



Harris Wofford and His Lifelong Campaign for *Equality*

*F*our years before the 1954 Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, a young Caucasian American entered the nearly all-Black Howard University School of Law. While the institution's singular goal was to defeat Jim Crow and segregation, the law school did not seem like the likeliest place for a White man with roots in Tennessee, Arkansas and Mississippi, states that to many were symbolic of the worst kind of bigotry.

Unless that someone was Harris Wofford (J.D. '54), a man who in fundamental ways was ahead of his time—whose belief in the inherent dignity of all, and whose deep sense of morality told him that the conditions in which African Americans were living in his country were wrong, and further that he needed to do something about it.

For Wofford, who would become a member of the U.S. Senate (D-Pa.) from 1991 to 1994, president of two U.S. colleges and an architect of Americorps, his enlightenment began with a trip to India, the land of renowned spiritual and political leader Mahatma Gandhi, in 1949.

One year after Gandhi's death, Wofford traveled there with his wife to study Gandhi's doctrine of nonviolent protest and peaceful coexistence. His experience with the issues that Gandhi spent his life fighting for convinced him that "segregation and denial of the rights of citizens because of race was the great scandal on the American soul."

Just 23 years old at the time, Wofford said he was often asked by Gandhi's followers whether he had done anything to protest racism in America. Embarrassed that his answer was no, he vowed that once he returned to the U.S. that would change.

A year later, he wrote the book *India Afire* with his wife, in which he advocated Gandhi's strategy, including marching and going to jail, as part of the struggle for civil rights in America. He also enrolled in law school,

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Photos by Ceasar

convinced that his training would be a worthwhile tool in the struggle to which he was about to dedicate his life. As the center for civil rights litigation, Howard University School of Law became the logical choice.

Wofford welcomed the opportunity for another reason. His life, so far, had not presented the diversity his spirit craved. From Tennessee, where he spent his first seven years, it was on to the almost all-White suburb of Scarsdale, NY; college at the University of Chicago; and the Army Air Corps in World War II where he served in all-White units. He says he did not hear about the Tuskegee Airmen until after the war.

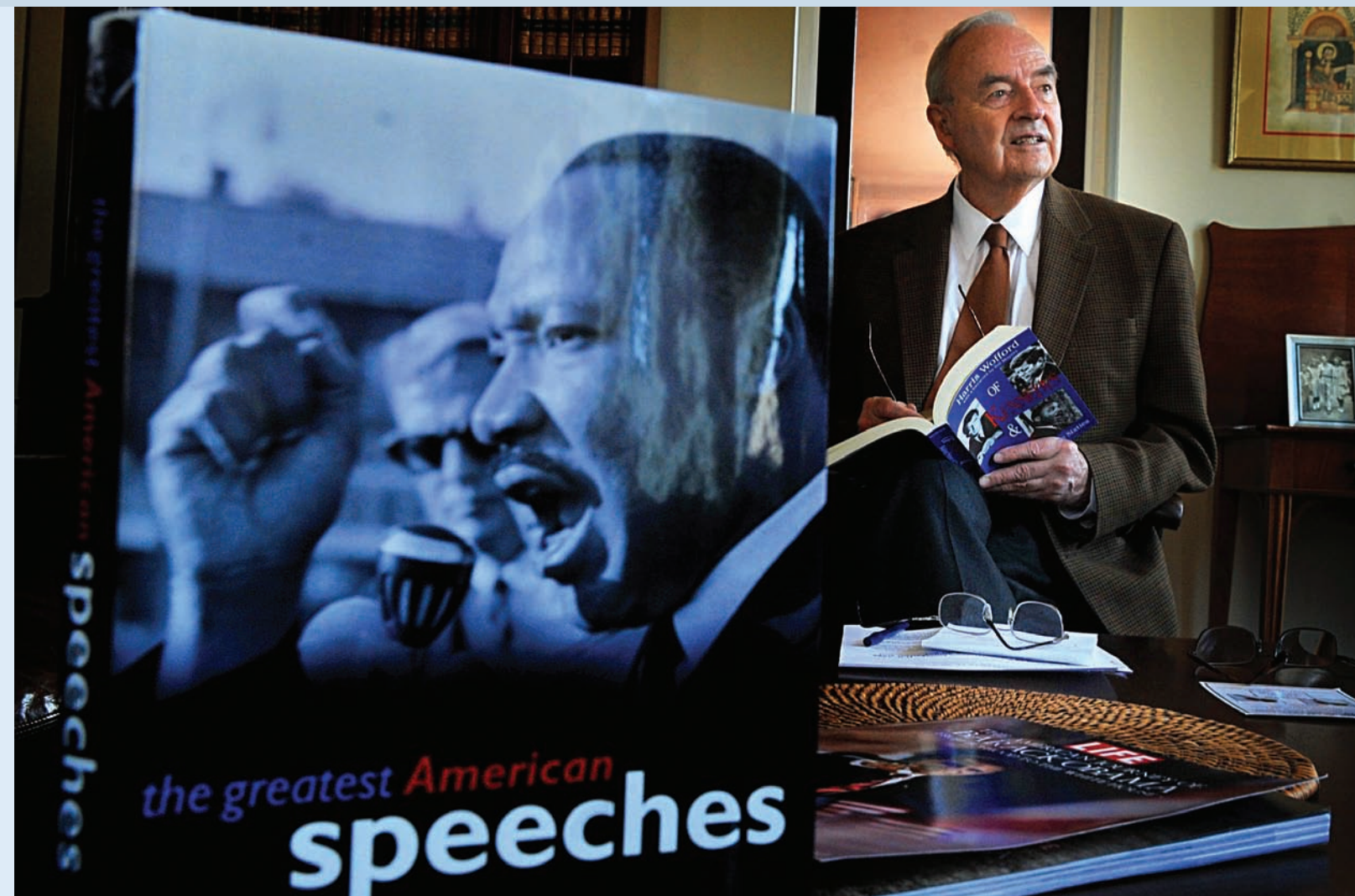
"I thought it would be an important experience, for once to be a minority in a thriving academic community that was predominantly Black. It certainly was, and I enjoyed it greatly," he said.

It was a hard-fought experience. His parents, whom he said were not racist, were nonetheless shocked at his decision to go to Howard and did almost everything they could to stop him, fearing that he was severely limiting his career prospects, particularly in the political arena.

"I wish they had lived to see my upset victory in 1991 when I became the first Democrat to win a Senate seat in Pennsylvania," Wofford said. "Overwhelming Black votes helped me do that and nothing seemed to have moved that constituency more than my going to Howard Law School."

Wofford also credits his association with the law school with the friendship he would later forge with civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., his appointment as counsel to Father Theodore Hesburgh of Notre Dame on the U.S. Commission for Civil Rights and as an adviser to John F. Kennedy Jr. in his presidential campaign.

From his vantage point as a student at the law



school, Wofford also had the opportunity to witness the case against segregation in action. He was there the night before the *Brown* ruling when Thurgood Marshall and other NAACP lawyers came to the school for a dry run, with the faculty acting as Supreme Court justices and the students as the audience, and he joined his fellow students as they picketed the lunch room at Hecht's department store for its refusal to seat Blacks.

"We picketed throughout the winter months and finally won—my first such involvement. I've wondered if the picketing hadn't succeeded whether we would have been ready for a sit-in and jail, as the students in Nashville and North Carolina were ready a few years later."

This past February, Wofford, now a highly accomplished politician, author, academic, statesman and Barack Obama surrogate in the 2008 presidential campaign, took a sentimental trip back to India as a part of a congressional delegation led by Rep. John Lewis (D-Ga.), to commemorate the 50th anniversary of King's "pilgrimage."

In 1957, Wofford says he suggested to King that he make the trip and secured the funds to pay for it. However, King was stabbed and the trip was postponed until 1959. Wofford said the three-week trip deepened

the civil rights leader's commitment to nonviolent protests.

On this trip too, the Indians had questions for him—about the election of his new president—and tremendous expressions of good wishes for the first African American to lead the U.S. Their joy mirrored his own, he said, at the elevation of a man who he believes will be great despite the challenges facing the nation and the world.

He sees Obama's presidency as the culmination of his work and that of all those who devoted their lives to the struggle for racial justice in America and likened his feeling to that of Harry Belafonte, who in a recent conversation told him, in a voice filled with emotions, that he campaigned for Barack Obama for 41 years.

"In the same spirit," Wofford said. "I've been waiting since the sad spring of 1968, when we lost both Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, to find someone we needed for president as much as I thought we needed Robert Kennedy then. President Obama is that man." ■

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