

HOOSIERS AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964 50th ANNIVERSARY SPEECH
U.S. Senator Joe Donnelly Remarks as Delivered

Madam President, to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, I rise to pay tribute to a few Hoosier leaders who played important roles in the passing of this landmark legislation.

The story of the Civil Rights Act can be told through the leadership and vision of a long list of extraordinary Hoosiers—including many in the Indiana congressional delegation who supported the bill, regardless of party. Yet to truly understand the Indiana leadership behind the Civil Rights Act, we need to start back home.

During World War II, Rev. Andrew J. Brown vowed to dedicate himself to social justice while in a hospital bed, after being told by a doctor that one of his legs would need to be amputated. Brown promised God that if his leg was saved, he would spend the rest of his life fighting for justice for all people. Later recalling this moment during an interview, Brown said, “That’s the miracle in my life. That’s the commitment that I made...I’ll keep fighting until I fall, because that’s what God said I should do.”

And Brown did just that. He went on to fight for civil rights as a young pastor at St. John’s Missionary Baptist Church in Indianapolis in the 1950s and 60s. Brown organized African-Americans to show voting strength in 1963, he was a founder of the Indiana Black Expo, he started Operation Breadbasket—a radio show devoted to promoting economic and social justice—and he served as the President of the Indiana Chapter of the NAACP.

He marched with Dr. Martin Luther King in Selma, Alabama in 1965, he welcomed King into his home during trips to Indianapolis, he worked closely with King on the national civil rights movement, and he was at the home of Dr. King’s parents the night of Dr. King’s tragic assassination in April 1968.

Another renowned, homegrown Indiana leader was Willard Ransom—and they’re all featured right here [points to visual]—Mr. Ransom graduated from Harvard Law School as the only African-American member of his class, and was drafted into the military during World War II. While serving, Ransom spent much of his time in Alabama, where he was distraught by the discriminatory manner in which his fellow Americans were being treated. Resolving to see these practices come to an end, Ransom returned to his home community of Indianapolis, where he quickly became a leader in the fight for greater civil rights.

He spoke out against housing discrimination and school segregation, he played a role in drafting civil rights bills before the State legislature, served as the State President of the NAACP five times, and was the first African-American to run for Congress in Marion County.

Henry Johnson Richardson, Jr. moved to Indianapolis from Alabama to attend Shortridge High School and he went on to attend law school at Indiana University in Indianapolis. Richardson became a judge in Marion County, and then a state representative during the struggle for civil rights. He actively fought to desegregate schools and university housing and helped change the state constitution to allow African-Americans to serve in the Indiana National Guard.

These men brought together Hoosiers from every corner of the state, every socioeconomic class, race, and religion to further their efforts. They knew that if we want to improve together, we have to work together.

In 1959, University of Notre Dame President Father Theodore Hesburgh and his fellow members of the Civil Rights Commission found themselves in Shreveport, Louisiana, while conducting hearings across the country on voting rights. Noticing the Commission was uncomfortable in the heat of a Shreveport Air Force base, Father Hesburgh made arrangements for the Commission to move their work to Notre Dame's research facility in the president's home state of Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin. While the commissioners relaxed and enjoyed the flight to their new location, Father Hesburgh reportedly sat in the back of the plane drafting resolutions that would come to make up the core of the Commission's report.

After an evening of fishing together at Land O'Lakes in Wisconsin, Father Hesburgh strategically presented the Commission with his 14 resolutions, 13 of which were approved unanimously. After learning of how Father Hesburgh brought the potentially divided Commission together, President Eisenhower remarked, "We've got to put more fishermen on commissions and have more reports written at Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin."

Congress would later go on to enact approximately 70 percent of the Commission's recommendations, including the recommendations in legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Father Hesburgh knew that if we want to improve together, we have to work together.

A likeminded Indiana leader serving in the U.S. Senate in 1964 was Senator Birch Bayh, who was also the father of Evan. On June 19, 1964, exactly one year after President John Kennedy submitted the Civil Rights Act to Congress, Senator Bayh helped the Senate pass the most important and sweeping civil rights legislation since Reconstruction.

The clerk announced the bill had passed 73-27 at 7:40 p.m. According to a copy of a draft press release amongst Bayh's papers at Indiana University, Senator Bayh stated, "Reason replaced emotion. Respect for another's view replaced blind refusal to hear a differing opinion...And when this bill is signed into law, we shall have established the basis for fulfillment of Thomas Jefferson's hope for a nation in which all of the people are treated equally under the law."

Indiana's other U.S. Senator, Vance Hartke, also helped pass the Civil Rights Act out of the Senate on the evening of June 19, 1964. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote Senator Hartke after the vote, saying, "The devotees of civil rights in this country and freedom loving people the world over are greatly indebted to you for your support in passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964. I add to theirs my sincere and heartfelt gratitude."

Senators Bayh and Hartke brought to the U.S. Senate a belief that if we want to improve together, we have to work together.

And another Hoosier who stepped up to help shepherd through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was then-Minority Leader of the House, U.S. Congressman Charles Halleck from Rensselaer, Indiana.

While working to move civil rights legislation forward, President Kennedy and leaders in the House went to Minority Leader Charles Halleck to ask for his help to get the bill through the Judiciary Committee. Congressman Halleck, despite having a small percentage of African-American constituents and despite receiving some criticism, agreed to help.

When the Civil Rights Act came to the Judiciary Committee, some committee members took issue with several of its provisions. After working with other committee members to take out some of the controversial provisions of the bill, Congressman Halleck and others went to work convincing their colleagues to support a more moderate version. In the end, the bill passed the committee with bipartisan support. No one got 100 percent of what they wanted, but thanks to Congressman Halleck, the Judiciary Committee was able to move forward a strong bill that both Republicans and Democrats could be proud of.

In private conversations shortly thereafter, Congressman Halleck admitted that his vocal support for the Civil Rights Act was endangering his position as House Minority Leader, and he would likely lose his position after the next elections because of his support, and he was right. Despite the personal cost and consequences, Congressman Halleck's work to bring Republicans together with Democrats to support the bill was key to his success. He showed that if we want to improve together, we have to work together.

On August 28, 1963, another Indiana Congressman stood behind Martin Luther King Jr. on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and bore witness to a speech that would change the arc of American history. John Brademas came from Mishawaka who grew up hearing stories of the KKK boycotting his father's restaurant simply because he was Greek Orthodox.

These stories, coupled with John's progressive Methodist faith, instilled in him a deep sense of social justice that guided him throughout his career in public service.

Congressman Brademas became an instrumental supporter of civil rights during his twenty-two years in Congress. After witnessing Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech, Congressman Brademas welcomed King to speak in Indiana's 3rd District; years later, Coretta Scott King remembered his work and helped campaign for Brademas' last bid for reelection. A pioneer in federal education policy, Congressman Brademas worked hard to both integrate schools and increase their funding across the entire country.

Minority Leader Halleck and Congressman Brademas were not alone in supporting the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Indiana U.S. Congressmen Madden, Adair, Roush, Roudebush, Bray, Denton, Harvey, and Bruce all supported the Civil Rights Act to help it pass the House with bipartisan support on July 2nd, 1964.

These men knew that if we want to improve together, we have to work together.

The list of Hoosiers involved in fighting for Civil Rights is long, and we should not forget the everyday Hoosiers—the men and women who did their part in their daily lives to broaden opportunities for all Americans.

We may never read their names in history books, or know what the United States would be like if they hadn't done what they did, but what we do know is that they understood that if we truly want to improve our country, to strengthen who we are as a people, we have to all work together. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 wouldn't have passed without leaders who were willing to set aside their differences and work together. No one got everything they wanted, but America got what was so crucially needed. Our country took a monumental leap forward.

This 50th anniversary is a powerful reminder that if we truly want to improve our country, we have to work together. I'm honored to follow in the footsteps of these and many more great Hoosiers who fought for civil rights. I am humbled to have the chance to talk about them today. Thank you, Madam President.