THE TIME OF OUR LIVES

ALUMNI LECTURE FOR GRINNELL COLLEGE

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Let me begin with an expression of deep gratitude to my classmates, who invited me to give this year's Alumni Lecture. I was moved by their offer. I bow to the impact which this wonderful place, Grinnell, had on us, and on our wider society.

I also thank Professor Bill Ferguson for his willingness to introduce me, not just to my classmates and friends, but to those Grinnellians from scattered generations who may, hopefully, feel some of the power of ideas and idealism which I hope my story conveys.

I am not an academic historian. I have, however, lived in a time and with interests and a career which plunged me deeply into what I count as the two pillars at the heart of America's development in the half century after World War II. These are the spread of open markets, free trade, and democratic government around the world; and the civil rights movement here at home.

I suspect most of you have approached your careers and your civic life with the same hopefulness and sense of purpose, whatever path you chose.

FROM WHENCE DO WE COME?

Every generation is shaped by events which occur early in life.

Before putting ourselves in context for our time, let's think for a moment about our parents' formative years.

War was not a stranger to them, as they had the First World War in their childhood and the Second World War as adults.

Our parents were certainly aware of—maybe participated in—the speculative fever of the 1920s.

While the 1920s here in the United States were excessive and garish, they did not have the dance of death character of Berlin in the Weimar era of Germany, or the militaristic violence which overtook Japan.

What our parents knew was The Great Crash, and the struggles of the 1930s. They were just desperately

thankful for having work. Isolationism—no interest in Europe's or Asia's feuds--was real and pervasive. Roosevelt understood that perfectly.

The lesson of frugality stayed with our parents.

The other legacy of the 1930s, the isolationist way of thinking, did dissipate. Veterans returning from the War felt the need for America to play a positive and forceful role after the carnage and ruin of that conflict.

That was them. What of us and those coming after us?

Our view of the world was one deeply influenced by the Allied victory and its afterglow.

It was not simply a prolonged era of celebration of the victorious outcome of the war. Nor was it only relief from the fears and loss which wartime brought. It was more than either.

It was a sustained conviction that America had imposed a generous peace, even a compassionate peace.

It nourished a feeling that American dominance of the post-War period would be benign.

At the dawn of that period, the changes in the condition of the great powers were starkly clear. Britain was spent, France had been over-run; Germany of course lay prostrate with its cities and industry largely demolished. Russia had lost between 30 and 35 million dead. The US alone finished the war strengthened, and spared from devastation.

I was not ten years old when the Marshall Plan, for massive assistance to the war-torn economies, was announced at a Harvard Commencement, by the Secretary of State, George Catlett Marshall.

It was assumed that economic recovery in Western Europe could help block any drive by the Soviets into countries not yet under their control. But the Marshall Plan was born not just due to fear of Soviet aggression, but also to a conviction that economic hardship had played a central role in the growth of fascist parties between the wars. The economies of Europe had to be put back on their feet, to assure employment and social stability. There was a companion feeling that global trade must be kick-started. The Depression and its

rounds of defensive tariffs and currency management had meant international trade had all but collapsed.

At home, the economy went from strength to strength. Between a growing economy and a national glow following the war, you might agree with me that we were coming of age in a positive, even a golden time.

This launch of our lives gave us an outlook which lacked cynicism, and perhaps led us, beyond the usual innocence of childhood, to be too hopeful about human nature. Yes, having to get under our desks at school to protect us from a Soviet nuclear attack doubtless gave us some forebodings. And later—as a central part of my story-- our consciences were assaulted by what we came to know about the mistreatment of our fellow citizens.

As to the fifty year move toward open markets, open trading regimes, and democratic institutions, I will spend only a moment. It had an evangelical as well as a practical element. It reached its apotheosis in the early 1990s, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the shedding of “Nehruvian socialism” in India, both in 1991, the Deng Xiaoping capitalist oriented reforms in China, the creation of the World Trade Organization, the

creation of the “Single Market” in Europe, and even the labor market reforms in Germany, plugged for by a determined Socialist Chancellor, Gerhard Shroeder.

This is a fascinating story, but will be for another day. Instead, I will focus on the central moral issue of our youth, the civil rights movement, and the politics surrounding it.

THE SIREN SONG OF POLITICS

Bob Noyce asked me once, plaintively, “John, didn’t you ever want to MAKE something?” I replied that ever since I had been in about fifth grade, my mind turned to the news and politics. Breakfast was accompanied by a full thirty minutes of international, national and local news. As my twelve year old son can today tell me most every player on Manchester United, or Manchester City, or Barcelona, or even Swansea, I could probably have told you the Prime Ministers and Foreign Ministers of the significant countries in the United Nations, and many that weren’t. Let me look at this issue then, through the lens of politics.

The sunny optimism of our youth gave us confidence about our ideals of economics and forms of government being spread around the world.

And yet, as we went through our teens, and on to college and beyond, there began to gnaw at us a disquiet. An unnerving sense of hypocrisy. Our model was flawed. It had a glaring imperfection.

It was the issue which had plagued the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. The issue which caused the Missouri Compromise of 1820. The issue which launched the American Civil War. The issue which led to post war bitterness in the South.

It is the issue the Swedish scholar, Gunnar Myrdal, wrote of in 1940 in his classic book: "An American Dilemma." It is the issue of race in America.

CIVIL RIGHTS

Race and the civil rights movement touched all of us. Our attendance at Grinnell, with its history of foundation by Abolitionist ministers, and its central role a half century later in the Social Gospel Movement, helped keep in front of us the moral implications of the human

rights struggle. I became acutely aware of this as I hitchhiked for two months and three thousand miles in South Africa in the summer of 1961. There were too many unsettling parallels.

We meet today just two weeks after the 60th anniversary, on May 17th, of the Supreme Court decision in one of its most celebrated cases, Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka. It was a flexion point in the move toward equal rights.

The struggle for rights made major strides in the 1950s under President Dwight Eisenhower. He increasingly acted out of conviction that the "American Dilemma" had to be addressed. I will note his contributions shortly.

But the full fruition of the mid Twentieth century drive to codify and enforce minority rights was due to two later Presidents and to the position of their parties at the critical moments.

Each of them, Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, was shrewd and tactically gifted, even brilliant. Each of them

was deeply flawed, capable of profound cynicism in quest of their goals, and with some unpleasant, even repellent, characteristics. Each of them contributed significantly as well, through Viet Nam and Watergate, to the erosion and loss of respect which the American public had historically accorded institutions of government, including the presidency.

And yet---and yet---each of them played a crucial role in the remarkable transformations in the America of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, through meaningful civil rights legislation, and enforcement of Supreme Court decisions. At first, one was in the vanguard and the other in intransigent opposition; later, the Republican was coming to terms with a party realignment which he partly precipitated, but which put great pressure on his earlier, more liberal, views.

Yet both Johnson and Nixon acted in the end decisively to dramatically recognize and assure human rights.

They almost confirm the Roman Catholic notion of a flawed, sinning priest who is nonetheless able to perform something sacred. A vessel of a greater good.

The two start at very different points. Johnson begins—and lasts for decades in his political career—a confirmed, consistent and highly effective segregationist politician. Nixon begins as a Quaker youth, and with a great grandparent who had run a station on the Underground Railroad. His disposition was in favor of civil rights.

The promise of the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution had ebbed after the 1870s. The South regrouped. It won an important victory for segregation and discrimination in Plessy v. Ferguson, in 1896, which condoned "separate but equal".

The 1948 race showed some change. The champion of segregation, US Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, captured all of Dixie, but could not deny the election to Harry S. Truman. It also was the election which brought Lyndon Johnson to the Senate.

LYNDON B. JOHNSON

Lyndon Johnson was a man of no less towering ambition than Richard Nixon, but his geography and his party affiliation saw that ambition channeled in a career steeped in segregation and resistance to change.

Upon arriving in the US Senate, Johnson immediately began assiduous currying of favor with the barons of the Senate who were, virtually to a man, southerners and determined segregationists.

Richard Russell was their Dean. Though not as apoplectic in his racism as Eugene Talmadge, or James Eastland, he was every bit as determined not to give an inch on segregation, or anti-lynching laws. Johnson immediately ingratiated himself with his maiden speech in the Senate, "We of the South". In it, he embraced the Southern cause in full throated cry. It was a battle against President Harry Truman's civil rights bill. Russell said of the speech, it was "one of the ablest I have ever heard." In further convincing Russell of his loyalty, Johnson voted for the Eastland Bill which would have made segregation mandatory in the District of Columbia.

By 1956 LBJ's presidential ambitions were obvious; his southern friends knew of them, and voiced approval. As Majority Leader, Johnson's strategy in dealing with civil rights now had to be calibrated to subdue open and rancorous debate in the Senate on civil rights legislation, which could have alienated this support.

The Eisenhower administration sent over a bill drafted by Ike's liberal Republican Attorney General, Herbert Brownell. It was a tough bill, taking aim at not only securing voting rights for Blacks, but giving the Attorney General broad, even sweeping powers to enforce civil rights in hotels and motels, parks, theaters, restaurants, and in housing. This was a bill with teeth. Johnson knew he had to kill it before it saw debate in the Senate.

The bill began in the House where the Democratic Judiciary Committee Chair, Emmanuel Celler, subordinated his own bill to the Republican bill.

Johnson, using his long cultivated friendship with the Speaker, sought to sidetrack the House Bill. The only witness to a conversation between the two powerful Texans, Cong. Bolling of Missouri, says of Johnson's desire for the nomination, "He was just desperate for it." The Republican bill must not reach the Senate in 1956. "He [told Rayburn] he would be destroyed if it got there." Rayburn obliged him, and stalled the progress in the House until full consideration in the Senate would not be possible.

As Senate Democrat Willis Robertson of Virginia noted, "Lyndon organized the Southern Democrats against civil rights this year so successfully that it was crushed." That was done on Johnson's turf, out of the public eye.

The public eye had begun increasingly however, to take notice of the plight of the American Negro. One reason Ike's Attorney General had served up such a stiff civil rights bill was that he had felt powerless to do anything about a notorious murder, that of young Emmett Till, in 1955. Till was a Chicagoan who had gone south to visit.

As Robert Caro, Johnson's biographer, notes, the Till case was different. Thousands of lynchings, murders and other forms of violence against blacks in the south had occurred over decades, with little national notice taken. This was because it happened to local southern Negroes in the south where there was, with rare exception, no interest or sympathy for their plight. The furor which greeted the return of Till's body to his family and church in Chicago for burial ignited not just the Attorney General, but the broader public.

Attention now focused on the plight of southern blacks after the Brown decision. White Citizens' Councils were

formed, “massive resistance” began; black students were barred access to publicly financed universities.

Our own Charlayne Hunter Gault, wife of alum Ron Gault, was a case in point. She applied to the University of Georgia in Athens and was denied admission repeatedly until a Federal judge on January 6, 1961, decided that she was to be admitted as qualified. Three days later she arrived, facing taunts, attacks on her dormitory, and the need for protection from mobs.

Violence became, if possible, more frequent. Medgar Evers was killed in Mississippi. Freedom Riders Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner were slain in summer of 1961, as they were attempting to register black voters in Mississippi.

It was during this period that Lyndon Johnson had been cast into outer darkness after his ambition led him to accept the Vice Presidency.

But the death of Kennedy changed everything.

Within days of Kennedy's death, the new President told his cautious staff that he would embrace the Kennedy civil rights bills, which had gone nowhere. Turning away from decades of staunch support of segregation, opposition to anti lynching laws, and helping to build the southern "wall" against civil rights, LBJ put his full weight behind the necessary maneuvering to move the 1964 Act. When Senator Russell understood that Johnson was committed to this legislation, he said to his friends that with Lyndon on the other side now, the South was going to lose. Johnson told staff, "What's the presidency for?" if not to fight for this. His transformation, though sudden, was complete.

On the Senate side, the President worked with Hubert Humphrey and Montana's Mike Mansfield, LBJ's successor as Majority Leader. The tactical hump was cloture, the only way around the sacrosanct Senate rule allowing filibusters. The only way they could get cloture was to win over Everett McKinley Dirksen, the Republican leader.

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY IN 1964

At this moment there was an intersection, a positive intersection, of a Republican Party still in the halo effect of the Eisenhower presidency, as well as heir to a long tradition of support for rights of African Americans; and a Democratic Party which had been profoundly influenced by internal migration, whereby millions of southern rural Negroes had moved over decades to the urban north and were voting.

When the Eisenhower court unanimously decided the landmark Brown case, it had to decide about implementation. Eisenhower and Brownell sent an amicus brief to the Court, urging it require plans to be submitted within 90 days for the school district. To Eisenhower's disappointment, the Court directed that desegregation should proceed instead with "all deliberate speed."

The Court's reluctance to require immediate enforcement led to fifteen years of mounting resistance. Richard Nixon was to be handed the hot potato when, in Alexander v. Holmes, the Court directed in 1969 that compliance must occur "at once."

Eisenhower enforced the Brown decision with the unprecedented use of Federal troops to assure the safety of the children. He also intervened in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. Following passage of the 1957 act, he created the Civil Rights Division in the Department of Justice.

Eisenhower was from Texas and Kansas. He was not in the vanguard for desegregation. Yet the General had a sense of duty about enforcement of the law. He spent most of his military career in a "Jim Crow" Army, but he had been appalled and embarrassed in London during the war as black officers and enlisted men were treated to abuse by many of the white American soldiers, to the shock of the British.

Ike as President enforced the desegregation of the armed forces after Harry Truman's order to do so was largely ignored by the military, especially in the south. Likewise, Ike desegregated the District of Columbia.

In his final State of the Union message, just days before leaving office, Eisenhower for the first time characterized civil rights as a moral issue.

The Republican Party in the Senate and the House of Representatives in the 1960s was still dominated by Midwestern members most of whom were the inheritors of a tradition reflecting the alignments in the American Civil War. Of central importance was an Ohioan who was the Ranking Member of the House Judiciary Committee, Republican William M. McCullough. He epitomized the constructive role of the Republican Party as the civil rights movement came to central national attention.

In the Senate there were many Republican liberals and moderates. The Republican Whip, Sen. Kuchel, his floor captains, religious and civil rights leaders, Bob Kennedy staff and labor met in Humphrey's office daily, to plot strategy. They realized the mainstream conservatives, shepherded by Sen. Everett McKinley Dirksen of Illinois, were the only path to cloture of Russell's stalling tactic: the filibuster which became the longest in Senate history.

Johnson directed Humphrey to focus on Dirksen. Johnson both romanced him and indicated he would not compromise on the central points of the bill. And Dirksen could anticipate what was going to happen in the 1964 election. Southern Sen. Eugene Talmadge with a sinking

feeling watched Dirksen. Talmadge concluded Dirksen "wasn't about to let the Republicans be on the wrong side of history."

The man from "The Land of Lincoln" delivered. Cloture passed on June 10th. Only 40 Democrats voted for it. 28 Democrats voted against. Dirksen delivered 27 Republicans for cloture. On the wrong side of history was Barry Goldwater. Only Goldwater and five others voted no. Republican Senators voted over five to one for civil rights; Democrats by less than two to one.

Johnson signed the bill on July 2d, just eight days before the Republican convention.

Those of us in the Ripon Society felt that the Republican Party was being pulled in totally the wrong direction. Goldwater's embrace of Strom Thurmond was a bone in our throat.

Four of us officers of Ripon, on July 4th, 1964, stood in front of the school house in Ripon, Wisconsin, the site of the founding of the Republican Party. We issued a "Declaration of Conscience". We foresaw devastation for

the party that fall if Goldwater were to win the nomination as he seemed now certain to do.

RICHARD M. NIXON

What of Nixon?

Nixon was a central figure in the internationalist and moderate party which Eisenhower hoped to build. In the 1960 campaign, Nixon did very well among black voters. In Fulton County, GA., for example, he got 53% of the black vote.

After Nixon's 1960 defeat however, the Republican Party was taken over by determined, activist conservatives. Barry Goldwater was the face of this revolution.

Nixon was a consummate party man and campaigned for Goldwater that year. Nixon did not oppose the Civil Rights Act. He simply did not discuss the issue. Like Everett Dirksen, Nixon could count and knew what lay in store in November.

The Goldwater "undertow" in the Congressional and state legislative elections in fact was powerful, drowning thousands of northern Republicans. Goldwater was replaced in the "Movement" by Gov. Ronald Reagan,

whose appeal in the south was powerful. As the 1968 convention approached, we in the Rockefeller camp assumed Reagan would cut deeply into Nixon's support there, and help us block his first ballot nomination. That was not to be. Nixon was nominated, and won in November although Viet Nam and urban unrest were more central to his victory than civil rights.

The Nixon campaign asked me to join for the general election and I did. (The father of our classmate, Jerry Voorhis, had been defeated by Nixon in 1946 in an ugly campaign for Voorhis' House seat. Many years later, Jerry and I, after I had served as Special Assistant to Nixon in the White House, had a conversation and Jerry told of his father and him filling a bathtub with ice, booze, wine and beer in a Chicago hotel on election night, 1960, to invite all comers to celebrate Nixon's loss to Kennedy).

Following a Nixon campaign rally in Syracuse, New York, on October 29, Rockefeller asked me to sit with him on his plane back to New York. I had served as his director for delegate intelligence in the 1968 campaign and at the Miami convention. He expressed admiration for how Nixon had managed to hold out against his and Reagan's

pincer movement, but was impressed with my saying how tight it had been for Nixon on the Monday and Tuesday nights. His eyes closed to slits when I said I had learned of Nixon's phone call to Thurmond on the Tuesday, and he made a face when I said so far as I could learn, nothing specific had been promised.

Leonard Garment says that promises were made. Garment had been Nixon's law partner in New York. A liberal Democrat, he admired Nixon, and later came into the White House where he helped shepherd civil rights issues. He wrote a wonderful slim memoir, titled, "Crazy Rhythm." In it he says that Nixon promised Thurmond the moon and stars, and then showed him the back of his hand.

Nixon did bring many conservatives, including Strom Thurmond's political man, Harry Dent, onto the White House staff. Yet he also appointed many liberals across the government in key posts. This was true of his White House as well. He lured Democrat Daniel P. Moynihan from being head of the Harvard-MIT Joint Center for Urban Studies. The two of them saw the race relations question as central, and they concurred on a "jobs and

income" strategy. Nixon was raised in near poverty. He believed in the need for the opportunity for work.

One of his most aggressive pushes was on the jobs front. Here he had the staunch support of George Shultz, Secretary of Labor (DOL) and Art Fletcher, his Assistant Secretary. Fletcher, a black Republican from Pasco, Washington, was the point man. The goal was the breaking down of racial barriers to employment for blacks in the construction trade unions. These were among the most inbred and impregnable unions. The DOL began a major assault which bore fruit in jobs for minorities on construction jobs, for the first time.

It was on Nixon's watch that the Supreme Court called for immediate enforcement of desegregation. This set the cat among the pigeons within the White House and the administration. Nixon was a foe of forced busing and believed that the north was hypocritical in supporting desegregation in the south if that were the form enforcement would take since there would be strong resistance were it to be imposed on the north. In fact, Democratic Senators Abe Ribicoff and Birch Bayh

introduced an anti-busing bill, while Republican Hugh Scott was urging the same.

Yet the Court's edict was now clear. Internal debate raged. Nixon feared a potential Reagan challenge to his 1972 renomination. Strom had certainly not reached the point of reconciling to a new order.

Thurmond, Dent and Clarke Reed, the powerful Republican chairman from Mississippi, were arguing for delay. The south was a pile of tinder. Nixon was torn, and John Mitchell, his Attorney General, was uncertain.

Pat Buchanan, a highly conservative White House speechwriter (and later right wing Presidential candidate) was in favor of declaring opposition to the desegregation movement, and wrote a speech for the Vice President, Spiro Agnew, challenging it. That speech was never delivered. Garment and Moynihan were arguing forcefully with the President, in meetings and in memos, for swift and full compliance with the Court order. Then Garment took a gamble. He and Moynihan in early February of 1970 sprang on Nixon the idea of creating an advisory committee, which would try to smooth the way. It consisted of the Vice President as Chair, George Shultz

of Labor, Garment, Moynihan, the Attorney General and others. At its first meeting, Garment got Shultz elected Vice Chair.

That was just as well, because Agnew, seeing a southern strategy for the party imperiled, and favoring delay, said he would have nothing to do with the Committee. Shultz took over. Garment said the meetings ricocheted from day to day between superb briefings by Justice and HEW lawyers, and incapacity even to define the problem. He said that the Attorney General was alternately "hard as nails" and then realizing he was the country's chief law enforcement officer. Nixon himself spent hours in related meetings.

Nixon told his chief of staff that "Buchanan is just as far off to the right as Garment is on the left." Nixon was receiving this conflicting advice until he acted.

The desegregation message was released on March 24, 1970. It was moderate in tone, and was well received.

It was accompanied by the creation of a series of black and white advisory committees in each state of the south. These were the leaders in their respective

communities, and their tasks would be to find the ways and the people to make the integration of schools in their states proceed without bloodshed. Early meetings of the leaders of these committees were inconclusive, and one at the White House looked like it might go nowhere. Shultz, fearing this, called the President in. Nixon gave a passionate talk about the importance of these leaders taking on the responsibility to manage so that their communities would be spared further violence. The Attorney General was then asked what he was going to do. He said simply, "I am going to enforce the law." He said it twice.

The Committees began to roll out across Dixie. The last one to do so was in Louisiana. The President met with all of the Committees together to enjoin them to proceed with peaceful implementation. It went forward in just such a way.

The debate about the upcoming five year renewal of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 occurred in the midst of the school desegregation struggle. The White House staff and Justice, as before on school desegregation, were split about whether to support renewal. On March 5, in the

senior staff meeting, it was mentioned that Senator Hugh Scott, the Republican leader, had the votes to put over his own strongvoting rights bill. I said why don't we adopt it and get credit for a change? The chair of the staff meeting, John Ehrlichman, slightly disconcerted, suggest I take it up with the Attorney General; Thurmond's man, Harry Dent, volunteered he would approach him for me, to everyone's amusement.

I went from there to a reception for top black appointees, who had just had a meeting with the President where they tore up the agenda and talked of school desegregation.

I spoke to Garment of my frustration about voting rights. He suggested I write a memo directly to the President, since it was he and he alone who was the audience. In it, I argued forcefully for renewal, as being in the strongest traditions and lineage of the party.

For Nixon, understanding as he did how passage of the 1964 and 1965 Acts had opened the way for a Republican takeover of southern loyalties, the pressures were enormous. Johnson himself had told friends that their passage meant the Democrats had lost the south for a

generation. Yet Nixon chose the right course on both school desegregation and voting rights, not for the first or only time in his career.

Tom Wicker, a long time and liberal reporter for the New York Times, wrote a counterintuitive book. He called it, "One of us: Richard Nixon and the American Dream." In it, he claims that:

> There's no doubt about it—the Nixon administration accomplished more in 1970 to desegregate Southern School systems than had been done in the previous 16 Years, [since Brown was decided] or probably since. There's no doubt either that it was Richard Nixon personally who conceived, orchestrated and led the administration's deseg-regation effort. Halting and uncertain before he finally asserted strong control, that effort resulted in probably the outstanding domestic achievement of his administration.

Pat Moynihan, in a May, 1970 memo noted that "There has been more change in the structure of American

public school education in the last month than in the past 100 years".

That was Richard Nixon's accomplishment.

In a short paragraph written by Nikos Kazantzakis, author of Zorba the Greek, he says:

> I bend over the age in which I live, that tiny, imperceptible arc of the vast circle, and struggle to attain a clear view of today's duty. Perhaps this is the only way a man can carry out something immortal within the ephemeral moment of his life: immortal because he collaborated with an immortal rhythm.

These two Presidents, and the Everett Dirksens and William McCulloughs, got civil rights through the eye of the needle. They saw their duty. Talmadge was only partly right that Dirksen "did not want to see the Republican Party on the wrong side of history". In the end, without regard to party, these leaders did not want themselves to be on the wrong side of history.

It is my firm conviction that, in the time of our lives, we did cooperate with a rhythm which was immortal. We

should be thankful we were on earth in this tiny arc of the vast circle.

Thank you.