The Legacy of Rosa Parks

Remarks by Chief of Mission Michael Parmly
October 23, 2006

Thank you all for joining us in celebrating the life and legacy of a truly iconic figure known as the "Mother of the American Civil Rights Movement," Rosa Parks, on the one year anniversary of her death.

A year ago, 4000 mourners gathered at the Greater Grace Temple in Detroit, Michigan for the funeral of Rosa Parks – political and civil rights leaders, religious leaders, celebrities and ordinary people all came to honor her. Some waited for hours to pay tribute to her. Who was Rosa Parks? And what had she done to so inspire the most important movement for social change in 20th century America?

Rosa Parks never held public office, nor was she a wealthy woman. She was a simple African-American seamstress living in Montgomery, Alabama, in the heart of the segregated South in the 1950s. This was a difficult time for African-Americans in the South subjugated under a system of racial apartheid -- denied their voting rights, barred from restaurants, and even forbidden to drink from same water fountains as whites. Racial segregation extended to the public transportation system where blacks were separated from whites on public buses. Lynch mobs and brutal murders such as that of a black teenager, who had dared to whistle at a white woman in neighboring Mississippi in August 1955, were not uncommon.

Rosa Parks lived in a world of injustice and she had had enough. She became a civil rights activist in the early 1950s and was the first female member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in Montgomery. On December 1, 1955 Parks boarded a crowded public bus. The bus driver demanded that she give up her seat to accommodate white passengers. She refused. When he threatened to call police and have her arrested, she answered simply, "You may do that."

Her arrest sparked a 381-day boycott of the Montgomery bus system led by Rev. Marin Luther King, Jr., that ended when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled Montgomery's segregation policy unconstitutional in 1956. Her simple act launched a massive movement of civil disobedience, joined by many white Americans, against racial discrimination.

Rosa Parks was a humble woman, a single individual, whose personal dignity and defiance transformed a nation.

Hers was a simple message, one that inspired the American Civil Rights Movement 60 years ago, and one that still resonates today.

A few days ago the Nobel Prize Committee awarded the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize to another champion of social justice Muhammed Yunis, the founder of Grameen Bank, an organization which has provided micro-credit loans to 2.2 million families in 22 developing countries. The citation from the prize committee read:

"Every single individual on earth has both the potential and the right to live a decent life."

This too was the message of Rosa Parks, and other American Civil Rights leaders. It is a universal message for equality and social justice.

Following the presentation of the documentary “Mighty Times” we are privileged to have with us this evening via video conference from Miami a prominent civil rights leader, James Meredeth.

On October 1, 1962, James Meredeth became the first black student at the University of Mississippi. The governor of that state opposed his enrollment, which sparked violent riots on campus and clashes with federal U.S. Marshals sent by President John F. Kennedy. Meredith graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1963. He led a civil rights march, “The March against Fear” in 1966 and was wounded by a sniper in June of that year. He received a law degree from Columbia University in 1968 and is the author of several memoirs and books on his experience as a civil rights activist.