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WHEN THEY GO LOW, WE GO VOTE

Today, as we contemplate the current state of the economy, the serious threat to public health posed by COVID 19, assaults on democratic institutions and deteriorating race relations, it is easy to become discouraged, depressed and despondent. But we do well to remember a woman who, in the early 1920s, when threatened with a visit from the notorious Ku Klux Klan night riders, summoned ingenuity and intelligence to escape. The Ku Klux Klan was known for wearing hoods and masks to hide their own identity while burning crosses, lynching and shooting their Black neighbors to intimidate those who dared to vote, accumulate property or seek an education.

Warned by a neighbor's child of an imminent threat, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune sent the younger students to turn off the lights and get into bed and gathered up the older ones to stand guard with her in front of the darkened school to wait serenely and defiantly for the Klan. Soon a long motorcade of cars slowly approached the school. Just as the motorcade inched toward the school, Dr. Bethune clapped her hands. The teachers and younger students waiting in abject terror inside responded to her pre-arranged signal by turning on all the lights in the school, just as she had instructed them.

During the months prior to the Klan visit, Dr. Bethune traveled the back roads and byways surrounding Daytona Beach Florida, urging African Americans to vote and raising money to pay the poll tax designed to dissuade them from exercising the fundamental privilege of citizenship. This night of intimidation was her punishment for disobeying the status quo.

As the Klansmen drove slowly past the school, she began to lead the children in an old familiar spiritual, "when Israel was in Egypt land," and the older students responded in unison, "let my people go." The nefarious motorcade moved past the school without stopping, without exiting their vehicles. It must have been a terrifying moment. And yet, whether because of the singing, or the sudden flood of light from inside the building, an eerie premonition that black men armed with weapons were waiting to repel an ambush, or divine intervention, there was no violence that night.

That school still exists today and is known as Bethune-Cookman University. Mary McLeod Bethune became one of the most influential women in American history, despite, or perhaps because of, the formidable obstacles she faced. It would be decades after passage of the historic 19th Amendment in 1920 before the promise of citizenship became tangible for Black women living in the South. Across the region a diabolical and racist combination of poll taxes, white primaries, literacy tests and outright domestic terrorism would prevent most Black people from voting. Dr. Bethune went on found the National Council of Negro Women to be a voice for Black women, to advise presidents, to befriend Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt and insist on New Deal jobs for Black women and men.

Founder: Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune

President & Chair Emerita: Dr. Dorothy Irene Height (1957-2010)

Chair of the Board and 7th President: Dr. Johnnetta Betsch Cole

Executive Director: Janice L. Mathis, Esq.

Chief Administrative Officer: Krystal Ramseur, MPA

A quick survey of the past 155 years reveals the tortured back and forth between a people determined to vote and forces almost equally determined to deny them that right. In 2018, Brent Staples opined in *The New York Times*, "It became clear after the Civil War that Black and White women had different views of why the right to vote was essential. White women were seeking the vote as a symbol of parity with their husbands and brothers. Black women, most of whom lived in the South, were seeking the ballot for themselves and their men, as a means of empowering Black communities besieged by the reign of racial terror that erupted after Emancipation."

The White Women suffragettes gave in to their own racism in an effort to appease White men in southern states. Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott cannot be celebrated for what they did for women's right to vote without acknowledging their racist attitudes. For example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton vigorously opposed the 15th Amendment that gave Black men the right to vote, based purely on a desire to uphold a claim to white superiority.

Frederick Douglass was the only person of African descent who was invited to attend the famous suffrage convention in Seneca Falls, New York in 1848, a telling clue to the attitudes of White women suffrage activists toward Black women. Douglass was best known as an abolitionist, but he was a staunch champion of women's suffrage, like Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman. Were it not for Douglass's oratory, the historian Lisa Tetrault wrote in "The Myth of Seneca Falls," the resolution demanding the vote for women might actually have failed.

Sojourner Truth and Harriet Tubman were not the only Black women who were proponents of suffrage. Mary Ann Shadd Cary supported the Fifteenth Amendment but criticized its failure to include Black women. Long before we began to understand the concept of intersectionality, Black activists like Mary Church Terrell and Frances Ellen Watkins Harper understood the double jeopardy of race and gender that limited the rights and opportunities of Black women.

The 15th Amendment was adopted specifically because the 14th amendment did not go far enough in protecting the right of Black men to vote. Following the end of Reconstruction, in 1876, the federal government gave up its responsibility to guarantee Black citizens the right to vote and gave in to the worst white supremacist instincts of domestic terrorists who legislated, burned, assaulted, taxed and discriminated against Black citizens to deny them the right to vote, especially in the South.

Other Black suffragists like Nannie Helen Burroughs, urged Black and white women to cooperate to achieve the right to vote. Black women worked with mainstream suffragists and organizations, like the National American Woman Suffrage Association. However, the mainstream organizations did not address the challenges faced by Black women because of their race, such as negative stereotypes, harassment, Jim Crow laws, voter intimidation and unequal access to jobs, housing, and education. So in the late 1800s, Black women formed clubs and organizations where they could focus on the issues that affected them. In 1890 they formed the National Association of Colored Women with Mary Church Terrell as the first president.

Infamously, White women suffragettes dared to tell Ida B. Wells, who came to Washington, DC in 1913 with the Chicago suffragettes, that she could not march with them but had to go to the back of the March.

In its first public act, the founding members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority were similarly segregated from White marchers.

Beginning after World War II, in 1948, Dr. Mary McLeod Bethune built a relationship with Presidents Roosevelt and Truman specifically to expand opportunity for Black people. She urged racial and gender integration of the military, resisted segregation and set an example for the next generation of Black women leaders. The success of the mid-century Civil Rights Movement owes a debt of gratitude to a generation of Black women strategists that included Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker and Diane Nash who organized, mobilized their peers and perfected the philosophy and techniques of nonviolent direct action.

The right to vote was invigorated by the adoption of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in response to the violent attack against peaceful marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. We honor the late Congressman John R. Lewis for his suffering on that bridge. However, he did not suffer alone. Many women marched with him, including Mrs. Amelia Boynton, who was severely beaten by state officials.

In the Voting Rights Act, at last there was at last a legislative response to the unending diabolical ingenuity of White officials determined to deter the Black vote. In 1966, the Supreme Court wrote, "Early attempts to cope with this vile infection resembled battling the Hydra. Whenever one form of voting discrimination was identified and prohibited, others sprang up in its place. This Court repeatedly encountered the remarkable 'variety and persistence' of laws disenfranchising minority citizens."

The Voting Rights Act was unique among laws in its power to prevent newer, more effective restraints on the rights of Black voters BEFORE they could take effect. That power was what made the Voting Rights Act arguably the most effective civil rights law in the history of the United States. After all, Civil Rights Acts in 1957, 1960 and 1964 attempted unsuccessfully to cure the nation of racial discrimination in voting. For decades after its passage, reactionary forces sought to upend bi-partisan support for the Voting Rights Act.

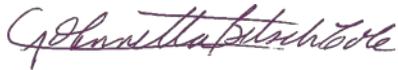
Finally, in 2013, the United States Supreme Court, in *Shelby County, Alabama v. Eric Holder*, found that despite ongoing race-based voter suppression, the section of the Voting Rights Act that established the pre-clearance coverage formula was unconstitutional because the discrimination it was meant to deter had magically disappeared. A majority of the justices ignored the fact that voting was gradually becoming more accessible to Black citizens, BECAUSE of the Voting Rights Act. Near the end of her dissent in *Shelby County v. Holder*, Justice Ginsburg wrote that "throwing out (Section V) preclearance when it has worked and is continuing to work to stop discriminatory changes is like throwing away your umbrella in a rainstorm because you are not getting wet."

Predictably, following the *Shelby* decision, the floodgates of discrimination opened as states began to adopt more restrictive voter ID requirements, closed polling places, purged voters from rolls, ended pre-registration for 17-year olds and adopted various measures designed to restrict the right of Black citizens to elect representatives of their choice.

Last year the United States House of Representatives passed two laws, HR1 and HR4 (originally the Voting Rights Advancement Act) that would restore, modernize and expand the Voting Rights Act. Unfortunately, no hearings or votes have been held in the United States Senate. After his death, HR 4 was renamed the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Act.

The lesson for us today from all of the advocates for universal suffrage is to persevere with courage, remembering as Dr. Bethune often said, “without faith, nothing is possible. With faith, nothing is impossible. Her life stands as a reminder that no matter how dark the nights or desperate the days, through faith, education, civic engagement, direct action and persistence in the face of unjust treatment, people of goodwill can prevail. Dr. Bethune lives on in each of us as we confront systemic racism, oppressive intersections of race, class and gender, unequal educational opportunity, health care disparities and economic oppression. Her life inspires confidence that the arc of history is long, but we have it within our power to bend that arc toward justice.

Onward!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Johnnetta Betsch Cole". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Johnnetta Betsch Cole, Ph.D.

NCNW Chair & 7th National President