



Reverend C.T. Vivian, In Memoriam

August 21, 2020

During the Civil Rights Movement many Americans bravely urged our nation to keep its promise of equality for all, but very few met the face of racism, violence, and fear with a clarion call for justice that remains seared in the national memory.

“We are willing to be beaten for democracy and you misuse democracy in the streets”¹ once said a young Cordy Tindell (“C.T.”) Vivian in Selma, Alabama to Sheriff Jim Clark, as Vivian led a peaceful Black voter registration march in 1965.

Reverend Vivian offered these words after Sheriff Clark, acting under color of law, punched Vivian in the mouth on the Selma courthouse steps in front of television cameras with force so great that it both made Vivian bleed and broke Clark’s hand. This moment crystalized the contest and cost of facing segregation, injustice, and brutality with courage, fortitude, and selflessness.

Sheriff Clark became a face of injustice, and Vivian the face of Americans seeking justice. C.T. Vivian was an unrelenting advocate for non-violent change to which he was inalterably committed throughout his life. Recalling the courthouse confrontation, Vivian recounted, “with Jim Clark it was a clear engagement...you do not walk away from that you continue to answer it.”² In his words, “We have proven that we can solve social problems without violence if we choose.”³

C.T. Vivian spoke of Black Americans’ aspiration for equality, and, as we would learn, he spoke of destiny. He was a fearless fighter for equality in a cause that was paved with his sacrifices and those of so many others.

Sheriff Clark later would lead the assault on John Lewis and the voting rights marchers on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. Clark’s resort to violence, however, could not stop the unrelenting calls to let Black Americans vote.

¹ Atlanta Journal-Constitution, *Personal Journeys: The Freedom Fighter*, YOUTUBE (Dec. 16, 2013), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tU6IEC7JXN8>.

² HuntleyFilmArchives, *Rev C T Vivian in 1965. Archive Film 99240*, YOUTUBE (Sep. 27, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gHJjbDofdo>.

³ Lisa Mitchell Sennaar, *John Lewis and C.T. Vivian Chose Peace as Their Weapon*, AFRO (Jul. 19, 2020), <https://afro.com/john-lewis-13/>.

For nearly 100 years, Vivian, who began his life of advocacy for racial equality as a child in Illinois,⁴ fought to make America realize its constitutional promises. He was a legendary civil rights advocate who served as one of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.'s chief allies and strategists. He led with his words and his deeds, and made the country better.

Once called “the greatest preacher who ever lived” by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.,⁵ Vivian, a Freedom Rider and leading Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) organizer who studied with John Lewis,⁶ was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation’s highest civilian honor, by President Obama in 2013.

Honoring the will of the people as expressed through their votes is the first principle of democracy. It is a principle that C.T. Vivian never forgot. “You are made by the struggles you choose”⁷ Vivian once said, and his struggle was to deliver on America’s promise.

On those courthouse steps on that day in Selma, C.T. Vivian declared, “you cannot turn your back on the idea of justice.”⁸ As we remember his contributions to the nation, we recognize that C.T. Vivian never did, and today the United States Commission on Civil Rights pays tribute to his lifelong commitment as an effective advocate for the nonviolent pursuit of equality and justice.

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The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, established by the Civil Rights Act of 1957, is the only independent, bipartisan agency charged with advising the President and Congress on civil rights and reporting annually on federal civil rights enforcement. Our 51 state Advisory Committees offer a broad perspective on civil rights concerns at state and local levels. The Commission: in our 7th decade, a continuing legacy of influence in civil rights. For information about the Commission, please visit <http://www.usccr.gov> and follow us on Twitter and Facebook.

⁴ Robert D. McFadden, *C.T. Vivian, Martin Luther King’s Field General, Dies at 95*, NEW YORK TIMES (Jul. 17, 2020), <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/17/us/ct-vivian-dead.html>.

⁵ 11Alive, *Remembering Civil Rights Icon Rev. C.T. Vivian*, YOUTUBE (Jul. 17, 2020), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1L1JEUrdPNo&feature=youtu.be>.

⁶ Desiree Seals and Michael Warren, *Rev. C.T. Vivian, Key Civil Rights Leader, Has Died at 95*, WASHINGTON POST (Jul. 17, 2020, 5:00 a.m.), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/civil-rights-veteran-rev-ct-vivian-dead-at-95/2020/07/17/ee89e6ea-c80b-11ea-a825-8722004e4150_story.html.

⁷ Tim Darnell, *‘Heaven’s Gain’: C.T. Vivian Tributes Pour in Across Social Media*, ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION (Jul. 17, 2020), <https://www.ajc.com/news/nation-world/sympathies-memories-of-ct-vivian-pour-in-from-social-media/KS4SS7MSOBGJ7NLZUY3WXDSVLO/>.

⁸ HuntleyFilmArchives, *Rev C T Vivian in 1965. Archive Film 99240*, YOUTUBE (Sep. 27, 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5gHJbDofdo>; Adam Bernstein, *C.T. Vivian, King Aide Bloodied on the Front Lines of Civil Rights Protest, Dies at 95*, WASHINGTON POST (Jul. 17, 2020, 5:04 p.m.), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/obituaries/ct-vivian-king-aide-bloodied-on-the-front-lines-of-civil-rights-protest-dies-at-95/2020/07/17/a08e640c-c838-11ea-b037-f9711f89ee46_story.html.