

Benjamin L. Hooks, Continuing the Struggle

Even with the impressive economic, social, and political gains which African Americans had achieved by the early 1970s, civil rights leaders continued to press for change. One of the most vocal was Benjamin L. Hooks (1925–), who followed Roy Wilkins as executive director of the NAACP from 1977 to 1993. During the 1980s, he was a major critic of the Reagan administration's avoidance of important racial questions and trimming of major social programs, including those designed to aid the poor. In the following remarks, which are excerpted from an address to the annual national gathering of the NAACP in New Orleans, Hooks offers a challenge to his fellow African Americans to continue the struggle for racial justice.*

I come humbled by the knowledge that as we assemble in this convention center, we stand on the shoulders of many giants who put their lives on the line in order that the racial progress we now enjoy could be made. We pay tribute to Medgar Evers who, 20 years ago on June 12, was cut down by an assassin's bullet. Medgar realized better than most that to stand up for justice in Mississippi was a dangerous and potentially fatal endeavor. Yet he stood boldly and tall, declaring to the world that it was better to die in dignity for a just cause than to live on one's knees as a supplicant. . . .

Today there are more elected black public officials in the State of Mississippi than in any state in the nation. Today, the face of race relations has been drastically altered by the surgical knife of self-denial and selfsacrifice by the thousands of men and women who met in churches off lonely roads [and] assembled around diningroom tables of shacks and shanties and who marched until [racist governors] gave way to elected officials who helped bring this state into the twentieth century. *Life is a struggle. . . .*

So it should come as no surprise that even though slavery has been officially over for more than 118 years, we still find ourselves struggling against slavery under new guises: racial discrimination in this country, apartheid and colonialism abroad. But as far back as we can read recorded history, life for every group has been a struggle. . . .

Here in America, from the *Mayflower* at Plymouth Rock to the men of war at Jamestown, life for the earliest settlers and their first slaves has been a struggle.

* Benjamin L. Hooks, "Struggle On!," *Crisis* 90 (August-September 1983).

Today, as our 74th Annual Convention assembles in this historic city, a city where blacks fought alongside Andrew Jackson . . . we find ourselves in a race in the struggle for survival.

One out of every three blacks in the country is officially listed below the poverty line.

One out of five black adults is unemployed. . . .

Black infant mortality is twice as high as that of whites. . . .

I cite these figures to highlight the fact that although we have made tremendous progress in the area of race relations, we still have a long way to go; and contrary to the glib assertions of the present Administration [of Ronald Reagan], much remains to be done if blacks are to share in the economic wealth and prosperity of this nation.

Yes, my friends, we are in the midst of a fierce struggle, one that becomes more difficult with the passing of each day. . . .

Anyone who has an appreciation for history should be cognizant of the fact that nations and great civilizations were not destroyed from without, but from within. When hopes are blasted, when expectations are doomed, when respect for government is shattered by the disparate treatment of groups of individuals; when people are left out—then a social order is doomed to destruction. Yes, social and economic destruction from within, not foreign aggressors, constitutes the greatest threat to our system of government. . . .

My brothers and sisters, as I close tonight, I want you to know that the struggle we will face through the remaining period of the '80s and on through the twenty-first century will not be an easy one. It is fraught with pitfalls and plagued with setbacks, but we as a people have developed a resiliency which has made it possible for us to survive slavery and various discrimination. We must never tire nor become frustrated. . . . We must transform stumbling blocks into stepping stones and march on with the determination that we will make America a better nation for all.