50 Years Later — Redefining Equality

Civil rights movement balances on the edge of change

by Robert G. Brock

"I have *lived the struggle* of civil rights for 50 years," proclaimed the six-foot-three chairman of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. At age 68, barrel-chested Arthur Fletcher still carries himself like a football linebacker, although he often catches his balance with a stiff hobble on a game leg, and the frizzy hair ringing his head has turned steely grey.

But age and injury have not diminished the vocal thunder, which he delivers in the rich vibrato of the great black preacher/orators of our age. And while Fletcher's delivery is old-time religion, his message is brand new—one not heard before, certainly not from an African American.

"I've lived to see the beginning of the harvest," he boomed. "We (minorities) are inside the system now. We're the quarterback; we're calling the plays. If it doesn't work, we have no one to blame but ourselves."

From lecterns and pulpits across the country, as well as before Congress, Fletcher is spreading his message that the civil rights movement has fundamentally changed.

Redefining Equality

"There has been a shift in emphasis from race to economics," said Fletcher, who has observed the change from a string of unique vantage points: deputy assistant to the president for urban affairs, executive director of the United Negro College Fund, alternate delegate to the U.N. General Assembly, and advisor to every Republican president for two decades.

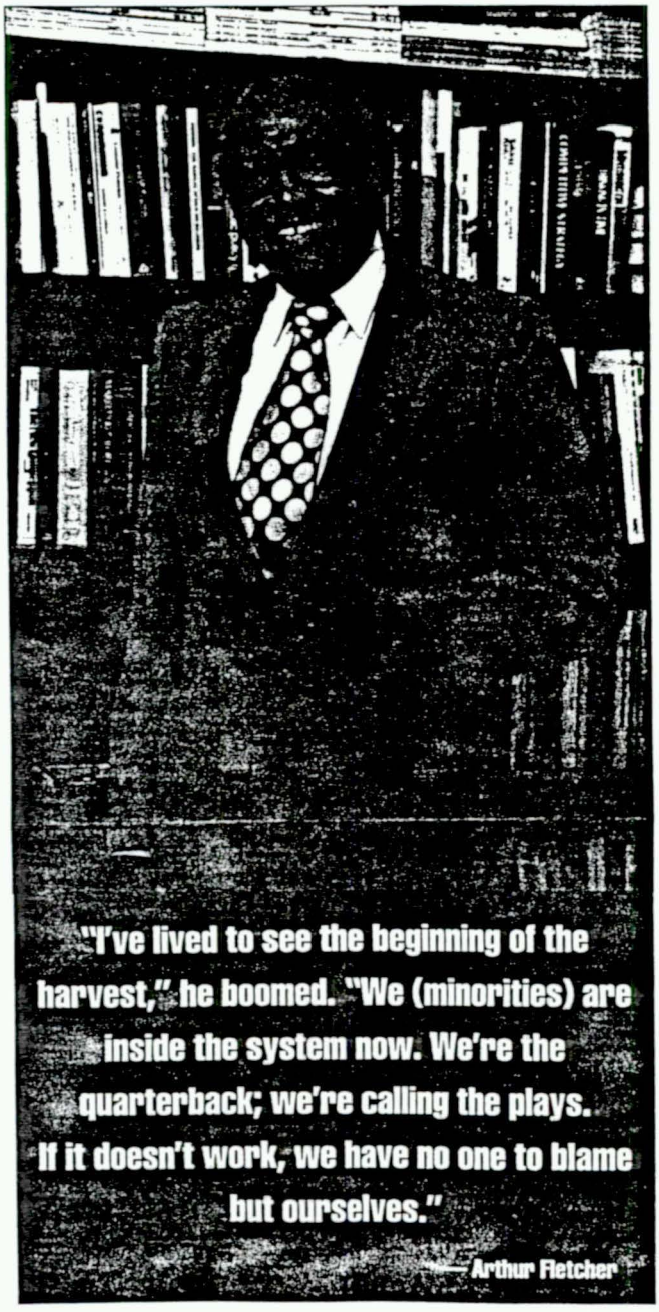
In 1990, President Bush appointed him to a five-year term as chairman of the Commission on Civil Rights, an eight-member bipartisan commission founded in 1958 to investigate patterns of discrimination affecting federally-protected minorities: Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, Asian Americans, the disabled, and women.

"No one talks about social equality any more. It's obsolete. They didn't ask about that when (Democratic Party Chairman) Ron Brown was called upon to save his party. They asked if he could get the job done. Vernon Jordan helped assemble the new U.S. government—it doesn't get any more equal than that. Today, people want to know if you can help my team or my school or my company succeed."

Fletcher's down-playing of racial differences in favor of individual opportunity reflects his own evolution in the equality movement. He cut his teeth working for the landmark 1954 desegregation case, *Brown vs Board of Education*. Later, as assistant secretary for employment standards at the Department of Labor, he devised the 1969 Philadelphia Plan, one of the most effective of the early affirmative-action initiatives, which later became a national model.

Then two years ago he joined the University of Denver as distinguished professor of business to establish DU's International Institute for Corporate Social Responsibility. The institute was created to help corporations mainstream programs for minorities, women, child-care, environment, the aged, and education. He hopes the institute will house his "civil rights legacy."

This new kind of cooperative between education and business, Fletcher explained, will redefine equal rights. "Equality today means the opportunity for every individual to function at the top of their game. Race and color are no longer part of the equation; education and economic opportunity are."



Bootstrap Philosophy

Fletcher is quick to acknowledge that, despite impressive gains made since the 1950s, Blacks, Hispanics, Native Americans, and Asian Americans have a long way to go in education, employment, housing, and health care. In a recent address to Congress, he pointed out some of the problems:

- The average Black family has a net value ($26,000) less than one-fourth that of the average white family ($112,000);
- Minority mortgage applicants are turned down between one-and-a-half and two times as often as whites;
- Nearly a third of minorities live in poverty, compared to 10 percent of whites;
- The minority infant-mortality rate (17.7) is twice that of white children (8.2).

But minorities no longer need legislation, he said. They possess the critical mass of power, wealth, and political influence to take the movement into their own hands and shape its outcome.

This implies that minorities accept greater responsibility for personal advancement. Although there is no consensus on how far leaders can (or should) push the "bootstrap" concept among their constituencies, many voices are echoing a similar message.

Shelby Steele, English professor at San Jose State University and author of the controversial book, *The Content of Our Character: A New Vision of Race in America*, wrote that minorities must shed the self-image as victims. On college campuses, he said, Black students often "choose to believe in their inferiority, not to fulfill society's prophesy about them, but for the comforts and rationalizations their racial 'inferiority' affords them. They hold their race to evade individual responsibility."

The critical new factor may be the minority and women legislators elected last November. Congress now tallies 40 Blacks (including 16 from the South), 43 women, 19 Hispanics, eight Asian Americans, and one Native American. "That's a helluva voting block," Fletcher said. Equally important are the more than 8,000 minorities now holding state and local positions nationwide.

Do Minorities Call the Plays?

Pressure is on minority leaders to provide the neighborhood-centered vision missing from minority communities: "Minorities are in position to pass zoning, real estate, and development ordinances to create neighborhoods to match their vision," Fletcher said.

Not everyone agrees on the effects of greater representation: "When Congressional leaders emerged from (a recent) meeting with President Clinton," said Rep. Maxine Waters, Democrat from California, "all I saw were white males. That should tell us we aren't quarterbacking this team. Maybe we're no longer riding the bench, but somebody else is still calling the plays. Many African Americans, especially in our cities, are being left behind," she said. "That's why we've got to have a national economic policy that invests in our cities with public works, job training, and better schools."

And after the South Central L.A. riot and the racial hostility in New York's Crown Heights, one unanswered question is whether or not competing groups can maintain strategic alliances necessary to wield their new-found political power. Will more violent flash-points erupt from those who have not received their piece of the pie? Will minority groups splinter, Black vs. Jew, brown vs. Black?

Jack Miles, a journalist at the *Los Angeles Times*, writing in the October 1992 issue of the *Atlantic Monthly*, claimed that the L.A. riots reflect a fight between disadvantaged Blacks and Hispanics for control of the unskilled labor market. Miles sees the conflict over a limited number of jobs worsening as more Hispanic and Asian immigrants pour into this country.

Yet Fletcher remains optimistic: frictions will diminish as minority leaders achieve greater enforcement of economic incentives. The new minority voting block, anchored by support from the White House, Fletcher said, has the clout to force compliance with existing affirmative-action legislation. "All the laws are there, they just need to be used." He is assured of help from the new Attorney-General Designate Janet Reno, if she is approved by Congress. Reno has already made enforcement of existing civil rights legislation a top priority—it was one of her first promises at the Feb. 11 White House acceptance of the nomination.

On the national front, the Civil Rights Commission is now looking at banks to provide minorities with more credit through the Community Reinvestment Act and to developers (with oversight by Clinton's new Economic Security Council) to offer more contracts to minority-owned businesses.

In the end, Fletcher said, our collective future—not just that of minorities —depends on how well minority leaders force the opening of new economic opportunity. "It's on their shoulders, now. If they decide to truly represent their people, we'll see the harvest begin." ■