Q&A: Vernon Jordan ; 'We must keep on walking and keep on talking'

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Vernon Jordan is probably best known as an adviser and friend to former President Bill Clinton and as a Washington and New York power broker. However, earlier in his career he was a civil rights lawyer, leader and president of the National Urban League. In 1980, Jordan survived an assassination attempt by a white supremacist. He is now managing director of a New York investment firm.

Jordan will be keynote speaker at Monday's annual Martin Luther King breakfast at the Minneapolis Convention Center, sponsored by the General Mills Foundation and the United Negro College Fund. Editorial writer Denise Johnson recently spoke with him about the state of civil rights in America. Here are excerpts from the conversation:

Q: This year is the 50th anniversary of the landmark Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court ruling that desegregated America's schools. What did that decision mean to you?

A: I was a freshman in college at DePauw University in 1954 - the only black person in my class. When Brown came down that spring, I thought about the segregated schools I had attended in Georgia, the fact that I used a geometry book in 1951 that had been used by white students in 1935. I thought about the hand-me-down band instruments we used . . . that we didn't have a gymnasium. I thought, all that is over now. Other black kids will have it better. That was my reaction then.

Q: And now? The purpose of Brown was to open up and equalize educational opportunity. What would your late mentor and teacher Thurgood Marshall [who argued Brown before the Supreme Court] and Martin Luther King think today as we lament the continuing achievement gap between children of color and their white peers?

A: Brown made a tremendous difference. I think Thurgood and Martin would agree that Brown emancipated black people and white people - it allowed us to
be relieved of the burden of bias. They would also agree that we need to "re-
Brown" Brown; we must hold that decision up again and reemphasize it.

The problems we have in education today . . . a lot of that is because of legacy. 
We have not done all the additional things we need to do to get people better 
educations, better jobs. And there must be more parental involvement. This is 
everybody's responsibility.

Q: While leading the Urban League, you issued an annual "State of Black 
America" report. What's the condition today?

A: Half-empty and half-full. So many things are better for people who have good 
educations and jobs - and they are much worse for those who don't. That's 
today's challenge - to make the progress more comprehensive and reach more 
people.

In some ways, this is a negative impact of success. We've got the Brown 
decision and civil rights legislation, so people think we don't have to do anything 
more. But what too many Americans never understood is that the 1960s were 
about defining and conferring rights. Then the '70s, '80s and '90s were about 
making those rights real. During the '60s, we tore down the walls of segregation 
and discrimination. But when walls tumble, you create debris. Cleaning up that 
debris takes longer, it's harder work and it is not as exciting as criticizing the wall.

Q: You've been a political insider for years. Why didn't you run for office?

A: I've never run because I'm not sure I can ever make a concession speech. I 
lost for student body president once in high school and never got over it.

Seriously, I announced the intention to run for Congress in 1969 - three weeks 
later I was offered the job at the [United Negro College Fund] and decided to take 
it. As for other political jobs, when I turned Clinton down for attorney general, I 
ever regretted it - except once. That was the night of Waco, Texas [when a 
standoff between federal officers and the Branch Davidian cult resulted in about 
80 deaths]. I would have handled that differently.

Q: The campaign against terrorism is high on the agenda of the Bush 
administration and his attorney general. You've said that terrorism is nothing new 
in this country. What did you mean?

A: Black people know firsthand about terrorism. I have a big hole in my back from 
a guy who shot me in Fort Wayne. For us, it started on the slave ships, continued 
through Jim Crow era lynchings, four little girls firebombed in Birmingham and 
the assassinations of Martin and Medgar [Evers]. Terrorism is no stranger to us.
What's different is that on Sept. 11th we were attacked from the outside; our invulnerability was pierced in a way we didn't understand. America found out, in the words of the old Negro spiritual, that "There's no hiding place down here." We can learn from Sept. 11th the same thing that black folks learned - we must keep on walking and keep on talking. We still must make this country a real democracy.

Q: Over your four-decade career, what are your most important accomplishments?

A: It is probably a mistake to do ratings, but I often think about being involved in registering nearly 2 million voters during registration drives in the South. . . . of pushing government and corporate America to do the right thing. I've served on many corporate boards and my presence made a difference. Many companies now know they should not have all-white, all-male boards.

When I speak about the state of civil rights today I want to be positive. The movement has always survived because it had hope - I don't want people to give up. If you give up, you give in. I think we should realistically celebrate what we've done, and know that we can and must do better.