

Civil Rights in America: Then and Now*

An Interview with
William B. Allen & Clarence Thomas
Interviewer: Angela Grimm

On Jan. 16, the United States honors the memory of the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., the acknowledged leader of the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s. As a result of the moral arguments and the direct action of the civil rights movement, the federal government enacted laws to protect and promote the civil rights of blacks and other minorities. In order to monitor enforcement of these laws, two independent federal agencies were established: the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC).

CATHOLIC TWIN CIRCLE spoke recently with the chairmen of these two commissions about the past, present and future of the civil rights movement and of blacks in America. Clarence Thomas, a practicing lawyer until appointed by Ronald Reagan is chairman of the EEOC. William Allen, a professor of government at Claremont Graduate School, serves as chairman of the Civil Rights Commission. Both men will remain on their respective commissions in George Bush's administration.

CATHOLIC TWIN CIRCLE: *For those who were born in the last 30 years, it is sometimes hard to appreciate what the civil rights movement is really about. Can you give some context, some history of the situation of blacks in this country?*

Clarence Thomas: It's very coincidental how close together Bill and I grew up—within 100 miles of each other. [Allen in northern Florida, Thomas in southern Georgia.] And racism and discrimination was really the way life was when we were young adults. Out in the country where Bill grew up, it was probably worse than where I was, because I was in the city.

There were rules back then: You did not walk on the side of the road late at night; if you saw a car coming down the road, you'd have to get into the bushes and hide; you didn't go to certain parks; you didn't even *dare* go by a swimming pool.

CTC: *Because groups of white kids out looking for trouble might . . .*

William Allen: Because you didn't want to disappoint certain expectations. The reaction when you don't live up to people's [negative] expectations is often violent.

Let me tell you a story that illustrates how deeply ingrained these attitudes and fears were. When I was 15 or 16 years old, I was working as a dishwasher in a restaurant at the beach—this was the white beach, there were two beaches. Attached to the restaurant was a concession stand that was being run by a strikingly beautiful young woman. Back in the stock room, which the concession stand shared with the restaurant, we all chatted and were friendly, and this girl and I became pretty good friends.

One day, I walked into the drugstore downtown. There at the lunch counter—which was, of course, segregated in the late '50s—this young woman was sitting with some of her friends. She happened to see me and she started waving energetically and saying, “Hi, William!” I nearly crawled beneath the floor. I could have been killed for that! I didn't have to do or say anything. That's how we grew up. I apologized to her afterward for not being more friendly, but explained that that was the reality of life.

CTC: *Was that kind of racial violence so common where you grew up?*

Allen: It's not as if these things happened every day, but when they did happen they were sufficiently dramatic that they lived with us forever.

I've always believed, by the way, that what changed our country more than anything else was the murder of Emmet Till in Alabama in 1954. Not many people remember it now. Emmet Till was a young black man who was involved in some very innocent relationship with a white woman. I don't remember exactly what—he winked or he whistled.

In any case, he was lynched on account of it, and the country reacted for the first time. There was outrage and moral revulsion about this lynching, and I've always believed that this, more than anything else, set us on the road to the civil rights movement. People had finally seen that you just can't live like this and be civilized.

CTC: *Do you think that this kind of racism, and the fear that it caused in blacks, especially black men, is a thing of the past now?*

Allen: In the broad sense, yes. I go home now to Florida and young people live entirely differently than when I was growing up.

Thomas: I think there are *individuals* today who feel as strongly racist as they ever did. The difference is that now they don't have the overall moral sanction of society.

Allen: They are scorned. Also, they don't have the sanction of government. These are the people who used to be considered the scourge of society, especially in the South. There are only a few of them left, but people are always talking about the so-called rednecks. I almost begin to feel sorry for them, because they are being used by people to build up their own power. They can always scare up a bit of indignation over this [crude bigotry], but that's not really where the problem is.

CTC: *What about the neo-Nazi hate groups, such as the skinheads, that are in the news these days—do they represent a growing trend of racism?*

Allen: It's hard to say because we don't know numbers, but, of course, it would be a problem if this kind of activity grew significantly. But I think this problem is still small enough that we should be focusing on the main questions.

Thomas: Of course, you never want hate groups in your society—whether it’s [anti-Semitic Louis] Farrakhan or the skinheads. But you don’t see the skinheads on the news programs, and you don’t see any politicians embracing skinheads and surviving. I will scare me when people begin to say, “Well, I can understand where the skinheads are coming from,” when they begin to get some moral sanction from our larger institutions.

CTC: *Such as getting chairs at universities?*

Thomas: Universities, though, have lost their intellectual and moral leadership in our society. I don’t look to the universities for anything.

CTC: *Where do you look for that leadership?*

Thomas: I’ll be honest with you—sometimes I wonder. Even the churches have become so humanistic. The minister at the church I used to go to preached the stuff he got from new age cults! But the churches *should* be the source of moral leadership.

Allen: But I don’t think they can be anymore. Even without the influence of cults, mainline Protestantism has been shot through with humanistic philosophy for years.

CTC: *Speaking of moral leadership, Professor Allen, you recently testified on the question of school-based health clinics that hand out contraceptives and contraceptive information. What is the issue here that involves civil rights?*

Allen: The issue is that the supporters of these clinics routinely locate the sex-education programs in minority communities—black and Hispanic, though mostly black.

I’m a simple fellow—I just like to put one and one together. And I just don’t believe that if you care about illegitimate births you should spend all your time talking to young black girls. In absolute terms, the number of illegitimate births among whites is very large, more than the number among black women. Why don’t we care about those women, too? So, you begin to think that maybe something else is motivating those who support these clinics, that they are not just concerned with the problem of illegitimacy.

CTC: *But I think they would argue that the rate of illegitimacy and certainly other social ills, such as crime, tends to be higher among minorities. Doesn’t this fact justify concentrating efforts in the black community?*

Allen: The important question is how do you look at the problem. I understand the need for generalization. But I don’t think you ought to go beyond that to pretend that the problem is just *black* illegitimacy. The problem is illegitimacy. And if society at large were capable of sustaining the moral tone that condemns illegitimacy, it would be easier to sustain it in the black community. You have to remember that we are doing things in our society that foster illegitimacy.

CTC: *Especially in the black community?*

Allen: Well, we're applying something to the black community that works very much like a magnifying glass does with sunlight. What we foster in society in general we foster more intensely in the black community. The people that I call policy mongers are looking at, and working on and "handling" American blacks in a way that will intensify the same perverse incentives and opinions that are operating in the society at large.

It's not that anyone *intends* to intensify these pernicious tendencies. But the poverty programs and other governmental agencies, which are usually focused on blacks, are generally based on the humanistic principles we were talking about. So, the blacks affected by these programs don't just get this philosophy and its consequences in the loose, dispersed way that everyone else does—they get it in a concentrated dose. The whole welfare system works that way, and therefore, I think, you find that the problems [related to morality] are greater among blacks.

Thomas: Every time someone has a new idea to engineer society, they have to go out and find some guinea pigs. It's almost as if they experiment. And if you go back and look at the whole inner-city effort in the '60s on crime and poverty, it was almost entirely limited to blacks and they were the examples. I don't know if I can say that that resulted in all of the concentration of problems we are seeing now, but it's very interesting that somehow it was always the blacks [that had to be changed].

CTC: *Why do you think that is? Is it a kind of concealed racism or is it misguided compassion born out of guilt over the past?*

Thomas: I don't believe it's real guilt. I think that's just another name for racism. I think it's very interesting that some white people—especially well-to-do whites—continue to go through a sort of self-flagellation for what they or their forefather did wrong.

Allen: I don't buy the guilt argument, either. People who feel real guilt want to punish themselves. But the people we are talking about want to punish other people, and they want to be in charge. Now, if their guilt led them to surrender to someone else, then I would believe that they actually felt guilt.

CTC: *The civil rights movement has achieved such a status in the moral consciousness of Americans that many groups other than minorities are trying to claim for themselves the "legacy" of the civil rights movement. One of these is the direct-action, civil disobedience wing of the pro-life movement known as Operation Rescue. Do you think that these people make a valid comparison between themselves and the civil rights activists of the '60s?*

Allen: Yes, I think they do. In fact, I think the question of abortion is really a more profound one than civil rights. In abortion, we are talking not just about the civil rights of individual, but about the intrinsic right to life of human beings. It's a question that comes before all others. But, unfortunately, the Civil Rights Commission is forbidden by Congress to speak on abortion.

CTC: *However, I understand that the Civil Rights Commission is involved with the rights of so-called Baby Does—infants born with severe handicaps whose right to life is sometimes questioned?*

Allen: Yes, our report on the Baby Doe issue is coming up now, and I think it will be a contribution to the debate. There will be recommendations in it for legislation to protect handicapped infants. But we'll have to see what the reaction is. I'm not sanguine about the effect the recommendations will have.

CTC: *What about people on the left who are trying to expand the definition of civil rights to include homosexual rights?*

Allen: They are still fighting, and they'll be back during the new year trying to get a sexual preference claim into some legislation. They've been trying to do it for years, and they're not going to give up. And unless the present direction of things changes, I would say they are getting closer every year.

CTC: *Why would that be wrong?*

Allen: What's the point? When you say sexual preference, what do you mean? Do you mean bestiality, pederasty? When you look at the language they use, you realize the problem they have trying to articulate and define their group is the very reason why it shouldn't be considered a special category. They can't even come up with language to define just what they would consider "normal" homosexual practice.

Thomas: And they have a range of "normalcy."

Allen: Exactly. It's insane, really. Homosexuals have the same rights everyone else does in this society.

CTC: *But so do blacks, and we consider the civil rights movement necessary for them.*

Allen: That's because there were laws specifically aimed against black people because they were black that sought to restrain their enjoyment of those rights. There are no such laws against homosexuals. Laws against sodomy are not aimed at homosexuals. They are aimed at sodomy, an action, a practice. Black people will also be punished under sodomy laws.

CTC: *These are the very last days of the Reagan administration, though both of you will continue in your posts. Reagan and his appointees have gained a reputation in the press as being soft on civil rights. How would you defend your record?*

Thomas: In no year in the history of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has any commission other than ours filed more than 500 cases in a year. We've done that three years consecutively. We have, in my tenure, collected almost a billion dollars in relief for charging parties. We now have personal computers, a central data system and an investigative system. In every category you can name, we have excelled our predecessors.

But we have been hampered by Congress, which, every year, guts the budget for EEOC that the president thinks will get the job done. It's very cynical: They just don't want the EEOC to be successful during a Republican administration.

CTC: *What about the record of the Civil Rights Commission?*

Allen: We're a different story. The political struggle on the Civil Rights Commission was won by the liberals. What the commission has contributed is the debate that Clarence Pendleton [Allen's immediate predecessor, who died last summer] carried on. He made the question of business set-asides for minorities, affirmative action and quotas an issue on the national agenda that could not be ignored. Pendleton did that single-handedly.

But the commission itself in all those years accomplished very little. They couldn't because Congress had decided to stifle it. They cut the budget 70 percent, they restructured the commission so that it is no longer appointed by the president exclusively, but half by the president and half by Congress. And they continually practice micro-management and manipulation of the press so that the commission cannot be effective.

CTC: *What is the future of the civil rights movement? Will it grow?*

Thomas: I don't think so.

CTC: *Is that because most of the objectives have been achieved?*

Thomas: No! It's because the issues are much tougher now. Look at the issues now. It's not desegregating a lunch counter or a bus. There's no longer a bigot on every street corner, and the Klan doesn't march through downtown every other day. Those issues were easy to dramatize. The issues today are much harder—long-term issues like education, family . . .

CTC: *It's not as easy to identify the bad guys?*

Allen: We're at a threshold. You can no longer talk about civil rights in a way that allows you to set people off into groups. We've exhausted the potential for those tactics, and, now, we have to find a way to bring people together. And that's hard. The people who are used to doing the old routine of dividing aren't as useful today. Today, we have to understand civil rights as what we all have in common, not what separates us.

* Published in *Catholic Twin Circle* 25 (January 15, 1989): 9-12, 16.