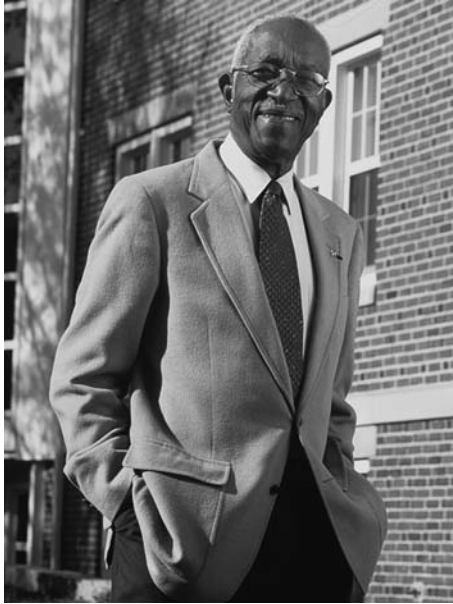

Remembering John Hope Franklin

by Walter Dellinger



John Hope Franklin

John Hope Franklin, who died in March at the age of 94, was one of the most remarkable Americans of the twentieth century. He was the master of the great American story of that century, the story of race. John Hope wrote it, he taught it, and he lived it.

For seven years, he and I taught constitutional history together at Duke University, and I never ceased to marvel at how he managed both to embody this history and yet recount it with an extraordinarily candid honesty. Our students would fall into the deepest hush while he recounted his experiences researching his epic 1947 work, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* (reprinted scores of times since, and still widely read), in segregated Southern state libraries and Southern university libraries. He would describe the various Jim Crow rules he was required to navigate – a separate table from white patrons, a prohibition on being waited on by white female librarians, and similar indignities – without a trace of bitterness.

After the acclaim for *From Slavery to Freedom* and his other writings brought him a place on the Howard University faculty while he was still in his 30s, John Hope thought he had achieved the final academic appointment of his life. He believed that a scholar who was a man of color could aspire to teach nowhere else. History proved him wrong. In 1956, when Brooklyn College made him the first African American to be appointed to chair an academic department at a predominantly white institution, *The New York Times* reported the story on its front page.

John Hope never compromised on principle. Well, almost never. He told and retold the story of a decision he made as a young teenager in Tulsa to see a performance by a star of the Metropolitan Opera. His parents strongly disapproved of his decision, since it entailed sitting in a segregated balcony. He later wrote, “I am not altogether proud of going to Convention Hall, and there are

times, even now, while enjoying a symphony or an opera, when I reproach myself for having yielded to the indignity of racial segregation.”

In 2007, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences joined with the American Philosophical Society to confer a “Public Good Award” on John Hope Franklin. In presenting the award, I noted that in the founding papers of both the Academy and the Society there are frequent references to “thinkers and doers.” The trajectory of our republic owes much to both kinds of participants in our national story – those thinkers whose ideas laid the foundation for our most important democratic institutions; and those doers who took aspirational concepts and made them concrete. John Hope Franklin was one of those rare individuals whose prodigious talents manifest themselves as both.

He worked on a crucial brief for *Brown v. Board of Education*, he marched in Selma, he lectured all over the world, and he taught all of America to see through his uncompromising eye. But it was not just what he did, but how he did it that marked his greatness. John Hope somehow combined a tough and uncompromising militancy with the courtly manner of an old-school Southern gentleman. He understood that the public good was not merely a set of substantive outcomes; it is also defined by how we go about reconciling our competing visions of that public good. It is about how we view one another when we peer across the great divides of policy, preference, political party, and personhood. John Hope Franklin looked at those who opposed him and saw fellow human beings.

He was no Pollyanna. He knew, as my son Drew once wrote, that we are still always crossing that bridge from Selma to Montgomery. But John Hope always looked at the state trooper blocking the bridge, the figure standing in the way of freedom, and saw

On April 28, 2007, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the American Philosophical Society bestowed the “Public Good Award” on John Hope Franklin.

Citation

Renowned historian and educator, ardent defender of civil rights, keen observer of American society, dedicated adviser to presidents, you have worked throughout your life to create One America. Born into poverty and burdened by racism, you responded with intelligence, insight, and integrity, creating an unparalleled body of work on African American culture.

With your books, essays, and lectures, you redefined the entire corpus of American history. Over the past sixty years, through eight editions and six translations, your landmark study, *From Slavery to Freedom*, has more than met the challenge you set for yourself: “To weave into the fabric of American history enough of the presence of blacks so that the story of the United States could be told adequately and fairly.” You have mentored thousands of students, many of them now distinguished scholars, and served as a role model for your profession as President of the Southern Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, and the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa.

Beyond the classroom and the scholarly community, your influence has been profound. Your research at the Library of Congress for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund was critical to the outcome of *Brown v. Board of Education*, ending the separate and unequal system of education you endured but rose above. A determined civic activist, you took to the streets with Martin Luther King in the voting-rights march from Selma to Montgomery. An adviser to presidents from Franklin Delano Roosevelt to William Jefferson Clinton, you have continued to champion the cause of racial equality with patience, determination, and dignity. We honor you tonight as the model of an American scholar-patriot, bringing statesmanship, knowledge, and engagement to one of our nation’s most intractable challenges.

You held up a “Mirror to America,” bore witness to inequality and injustice, and acted against both. Your seminal scholarship has reshaped our understanding of America, providing both blacks and whites with a new reflection of themselves and each other. As the consummate teacher, you reached out to instruct this nation and inspired millions of Americans to grasp a present and a future long owed to them. You personify the great humanitarian; a courageous and gentle man whose strong words and quiet actions are beyond measure. All of us who value freedom and opportunity stand tall in your presence.

there another child of God. He knew, as Charles L. Black Jr. said, that the tragedy of Southern race relations was drawn from that “prima materia of all tragedy: the failure to recognize kinship.”

When Barack Obama emerged as a possible candidate for president, I asked John Hope how historic it would be if Obama won his party’s nomination. He replied that the historical significance of such a thing was beyond measure. Obama’s nomination, he said, “would counter one of the most dominant narratives of the past 350 years on this continent.” Then he added the thought that it could be even more historically and culturally important “to have that family as the first family than to have Obama as president.”

When the roll was called in Denver and the Democratic convention, by acclamation, made Obama its nominee for president, I stepped outside and called John Hope. I asked him the question so many of us – particularly those of us from the South – have now asked each other: Did you ever think you would live to see this day? In his resonant baritone, John Hope responded, “Well, I never expected to live more than 90 years. But, no, even if I had, I still would not have thought that would be long enough to see this happen.” That he did live into this year seems a special gift.

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