



# THE ANTI-POVERTY SOLDIER

By Clarence Hightower, Ph.D.



Community Action

## Contested law presents clear and present threat to America's democracy

August 3, 2017 | Vol. 4 No. 31

*Individual rights are not subject to a public vote; a majority has no right to vote away the rights of a minority; the political function of rights is precisely to protect minorities from oppression by majorities (and the smallest minority on earth is the individual).*

– Ayn Rand

*For this nation to remain true to its principles, we cannot allow any American's vote to be denied, diluted, or defiled. The right to vote is the crown jewel of American liberties, and we will not see its luster diminished.*

– President Ronald Reagan

*The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.*

– President Lyndon B. Johnson

*...The true way and the easiest way is to make our government entirely consistent with itself and give every loyal citizen the elective franchise.*

– Frederick Douglass

*Voting is the right on which all other rights depend.*

– Thomas Paine

Before I proceed, please forgive the seemingly excessive number of quotes I have cited. I sincerely believe, however, that they are all particularly germane to the topic of this column. What I find particularly interesting about them, is that they represent extreme ends of the political spectrum across three centuries, and include two statements from abolitionists one of which has been called "The father of the American Revolution." And in spite of the ideological differences shared by these individuals, their sentiments in this particular arena are the same.

Although this rhetoric highlights some of our nation's most lofty principles, it goes without saying that America has not always lived up to these principles regardless of when they were spoken or written. Consider the extermination and forced relocation of America's indigenous population, the institution of chattel slavery, the eras of Reconstruction and Jim Crow, Exclusion and Internment Camps, and the Civil Rights and Women's Suffrage movements. For the better part of our history, American citizens have been denied basic human rights including the right to vote.

Some point out, quite convincingly, that even after the passage of landmark decisions such as *Brown v. The Board of Education* or The Civil Rights Act of 1964, American democracy has left millions upon millions behind. Far too many Americans are still subject to poverty, housing and employment discrimination, substandard schools, inadequate healthcare, segregated neighborhoods, and environmental racism and classism. Still, we must remember that people fought, bled, and died for the right to be free, the right to education, the right to work, and the right to vote.

In 2013, almost 50 years after the first Selma to Montgomery march, which became known as Bloody Sunday (and the subsequent passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled Section 4(b) of the Voting Rights Act as unconstitutional. Writing for *Newsweek*, Jamal Hagler of the Center for American Progress contends that this 5 to 4 decision “struck a devastating blow to voting rights, reducing federal oversight of elections and giving rise to a new era of voter suppression.”

Moreover, as several others reveal, the movement to impede voting rights has been ongoing for the last several years. According to the NYU Brennan Center for Justice more than 40 states have proposed restrictive voting laws since the 2010 election. And, 24 of these states, which include Iowa, Wisconsin, and Ohio, have passed new voting restrictions such as photo ID laws, proof of citizenship requirements, and limited registration and early voting periods.

While some have taken to the notion, without any evidence mind you, that there was rampant voter fraud during the 2016 elections, journalist Ari Berman presents an alternate view noting that “this was the first presidential election in 50 years without the full protections of the Voting Rights Act.”

If that is not depressing enough, a plan by the state of Ohio to permanently remove tens of thousands of registered voters from its electoral rolls, which was previously cited as unconstitutional by the U.S. Court of Appeals, all of a sudden has the support of the U.S. Justice Department. This attempt to purge voters from its rolls is based solely on whether or not the individual has cast a ballot in the last two years.

The Supreme Court has agreed to hear the State of Ohio’s appeal, which critics say is specifically designed to target people of color and the poor. A statement from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund argues that “The DOJ’s interpretation of federal law would leave Americans vulnerable to getting purged from the voter rolls, dispossessing millions of a fundamental right simply because they did not exercise it.” President of the Lawyers Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, Kristen Clarke, soberly adds that “The Justice Department’s latest action opens the door for wide-scale and unlawful purging of the voter registration rolls across our country.”

Sure, our American democracy isn’t – nor has ever been – perfect. But these latest trends bare the scent of something far worse.

*Clarence Hightower is the Executive Director of Community Action Partnership of Ramsey & Washington Counties. Dr. Hightower holds a Ph.D. in urban higher education from Jackson State University. He welcomes reader responses to 450 Syndicate Street North, St. Paul, MN 55104*