Continue the tradition of rights for all people

by Jack_Kemp

Last Sunday, as Major League Baseball from San Diego and Los Angeles to New York and Washington, D.C., honored the memory and the legacy of Jackie Robinson (No. 42), I was in the historic New York Avenue Presbyterian Church listening to the great historian John Hope Franklin. The occasion was the second in a series of discussions on Abraham Lincoln and African-American history sponsored by the Lincoln Bicentennial Commission authorized by Congress and appointed by President Bush.

As I walked in, Executive Director Eileen Mackevich pointed to my reserved seat and told me it was the very pew in which Lincoln sat for worship all during his presidency.

I had a chill as I sensed the history of that church, the pew in which Lincoln worshipped and the opportunity to listen to a conversation about Lincoln by the dean of American historians, Franklin, and the dean of Howard University School of Law, Kurt Schmoke, both of whom are African-American.

During the event I made notes of remarks by Franklin and also scribbled notes to myself as to what I would say the next day to my Republican friends in Congress who had turned down the D.C. Civil Rights Voting Act just a few weeks ago on some rather shallow constitutional arguments.

What follows is my message to the GOP just a few days before the next vote on this contentious issue, scheduled for this week.

On Dec. 1, 1862, in his annual message to Congress, Lincoln said, "Fellow citizens, we cannot escape history, the fiery trial through which we pass will light us down in honor or dishonor to the last generation."

He went on to say, "In giving freedom to the slave, we assure freedom to the free!"

To the Congress in general and especially to Republicans in the House, Senate and White House:

You cannot escape history. The light of history will be on your decision to enfranchise the people of our nation's capital or to continue to deny the residents of this city their basic civil right to vote.

The honorable course is to empower the residents of our nation's capital, and by assuring the vote to this city,

you will assure the vote to all Americans.

You must choose on which side of history you want to be recorded.

Do you want to be recorded with Lincoln and Frederick Douglass, or with those who used the Constitution to deny freedom, property, education and the vote to African-Americans for almost 200 years?

Don't forget that it was a Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, who issued the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. It was a Republican Congress that overrode a presidential veto and helped finance the Freedmen's Bureau in 1865, out of which emanated the great Howard University.

It was a Republican president, Ulysses S. Grant, who sent federal troops to the Deep South in 1870 and 1871 to guarantee the voting rights of blacks and to break up the Ku Klux Klan.

It was a Republican president, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who sent federal troops to Arkansas to integrate public schools in 1957.

It was a Republican Congress that helped pass the historic extension of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was signed into law by a Republican president just two years ago.

My Republican friends in Congress, you've sent members of the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force from this capital city to Baghdad and Kabul to expand democracy in those capitals. Now you need to ask yourselves the question of which side of history you want to be on when it comes to democracy for this capital city?

You can't escape history. You have to decide on whose side you stand: Lincoln; Frederick Douglass; Presidents Grant and Eisenhower; Daddy King, the father of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; and George H.W. Bush - or those who used the Constitution to declare African-Americans as three-fifths of a human being and who used the Constitution to declare blacks private property to be bought and sold.

Some political leaders used the Constitution to deny the vote to women, to segregate the races in schooling, housing, sports and public accommodations. If you have a question as to its constitutionality, let it be adjudicated by the Supreme Court.

Sixty years ago Jackie Robinson broke down the color barrier in major league baseball. Robinson was a Republican because of the great Republican history of civil, human and equal rights for all.

Now you have an opportunity to break down an even greater barrier to equality by voting to extend democracy to our nation's capital city.

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