

Module 08: Jackie Robinson, Civil Rights Leader?

Evidence 9: Branch Rickey Speech for the "One Hundred Percent Wrong Club" Banquet

A

Introduction

Below is the transcript of the speech Branch Rickey gave in Atlanta, Georgia, on January 20, 1956, at the "One Hundred Percent Wrong Club" Banquet. The speech was rebroadcast on WERD 860 AM radio. In his speech, Rickey describes the problems he faced in the 1940s when he decided to integrate Major League Baseball. He also discusses events that influenced his decision and factors he thought would reduce racial prejudice. This version of the text reproduces the spelling and punctuation of the original typed transcript.

Document

"Dr. May, gentlemen, -- ladies and gentlemen. My plane doesn't leave until tomorrow at 10:35 A.M. and I haven't a thing to do between now and then but to talk if I get the chance, -- and I feel like talking.

"I asked Mr. Lawson and several others today about my time limit, and I think I was rather insistent upon it, -- and I never did get a time limit and I just concluded that I would talk as long as I pleased. I don't know what time you gentlemen have engagements for tomorrow morning's work but I want to talk about a thing or two.

"I feel a little remote, -- the speaking spot is not as close as I would like it. I should like to feel that each one of you were my guests tonight at my own home, and that I could talk to you just as I would if you were there. And I am going to try to maintain that attitude of mine from my remarks that I am very close to you and whether you may agree with what I have to say or not, you will know that I am trying to be intimately confidential and frank about my remarks.

"Now I could talk at some length, of course, about the problem of hiring a negro ball player after an experience of 25 years in St. Louis, -- where at the end I had no stock at all in the club and no negro was permitted to buy

his way into the grandstand during that entire period of my residence in St. Louis. The only place a negro could witness a ball game in St. Louis was to buy his way into the bleachers, -- the pavilion. With an experience of that kind in back of me, and having had sort of a "bringins up" that was a bit contrary to that regime, -- milieu, in St. Louis, I went to Brooklyn.

"Within the first month in Brooklyn, I approached what I considered the number one problem in the hiring of a negro in professional baseball in this country. Now that is a story and that could be a fairly long speech. Namely, - ownership. Ownership must be in line with you, and I was at that time an employee, not at that time a part owner of the club. And when ownership was passed, then five other things presented themselves. This is not my speech. I am just giving you this as a preliminary. But I want to get out of the road of this thing, and have you say that, -- well, I wish he had talked about that thing.

"The second thing was to find the right man as a player. I spent \$25,000 in all the Caribbean countries, -- in Puerto Rico, Cuba, -- employed two scouts, one for an entire year in Mexico, to find that the greatest negro players were in our own country.

"Then I had to get the right man off the field. I couldn't come with a man to break down a tradition that had in it centered and concentrated all the prejudices of a great many people north and south unless he was good. He must justify himself upon the positive principle of merit. He must be a great player. I must not risk an excuse of trying to do something in the sociological field, or in the race field, just because of sort of a "holier than thou." I must be sure that the man was good on the field, but more dangerous to me, at that time, and even now, is the wrong man off the field. It didn't matter to me so much in choosing a man off the field that he was temperamental, -- righteously subject to resentments. I wanted a man of exceptional intelligence, a man who was able to grasp and control the responsibilities of himself to his race and could carry that load. That was the greatest danger point of all. Really greater than the number five in the whole six.

"Number one was ownership, number two is the man on the field, number three the man off the field. And number four was my public relations, transportation, housing, accommodations here, embarrassments, --

feasibility. That required investigation and therein lies the speech. And the Cradle of Liberty in America was the last place to make and to give us generous considerations.

"And the fifth one was the negro race itself, - over-adulation, mass attendance, dinners, of one kind or another of such a public nature that it would have a tendency to create a solidification of the antagonisms and misunderstandings, -- over-doing it. And I want to tell you that the committee of 32, -- it was called, in Greater New York -- eminent negro citizens, and Judge Kazansky, and my secretary and myself, -- those 32 men organized all eight cities in the National League and did a beautiful job of it. And for two years not one of those things was attempted or done and I never had any embarrassments in Brooklyn. They did have a great trainload of people go to see you play in Montreal and Buffalo and other places, -- and I tried to stop that but I was too late.

"But the greatest danger, the greatest hazard, I felt was the negro race itself. Not people of this crowd any more than you would find antagonisms organized in a white crowd of this caliber either. Those of less understanding, - those of a lower grade of education frankly. And that job was done beautifully under the leadership of a fine judge in New York who became a Chairman of an Executive Committee. That story has never been told. The meetings we had, two years of investigations -- the Presidents of two of the negro colleges, the publisher of the Pittsburgh Courier, a very helpful gentleman he was to me, a professor of sociology in New York University, and a number of others, the LaGuardia Committee on Anti-Discrimination, Tom Dewey's Committee in support of the Quinn-Ives Law in New York state.

"And sixth was the acceptance by his colleagues, -- but his fellow players. And that one I could not handle in advance. The other five over a period of two and one-half years, I worked very hard on it. I felt that the time was ripe, that there wouldn't be any reaction on the part of a great public if a man had superior skill, if he had intelligence and character and had patience and forbearance, and "could take it" as it was said here. I didn't make a mistake there. I have made mistakes, lots of mistakes.

"A man of exceptional courage, and exceptional intelligence, a man of basically fine character, and he can thank his forbearers for a lot of it. He

comes from the right sort of home, and I knew all this, and when somebody, somewhere, thinks in terms of a local athletic club not playing some other club because of the presence on the squad of a man of color. I am thinking that if an exhibition game were to be played in these parts against a team on whose squad was Jackie Robinson, -- even leaving out all of the principle of fair play, all the elements of equality and citizenship, all the economic necessities connected with it, all the violations of the whole form and conceptions of our Government from its beginning up to now, -- leave it all out of the picture, he would be depriving some of the citizens of his own community, some wonderful boys, from seeing an exhibition of skill and technique, and the great, beautiful, graciousness of a slide, the like of which they could not see from any other man in this country. And that's not fair to a local constituency.

"I am wondering, I am compelled to wonder, how it can be. And at the breakfast, recently, when a morning paper's story was being discussed and my flaxen hair daughter said to me, "He surely didn't say it." I thought, yes it is understandable. It is understandable. And when a great United States Senator said to me some few days after that, "Do you know that the headlines in Egypt are terribly embarrassing to our State Department?" And then he told me, in part, a story whose utter truthfulness I have no reason to doubt, about the tremendous humiliation - "The Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave," - "where we are talking about extending to all civilizations, tremendous and beautiful freedoms, and the unavoidable, hypocritical position it puts us in internationally," "How could anybody do it," said my daughter.

"That night we had a family discussion. It lasted a long time. My five daughters were there, mother was there, auntie was there, four sons-in-law were there, - it was Christmas time. And I said to them what I want to say to you tonight. It is understandable that an American with a certain background, certain exposures in the field of education, would represent a more or less a plausible inheritance in regard to the assimilation, the relationship, the acceptance in our current life of the negro.

"The whole thing as a difference between the acceptance in Brazil, for instance, Spanish and Portuguese countries, and the British West Indies and America, a very remarkable thing, but understood by all historians and all writers on the subject. Portugal was the first one to import slaves from

Africa, - took them into Portugal. It was the last one to give up the slave trade. 19,000,000 go into one country alone in South America, - imported slaves over a period of over four hundred years. Now, slavery antedated negro slavery, - oh many years, really thousands of years, before any negro was taken out of Africa. It was an accident, a misfortune, a thing that could be remedied. All slavery throughout the centuries preceded African importation of slaves. It was the result of war, it was a result of debt. There were several things that led to it, but always there was manumission in front of the man. Freedom obtainable. And the laws going back clear beyond Seneca, and Cicero refers to it, - all the way through all those centuries, manumission was a comparatively easy thing. The law of that time, all of it - Plato, the Roman jurisprudence is based upon it, that you can become free. You may be a slave today, - you can be a Moor, you can be a Greek, you can be a man of high intelligence. Slavery was a matter of accident or misfortune. And the Spanish Law, - the Latin nations inherited that law both in its enactment and in its interpretation were favorable to manumission, - making men free. It was not a matter of color at all and the law supported that and the importation of slaves into South America, and all of South America, into Mexico earlier, a few were there subsequently, and in all the Caribbean countries which are now predominant, - all of it came in the line of probable manumission, so that when, say, 90% of all the slaves who had been slaves came to be free in Brazil, for example. Then would come in the other importations and the other men who were slaves. There was a group of qualified free men to take care of the small number, 10%, who were slaves. That was Latin America.

"They had no problems such as we had here in the south following the Civil War, where there was nobody to take care of a great number of free men and no previous free men in the colored race to adapt themselves to those conditions. And, of course, there was disgraceful governmental conduct. Now the difference, miracle that it is, mystery that it is, and yet greed at the bottom of it the slave trade was immensely profitable, - Liverpool was, - I was going to say, was built out of it, and America followed suit on it. And whereas the law that men are equal long before, I say, the negro came into the picture.

"The church has always, and it has been a tendency of the Christian church too to undertake to establish the equality of all men in the sight of God. And to the extent which that prevailed to that extent it became inevitable

that all men should ultimately become free. That was the greatest force in the world, - to give every man moral stature. Of course the Emancipation Proclamation by Lincoln made the southern negro slave free, but it never did make the white man morally free. He remained a slave to his inheritances. And some are even today.

"I believe that a man can play baseball as coming to him from a call from God.

"I was in Cleveland at a dinner when I was a youngster, - just out of college, and a man in Cleveland who was called, editorially in the Cleveland Plain Dealer, on the occasion of his death, the foremost citizen of Cleveland, - George Shurtliffe was his name. I never had met him except at that luncheon that day up there in the cupola of that building, 12 or 13 gentlemen around the table, and I was asked to take a job, - a certain job that I had never thought about taking. And I didn't feel that I was qualified for the job, and I didn't no whether I wanted it, - I was quite ill at ease about it, but the strengthened force of the men who were asking me to take it was influential with me. And we had this dinner and Mr. Shurtliffe was asked to come.

"He was identified with the organization in some capacity, and when we had just about finished the meal, - I was sitting the second one on the left side of the table and he was down yonder at the end, he said to me, "Branch," he said, "do you believe in the call of God?" No, his first question was, - "if you thought God wanted you to do something would you do it?"

"I said, "if I knew what God wanted me to do, I think any boy would."

He said, "do you believe in the call of God?" I didn't answer.

He said, "do you know what the call of God is?"

"I said, "I don't know that I do," but I said, "I don't think it is a little bird that comes and sits on your ear and whispers and says to you go do this."

"He said, "I think you are right."

"Well," I said, "Bishop Basford said that to me and it's not original," but I said, "I don't. . . ."

"He said, "would you like to know what I think it is?"

"And I said, "I would," because he was a distinguished man.

"He said that the first thing in the call of God is aptitude. God doesn't want any man to do something that he can't do. He made me define the word in front of those gentlemen.

"He said, the second thing in the call of God is the advice of his friends, and he made me tell him all my friends and we got down from the 8,000 people that had seen that professional football game that fall where I had made a touchdown, - I was a great big fellow, and I couldn't name all those 8,000. I thought they were all my friends. They gave nine rahs with my name on the end of it and it got down to the place where I named my father and mother and then the girl that I had announced I was going to marry. He accepted her. And that made two and then he took a professor in school after questioning me about it. And then he took a boyhood friend that I had grown up with way down in the hills of southern Ohio, - a country boy. He said, no man has more than a handful of real friends under adversity. He said, they are God's angels -- go talk to them. God speaks to men through his friends. Be careful who your friends are. The second thing he said.

"And the third thing, he said, was opportunity. He said, when you are prepared to do something and your friends all tell you that you should do it and then the chance comes to do it, he said, that's where God shows His face. Now, he said to me, and I didn't quite know what the word meant when he said it. And he said there may be some sophistry about that. But whether there was or not, I have used it often. And I have thought about it in connection with ball players. What should they be doing in this thing that emphasizes the physical over the mental or spiritual or whatnot. And what are the weaknesses of opportunity in the field? What are the great chances for moral deterioration on the part of great men who go into this thing where they have been under hours of labor previously and now have leisure time, - the most damnable thing in the world.

"Leisure in the hands of the man who has no creativeness, - lots of young men don't have it. That thing that can write great symphonies, that can write great tragedies in this use of time. I have often wondered where God may come into the picture. There are some boys who shouldn't be playing ball. This chap, and others, - it's a wonderful thing to have a family

background and to have something you can hold on to that is basic and firm and strong.

"Character is a great thing to have in an athlete, a team. It's a great thing. And when I wonder if there is any condonation, any explanation, anything that can be done to make an extenuating circumstance out of something that violates the right of a part of our citizenship throughout the country when I know that the Man of 1900 years ago spent His life and died for the sake of freedom, - the right to come, to go, to see, to think, to believe, to act. It is to be understood, but it is too profoundly regretted.

"Education is a slow process. It may solve it. It is inevitable that this thing comes to fruition. Too many forces are working fast. This so called little Robinson, - we call it the "Robinson Experiment," - tremendous as it will be for Jackie to have so placed himself in relation not only to his own people in this country, but to his whole generation and to all America that he will leave the mark of fine sportsmanship and fine character. That is something that he must guard carefully. He has a responsibility there.

"Frank Tannenbaum, in his book on Slave and Citizen, - he is a professor of Latin American history in Columbia University, points out, - I think it is the bible on the subject - it really is. I'm not sure, I'm not sure that legislators ought to drive against a prominent and very antagonistic minority. I'm not sure that they should drive F.E.C. too fast too far. I'm not sure that the 18th Amendment might repeat itself. That you would have an organization of glued antagonisms that would be able to delay the solution of a problem that is now in my judgment fast being solved, and when you once gain an eminence you do not have to recede from it. The educational process is something.

"Four things, says Tannenbaum, is solving this question, with an unrealized rapidity. First, - proximity. Clay Hopper, Jackie's first manager. I've never told it in public. I've never allowed it to be printed if I could help it, took me by the lapels of my coat as he sat there sweating in his underclothes watching a game over on the inside park at Daytona Beach. And this boy had made a great play in the fourth inning and I had remarked about it and the two of us sitting there together, and this boy coming from - I shouldn't have given his name, - forget the name and I will tell you the story. I'll deny that he ever said it. He took me by the front of my coat when in the

seventh inning Jackie made one of those tremendous remarkable plays that very few people can make, - went toward first base, made a slide, stabbed the ball, came with it in his left hand glove and as he turned with the body control that's almost inconceivable and cut off the runner at second base on a force play. I took Clay and I put my hand on his shoulder and I said, "Did you ever see a play to beat it?"

"Now this fellow comes from Greenwood, Mississippi. And he would forgive me, I am sure, because of the magnificent way that he came through on it. He took me and shook me and his face that far from me and he said, "do you really think that a 'nigger' is a human being, Mr. Rickey?" That's what he said. That's what that fellow said. I have never answered him until this minute.

"And six months later he came into my office after the year at Montreal when he was this boy's manager. He didn't want him to be sent to him. And he said to me, "I want to take back what I said to you last spring." He said, "I'm ashamed of it." "Now," he said, "you may have plans for him to be on your club," - and he was, "but," he said, "if you don't have plans to have him on the Brooklyn club," he said, "I would like to have him back in Montreal." And then he told me that he was not only a great ball player good enough for Brooklyn, but he said that he was a fine gentleman. Proximity. Proximity, says Tannenbaum, will solve this thing if you can have enough of it. But that is a limited thing, you see.

"And the second thing, says Tannenbaum, is the cultural inter-twining through the arts, through literature, through painting, through singing, through the professions, where you stabbed through the horizontal strata of social makeup, and you make vertical thrusts in that cultural inter-twining. That inevitably will help solve this problem, - and he believes with rapidity.

"And third, the existence in our democracy here of a middle class, the middle class in Great Britain, - the middle class in probably every country, I think, that makes secure, if anything does, a democracy such as we know. This group here like this, - these groups throughout America of all colors. That existence in this country will bring it about surely and faster than people know.

"And fourth, the recognition of the moral stature of all men, that all humans are equal. This thing of freedom has been bought at a great price. That all

men are equal in the sight of God. That all law must recognize that men are equal, - all humans are equal by nature. The same pains, and the same joys, and in our country the same food, the same dress, the same religion, the same language, the same everything. And perhaps quite as questionable an ancestry civically in this country on the part of the black men as we can trace many of the forbearers in the white race of the other settlers of this country.

"Gentlemen, it is inconceivable to me that in view of domestic tranquility and home understanding that anywhere, anytime, anybody, can question the right of citizens of this country for equal economic opportunity under the law. How can it be. And how can anyone in official authority, where more attention is given to remarks than would come from an ordinary civilian, be so unremindful of his country's relationship that he could bring us into [?] and disgrace. internationally.

"These four things I mention will work, I think, in due time with a sureness that will make possibly the very next generation wonder and look back, as I said that you quoted me in Cincinnati, I had forgotten that I had ever said it look back with incredulity upon everything that was a problem to us today in this country, and will wonder what the issue was all about. I am completely color-blind. I know that America is, - it's been proven Jackie, - is more interested in the grace of a man's swing, in the dexterity of his cutting a base, and his speed afoot, in his scientific body control, in his excellence as a competitor on the field, - America, wide and broad, and in Atlanta, and in Georgia, will become instantly more interested in those marvelous, beautiful qualities than they are in the pigmentation of a man's skin, or indeed in the last syllable of his name. Men are coming to be regarded of value based upon their merits, and God hasten the day when Governors of our States will become sufficiently educated that they will respond to those views."

Ladies and Gentlemen, you have just heard a rebroadcast of the 100% Wrong Club's Banquet, held at the Walnut Room of the Matahara Apartments and tape recorded by Station WERD for presentation at this time.

This is Atlanta's voice of progress, WERD, 860 on your dial. The time in Atlanta is 5:00 o'clock and it is time for "Sounds" from the 860 spot.

Source:

Branch Rickey Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division.