution under the rule of law in America.

Burke Marshall is a builder of bridges who must be looked upon as one of the founding fathers of a new America. Many times, he was our link to the national government. And he wanted to help. He may not have been the Attorney General. He may not have been the President. But he was there when we needed him.

Through his work at the Department of Justice, he probably helped save the lives of many Americans. And maybe, just maybe, he helped avert a major racial conflict in the South.

He was in almost daily contact with the leaders of the civil rights movement. And I think he was there pleading our case. He was there, in Washington, to listen to us and our concerns.

It was not necessary for us all to protest or to go to jail. Some of us had to march and some of us had to get arrested. But Burke Marshall played an important role.

When we marched in Albany, Georgia, when we sat-in in Birmingham, Alabama, and when we rode in buses across the South speaking out for justice and equality, Burke Marshall spoke out for us in Washington.

Sometimes, he may have disagreed with us. We didn't always see completely eye to eye. But even within the civil rights movement, many people didn't always see eye to eye on every issue.

Burke Marshall helped usher in the building of what I call the "Beloved Community." He helped to put us on the road to building a truly interracial democracy in America.

The road to the Beloved Community has not been easy. In the 1960s, we were struggling to build a sense of community and a sense of understanding. And Burke Marshall was there.

Without him, America would probably be a different country. Without him, the walls of segregation might still be there. But he helped to bring them down. Burke Marshall helped tear those walls down. As Americans, we should be grateful to his commitment and to his dedication.

That's why I am here today: to pay tribute to a great lawyer, to a great teacher, and to a great man, my friend Burke Marshall. I'm here to pay tribute to a decent and good man who believes in the dignity of all human kind and the destiny of democracy.

Congratulations, Burke. Thank you, Burke Marshall, for being you.