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POTUS Article for Ebony Magazine

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draft, friday, 5 p.m.

President William Jefferson Clinton

Article on Race Relations

Ebony Magazine

September 13, 1995

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I am honored to join in congratulating my friend John Johnson, the Johnson family and Ebony on 50 years of helping to change our nation.

In its first half century, Ebony has through word, image and example unleashed an awareness and pride about the role of African Americans as full partners in our society. This great magazine has helped open a new world by uplifting so many of our people.

I was born several months after the debut of Ebony, so in many ways I am a product of the generation and the world that it helped to change.

I was blessed to be born into a family that understood that our world needed to change. Where I grew up, schools, movie houses and restrooms were segregated. My grandparents, who helped raise me, were poor, Southern and white but pro-civil rights. My grandfather ran a grocery store in Hope, Arkansas, and most of his customers were black, poor, working people. As a child in that store I saw that people of different races could treat each other with respect and dignity.

I learned early on that segregation and discrimination of any kind weighed down all of us. As a son of the South, I know how impoverished we can be socially and spiritually when we deny the basic rights of citizenship to some of our people and when we separate our people from each other.

I was 11 years old when Federal troops were called in to Little Rock to allow nine brave teenagers to desegregate Central High School. But progress was slow. My own high school was not desegregated by the time I graduated.

I remember watching television as Martin Luther King, speaking under the gaze of Abraham Lincoln on the steps of his memorial, told us of his dream that one day his own four children and all our children would be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. Many Americans, including myself, were overcome with the yearning for simple justice in Dr. King's message. He awakened our nation's conscience.

Our nation has changed a great deal since then, because the American people made a conscious effort to change. Some put their lives on the line to make us better and some lost their lives. The battle for civil rights was fought in our courts, our government, our communities and our homes, but the greatest victories took place in the hearts and minds of Americans.

Throughout it all, Ebony was there to chronicle and interpret these historic moments -- the tragedies, the triumphs and the miracles. In its pages, we met a courageous woman named Rosa Parks, we grieved at the death of Dr. King, we rejoiced at the state visit of President Nelson Mandela. Ebony challenged us to never lose sight of the human dimension in all that we do in our nation.

In July, it was my privilege to visit our National Archives Building and talk about affirmative action. Behind me were the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the documents that hold the principles of our democracy and our purpose as a people. Before me, in the audience, were top officials of our government, the Congress, the White House, and the Cabinet, and leaders in education, business and our communities. They were men and women of all colors.

On one side were our ideals as a nation, and on the other, a view of the diverse face of America that was not possible even a generation ago. Affirmative action is helping that face emerge from the shadows, helping us to live truer to the ideals our Founders set down.

I believe that we should mend, not end affirmative action, because even with all our progress, the overwhelming evidence is that it is necessary to combat lingering discrimination. At the

same time, I want affirmative action to remain consistent with our ideals of personal responsibility and merit. That means no quotas, no discrimination of any kind and no preferences for unqualified individuals.

All this is consistent with the fairness I have always tried to live by and with my deep belief in the overriding principle of affirmative action -- equal opportunity for all our people.

At the bottom of it all, it's the dream of the possibilities that come with opportunity that has built up America. As a people, we must always uphold our American dream, and as your President, I will always defend it.

Throughout my public career, I have hired the best people I could find while seeking out the diversity that is our great American strength. I have hired record numbers of African-Americans to work with me -- first as Attorney General, then as Governor of Arkansas. And now, as President, I am proud to have the most diverse administration in history, with more African-Americans in my Cabinet, agencies and staff than any President before me. I've nominated more African-Americans to the Federal bench than the previous three Presidents combined, and more of my nominees have received the highest rating given by the American Bar Association, proving that diversity and quality can go hand in hand.

I also believe that equal opportunity depends on a commitment to provide all our people the tools they need to help them reach their greatest potential. Head Start and child immunization programs are a part of that. So are the investments we have made to improve education and to make college loans more affordable and to train our people for high-wage jobs. By creating empowerment zones to the inner-cities, we are generating jobs and helping our urban communities. We have encouraged African-American entrepreneurship by strengthening minority business programs.

Building opportunity also means helping to keep our children safe and our families together. With the Brady Bill restrictions on handgun purchases and our ban on assault weapons, we have been addressing a plague of violence that has threatened lives and futures in the African-American community.

The America of our ideals is one where every child can wish to become an astronaut, a doctor, a teacher, a general or a business owner -- because there are role models and positive avenues of opportunity for all our children.

I have known many people who have realized their American dream despite great adversity, but the example of John Johnson's struggle and triumph is extraordinary. It is a long way from an impoverished beginning in the native state we share, Arkansas, to

the pinnacle of publishing. John Johnson is an inspiration to all Americans.

Fifty years ago, with Ebony, his dream came alive. I thank him for sharing his dream with America and I wish him and Ebony many more years of success.