

James Farmer
LBJ Lecture Nov. 13, 1989

Introduction of James Farmer
The 12th Lyndon Baines Johnson
Distinguished Lecturer
By Jerome H. Supple
President
Southwest Texas State University

It is my distinct pleasure tonight to introduce to you Southwest Texas' 12th Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecturer.

President Johnson wanted lecturers to come to his alma mater to talk about issues of the day, to give our students and the greater community a respected viewpoint on those issues.

James Farmer's viewpoint of the civil rights movement is very definitely an insider's viewpoint. He experienced the environment that made the movement necessary. He was a leader in the charge against the system. He now observes the long-term aftermath.

Thanks to James Farmer and others, most of our students don't remember that pre-Sixties racially segregated world. But Farmer — and many of us — remember the “white” and “colored” restrooms, the all-white lunch counters, the south-bound buses that stopped at the Mason-Dixon Line so that the black passengers could move to the back, the poll tax and “voter literacy” tests, the schools that were certainly separate but hardly equal.

James Farmer grew up amid the segregationist hatred that bred anger and fierce determination in its victims. It was Farmer and the other movement leaders who tried to channel this anger and determination into nonviolent expression. And they were successful to an extent they probably never dreamed possible.

But their successes demanded a price. Farmer is no stranger to paddy wagons and police dogs, fear and death. He sat out the glorious 1963 March on Washington, locked in a Louisiana jail cell.

James Farmer, like Lyndon Johnson, is a Texan by birth, the son of a Methodist minister. The senior Farmer was reared in Georgia — a state with no high schools for blacks — yet worked his way through a Ph.D. at Boston University as an Old Testament scholar fluent in seven languages.

James Farmer grew up in his father's library in the southern college towns where his father taught. (One of those colleges was Huston-Tillotson in Austin.)

In this scholar's house, the Farmer children were somewhat insulated from the harshness of black life in the South. But Farmer writes of the time when he learned that black and white were not the same.

He was 3 years old and was walking home with his mother down a dusty Mississippi road. When they passed a drugstore, he asked if they could stop for a coke. His mother said, “No.” “Why?” he asked, pointing out another little boy at the counter, sipping a coke. His mother replied, “Well, he can and you can't.” “Why?” he asked again. “Because he's white,” she answered. “What am I?” he asked. “You're not,” she answered. The incident haunted his dreams for years, and he learned from his mother

much later that when they got home she had thrown herself across the bed and cried bitterly.

When Farmer was 13, he won an oratorical contest and was awarded a four-year scholarship to college. He graduated from Wiley College at 18 and went on to theological studies at Howard University. He earned his degree in divinity at 21.

Along the way, he developed an intense interest in the social gospel and the idea of pacifism. It was with these ideals that he founded CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, in 1942.

He became one of the “big four” of the civil rights movement of the Sixties, along with Martin Luther King of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Roy Wilkins of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, and Whitney Young of the Urban League.

In 1969 Farmer was appointed assistant secretary of health, education and welfare but resigned two years later. In 1972 he became president of the Council on Minority Planning and Strategy and later that year served as associate then executive director of the Coalition of American Public Employees, a nationwide organization of 4 million public workers.

In 1985 he published the award-winning autobiography of the civil rights movement, *Lay Bare the Heart*.

Today he teaches history at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Va., gives lectures around the country and works on another book. We think it is particularly appropriate that James Farmer was chosen to give a lecture named for Lyndon Johnson. During his first week in office, LBJ called Farmer to the White House with reassurance of his support of civil rights legislation. The two did not always agree, but I know that LBJ would approve heartily of our asking James Farmer to be this fall’s Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecturer.

Lyndon Baines Johnson Distinguished Lecture

By James Farmer

President Supple and friends: Needless to say, I am honored to have been selected to give the LBJ Lecture this year, and I particularly appreciate the introduction that your president gave to me. It reminded me of many things in my life and of our long struggle to improve the quality of life for all American citizens.

It put me on the spot, too: I have to try to give a good lecture. Once I was lecturing after such a good and glowing introduction; when the speech was over, a woman came up to me and said, “Oh, Mr. Farmer, your talk was simply superfluous.” I said, “Well, thank you, Madam. In that case I must talk with my publisher and make sure it is published posthumously.” She said, “Oh, thank you, Mr. Farmer, and I hope it’s very, very soon.”

Back to Texas

But I am honored to come back to Texas, too, to see many, many old friends, some from Wiley College, whom I have not seen for years —some of them for many years — others from Austin. It’s always risky to begin naming people; you might leave someone out and might even forget the names of those you wanted to mention. But there is John Henry Faulk, of course, whom everyone knows, and I am flattered that he came;

Mike Gillette, from the Johnson Library; Don Carleton, who was kind enough to accept my papers for the Barker Center at the University of Texas.

So, this is a return home, with all that that means. I have enjoyed the day, though they worked me to death.

The questions were good; the students have been interested in what is happening in civil rights. They must have good classes because they ask good questions. The questions are very, very good indeed and covered a whole breadth of ideas. But that is America. America is much more than that area in Brooklyn — what is it, Bensonhurst? Much more than Howard Beach, much more than that county in Georgia where we saw bigotry in its ugliness a few years ago. America, too, is a country of concern about race, puzzlement about it, confusion about it. Folks are intrigued with it. No issue in this nation's history has had as much effect upon the life of the nation as that question of race in America. It is at once the curse and the challenge of our great nation.

Colored by Color

Color, color, color. All aspects of this nation have been touched by it, shaped by it, molded by it. There are no exceptions. Name one. The economy of the country touched by race? Every angle. The psychology of it touched by race? From beginning to end. Our children and their self concepts, whether they are white, brown, black, yellow or red —colored by color. More- than any place else in the world — with the possible exception of South Africa. You cannot escape it. Blacks cannot escape it any more than whites can, and whites cannot escape it. Even if one lives in Iowa, where there are very few blacks, or Minnesota, he or she is a part of a culture, which reaches its tentacles into Georgia, into Mississippi, into Texas, into New York and into Chicago. And that culture is absorbed by the children, even in those cities or states where there are few, if any, blacks or members of other minorities. What a waste of energy and time!

When I have time and nothing better to do, I sometimes like to sit down and wonder what I would have been doing with my life if there had been no problem of color in the United States. I don't know. I'd always wanted to play the piano; maybe I could have been a pianist. Who knows? Maybe I would have chosen to be a scientist. I took a pre-med course and had thought of being a doctor. But it was a little difficult when in my senior year I discovered I couldn't stand the sight of blood. Since then, needless to say, I've seen more blood than I could have imagined, some of it my own. But what would I have been doing? What would those thousands — nay, those tens of thousands — of bold young people, who in the Sixties were volunteering to live without a tomorrow in the struggle in the South — what would they have been doing with their lives? I don't know.

Live with No Tomorrow

But the fact is they had to do something about race. They had that commitment. And that was the difference between the nation then and the nation now — the dedication and the commitment. When CORE and SNCC and SCLC and NAACP issued that call in the spring of 1964 for volunteers to go south, to go to Mississippi, and engage in voter education and voter registration, we had more volunteers than we could possibly use, mostly white. From the West, the East, the South, the North, hands went up all over the place. Tables were set up in student centers and campuses all over the country. Students were queued up in lines to sign up to volunteer for the summer. It wasn't a big job,

wasn't a job. They weren't going to get paid for it at least. It was going to cost them money. They weren't even going to live in a hotel. They were going to live in some ramshackle shack with a poor black family. They wouldn't eat in restaurants. They would share the meager fare of that family. It meant that the mother would pour more water into the soup to stretch it. Worse than that, when they walked out of that door (if it had a door) in the morning to go about their appointed tasks, they had no assurance, no confidence indeed, that they would return that evening. They were volunteering to live without a tomorrow. And some gave their tomorrows.

Why? What drove them? COLOR, COLOR, COLOR! And they wanted to do something about it. They were Americans. When I was in jail in Mississippi, the jailers could not understand the white youth coming down there. The jailer called me to the bars and said, "Mmm Farmer..." (Actually, he wanted to say *Mister* Farmer, but that was as close as he could come to it.) "Mmm Farmer, we can understand those colored boys and girls coming down here. They just want to be treated like everybody else. If I were a *Negra*, I'd probably do the same thing. I imagine I would, yeah. But what about them white boys and girls? Why they come down here? We ain't done nothing to them. They can sit in the front of the bus if they want to. They can eat in any of our restaurants. What they come down here for?" I tried to explain to him that they believed in America, they believed in the promise of the nation, and they wanted to do something about seeing that that promise was appreciated, felt and understood by all American citizens. He shook his head. He just could not understand it. He looked upon the whites as traitors. He could not understand how people could get out of themselves and work, even if it meant risking their lives, work in behalf of someone else, that kind of compassion. None of the me-ism of today: What's in it for me? What am I gonna get out of it? None of that.

Once Upon a Time in Louisiana

Well, so America is that, too. America is that as much as it is the ugly face of bigotry that we have seen time and time again, and I fear we shall go on seeing for some time, unless we do something about it and do something about it quite quickly indeed. Well, I know some of you are too young to remember what happened in the Sixties. How could you know? You weren't born then. So I have to give you something of the flavor of those days.

The best way I can do it, I suppose, is to give you briefly a thumbnail sketch of personal experience. I have gone on telling this personal experience over and over again, and so many people don't believe that it happened — a time when I had to escape from a town in Louisiana in the back of a hearse to get away from a lynch mob. This was not long after the great March on Washington, which, as President Supple pointed out, I missed because I was in jail, was an involuntary guest of the state of Louisiana. After the March on Washington, they canceled all bail bond requirements so that those 275 of us who were in jail there in Plaquemine could get out. I got out and was confronted with a lynch mob, screaming for my blood: "Come on out, Farmer. We gonna getcha. When we catch that G.D. nigger (pardon the expression) Farmer, we gonna kill him." Tear gas all over the place. (I think the massive tear gassing, which I encountered in the closed house when they shattered the windows and sent more tear gas in, accounted for my eye problems a few years later; my doctors, however, think that that's fanciful, that there is no evidence to support it.) But be that as it may, they were screaming for my blood,

kicking open doors in the black community. “Come on out here. We know you’re in there.” Beating up any blacks seen in the streets. “Get up. Run, nigger, run. Everybody knew where I was, but nobody was telling. I have never seen such courage on the part of masses of people, who took that head-whipping with billy clubs and being stuck with electric cattle prods, rather than just tell, “There he is. He’s in that house, there on the corner.” I finally got out of town, obviously, in the back of a hearse. Two hearses were used, one as a decoy to open up one of the road blocks. They well, stopping cars, searching every car leaving town, looking for me. The second hearse was the real McCoy — I was in it — and we sped to New Orleans and safety.

People find it difficult to believe. The strange thing about this mob was that it was made up of state troopers. State police. Nameplates and badge numbers were taped over. I don’t know why. I don’t know who gave the order. The press was not there. The press was there at the beginning of the episode — one newspaperman — and he wrote in a Baton Rouge paper that when the mob invaded a church and turned high-pressure fire hoses in the church, that Bibles and hymnals were floating in the aisles. But when they discovered that reporter was there, they stuck him with a cattle prod and he jumped in his car and hightailed it out of town. We were there, and it was open season on us, on me. While the press was there, we were comparatively safe — they’re not going kill you for the 7 o’clock news. They don’t want to be seen there committing murder on network TV. But when the media is gone, it’s open season. I tried to get phone calls out of town. I tried to call the White House, Department of Justice, FBI, members of my staff in New York. As soon as I gave the number, I’d lose connection and get a dial tone. They weren’t placing any long-distance calls for the black community that night. True story.

A Year Later

But in order to balance the picture, I have to say that one year later, that same police force and the FBI saved my life in another town in Louisiana. You explain it; I can’t. Here their nameplates and badge numbers were not taped over; here the FBI had called me — this was in 1964 — and said, “Let us know the next time you are going below the Mason-Dixon line.” “Why?” He said, “Well, the Klan met yesterday and decided that you’re going to be killed next time you go down there.” I said, “How do you know?” “We’ve infiltrated and have a man there.” I said, “Well, tell me, were there any dissenting votes?” He didn’t think it was at all funny and said, “We would appreciate it if you would cooperate. We’re serious. The Klan is deadly serious.” “I’m going down tomorrow.”

Well, when we got to New Orleans the next day, the pilot announced that I should keep my seat, while other passengers deplaned. State police in plain clothes came aboard, identified themselves, and told me that their governor had gotten a call from Washington saying that my life was in danger while I was there. The governor had called the head of the state police and ordered him to protect me.’ Four lieutenants were given to me as personal bodyguards. They were to stay in touch with me every minute of the day. They were not to let me out their sight, except when I was sleeping, and then every access to my room was to be within their sight. They saved my life on those occasions.

So it was a whole mixed-up scene, a mixed-up situation, when I went back to Plaquemine later. There was a crowd of people gathered there, curiosity seekers; this did not look like a mob. There were women and children on the other side of a barbwire

fence, looking, children holding onto their mothers' hands, wanting to see this guy, Farmer, who's coming here. They weren't hostile, but they were curious. All this because of color. C-O-L-O-R. It cuts across race. We found something out in the Sixties. We found that the nation can change and change quickly if enough people will work with sufficient diligence toward that end. When one visits the South now, it's a different experience. It's like going to another country. Even Mississippi, which used to be the ultra of racism. We used to tell each other stories about Mississippi, you know. This fellow, black guy, left Mississippi because he got tired of running from the Klan. He left pretty fast, not by Greyhound but by bloodhound. He went to Chicago and couldn't find a job. He sat down to talk with God and asked God what he ought to do. God said, "Go back to Mississippi." He said, "Lord, I didn't hear you right. What did you say?" "Go back to Mississippi." He said, "Well, Father, I've never failed to do what you have told me to do, so I will go back if you insist. But Lord, will you go with me?" And the Lord said, "as far as Cincinnati."

A Changed State

That's when Mississippi was Mississippi, but now you go back there and it's different. I went back the last time when we were preparing for the 25th anniversary of the murders of Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney. We went to Jackson and held a press conference. The governor of Mississippi, a decent man, asked me to come up to his office. Imagine! The governor of Mississippi inviting me up to his office. I went there, and he said, "Mr. Farmer, you see that ornate desk there?" I said, "Yes." "You know whose desk that used to be? That used to be Senator Bilbo's desk." Most of you are too young to know who Senator Bilbo was, but he was the granddaddy of all racists. He was the worst of them in the Senate of the United States back in the Thirties. Oh, he was terrible; he was awful. So, I told him that there were two things I wanted to do while I was in his office. One was to kick that desk, and the other was to spit on it. I said, "Let me, and I'll clean it off. I just want to have the pleasure of spitting on it." We laughed about that and had a good time. Then when we had the rally down in Neshoba County where the three men had been brutally murdered, the governor had the courage to speak and delivered a marvelous address. Then the secretary of state of Mississippi spoke, too. What he said was directed to the parents and family of the three men — Mickey Schwerner, Andy Goodman and Jim Chaney. He said, "I grew up here in Neshoba County. And the decent people of this county and the town of Philadelphia join me in saying that we deeply regret what happened 25 years ago. We wish we could undo it, but we can't. We wish we could bring those three young men back to life, but we can't. But if it is any consolation to you, you have the consolation of knowing that their deaths did in fact help to change this state." A very moving talk.

Mississippi now has more black elected officials than any state in the country. Twenty-two members of the state legislature are black, including two state senators. That's Mississippi. The nation can change; it can change quickly. That does not mean that all of the racists have died or have ceased being racists. No, there are many racists still there. But it means that the racists are no longer in power and that those decent persons who are in power have learned to control them. They controlled them when we went back down there 25 years after the event took place. Who provided security? The

black state troopers of Mississippi. If the Klan is there, they better not come close because those guys mean business.

Identity Crisis

Those are the kinds of changes that can take place if people care and care sufficiently. I'm concerned about the nation today. Is there this caring? What is happening on the college campuses? Young people, the white youth, do not know what happened before the Sixties. They do not know what all the hullabaloo was about Affirmative Action. To them that means discrimination against white males. Discrimination in reverse—that's what it means today. They don't know what it's all about. The black youth don't know what it's about either; they think they've arrived. "What's this talk about discrimination? Nobody discriminates against me. I don't need no Affirmative Action. I got where I am by my own merit. did it myself." What nonsense that is, what nonsense!

And we have kept some of the rhetoric of Black Power. We have forgotten the content of identity and pride. We are struggling with who we are again. The big issue in civil rights a few months ago was whether we are black or African American. That was the big issue. That's an identity crisis. The Mexican Americans have an identity crisis, too. Who are you? What are you? Mexican American? Chicano? What is your objective? To maintain your culture and deepen the pride in that culture? Or is it to be submerged in the culture of the nation, meaning Anglo culture? Those questions you must ask yourself. And more than asking questions, you must come up with answers, just as we, the blacks, need to come up with answers. The Native Americans must ask those questions and must come up with answers, too.

We must define ourselves. I am black. I am proudly black. But that does not define me. If that defines me, then I have no link, no association, no ties with those who are not black because my identity, my definition, is a person who is black. How do we define ourselves? That is a part of the struggle: self-definition. I think if we define ourselves and define ourselves properly, we can have pride. And because we feel that pride in the marrow of our bones, we don't have to hate anybody else. They can be proud, too. That's cultural pluralism to me. I was invited to become an honorary member of the Italian American Veterans Club. I accepted, though obviously I am not Italian. (I don't know why I say "obviously" because Hannibal spent a long time in Rome, didn't he?) But apparently I am not Italian. I could accept the invitation with pride because that to me is cultural pluralism.

If I can be proud of what I am and who I am and join with others in being proud of what they are and who they are and share a common pride in a common nation and more than that a common humanity, then we've defined ourselves. I do not think that the Bensonhursts, the Howard Beaches or the Central Park incidents will be a recurring nightmare. When we've defined ourselves, then we will know what needs to be done to make this nation whole again.

I would urge that we start again using the term brotherhood, which we've forgotten, and sisterhood. What about love? We don't use that anymore either. We meet and have a breakfast on Martin Luther King's birthday, but we don't mention love. King would be turning over in his grave if he could see that we don't mention it. We've got to

meet together and love one another. I can answer the questions, What am I? Who am I? I must first answer before I can determine what I am to do with myself.

Several years ago, I wrote a poem — not a poem, it's a rhyme. I don't even know if I can remember it; my eyesight has deserted me. In the next minute or so, we'll find out if my memory has deserted me as well. If it has, bear with me. With apologies to a very great classic:

Mirror, Mirror, on the wall,
What am I when I stand tall?
Child of this land,
Hued black by chance?
Or a black here placed
By happenstance?
Ah, Mirror, Mirror, on the wall,
I know what I am
When I stand tall.
Of humankind
With heart so bold
I'll never let race
Define my soul.

Lecture transcribed by Benjamin Hicklin, graduate research assistant, 2007-08