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TRIBUTE TO PROFESSOR BILL LEATHERBERRY

Louis Stokes[†]

It was just over forty years ago that Bill Leatherberry and I met. I hired him to be my Legislative Aide in my Congressional office in Washington, D.C. I had just come to Congress in 1969. My election had made me the first black person in Ohio ever elected to the United States Congress. In 1970, I became one of the founders of the Congressional Black Caucus, the thirteen African American members of Congress who organized themselves as a group to strategize and legislate on behalf of minorities, the poor, disadvantaged, and underrepresented in America. This meant that my role in Congress required me to have a staff that was philosophically and ideologically in sync with my responsibilities and objectives. This was particularly true in the case of my legislative staff. In searching for such persons, I was fortunate to interview and hire such an individual in the person of Bill Leatherberry. Not only did he have the academic qualifications I was looking for in a Legislative Aide, but he also had the desire to be involved in the quest for social justice and economic equality that was at the top of my agenda. It was not going to be easy because it meant we were going to be making waves and upsetting the regular order of how things had been done. This included challenging those in Congress as well as Presidents of the United States. This was a continuation of the civil rights movement of the sixties, and Bill Leatherberry was committed to being involved in helping to change a nation.

One of the first battles in which the Congressional Black Caucus became involved was an attempt to meet with President Richard Nixon over his inflammatory race-baiting rhetoric and insensitivity toward the adverse effects his programs were having on the black and poor citizens of our nation. It was an everyday task to legislatively oppose his budget cuts and elimination of programs of the War on Poverty that had begun to improve the quality of life for blacks and other minorities. It was here that the talents of Bill Leatherberry enabled me to effectively engage in this battle. After our boycott of President Nixon's "State of the Union" appearance in Congress, and the attendant media notice given to it around the world, the President agreed to meet with the Congressional Black Caucus. When we met with him and presented to him a legislative document containing sixty recommendations addressing "the State of the Black

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Nation,” Bill Leatherberry’s legislative work on my behalf was a part of that historic document.

Another of our legislative priorities was the extension of programs run by the Office of Economic Equality—the implementing agency of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964.¹ We were also involved in advocating “Home Rule” for the District of Columbia, which in 1971 led to the election of Walter Fauntroy, the city’s first Congressional Delegate in a century. Throughout the period Bill served as my Legislative Aide, we fashioned legislation in the areas of health, education, transportation, housing, employment, and human relations, all areas important to a major urban area such as Cleveland and the neighboring suburbs I represented. Included in this category was legislation to clean up the Cuyahoga River after it had caught on fire and been called “a national disgrace.”² Our office initiated and passed legislation resulting in the cleanup of this river and an environmental victory for Cleveland.³ Bill was involved in this legislation.

Bill Leatherberry was a valuable and integral part of my success as a young Congressman, intent upon making a difference in Congress. His work ethic was superb, and he often worked long hours to meet my needs. His intellect and his excellent legal and analytical skills propelled him from my office to his position as a Professor at Case Western Reserve University Law School. In hiring Bill Leatherberry as a professor of law, the university brought to its faculty not only an individual who had the academic qualifications to teach but also someone who had legislative experience uncommon to most faculties. Bill Leatherberry had the experience of being a Legislative Aide in the highest legislative body in the world. Moreover, he participated in historic legislation promulgated through and by the Congressional Black Caucus. This was a unique period in American history and Bill Leatherberry was a part of it. While I knew I would miss him, I was proud to see him become a law professor at one of America’s top law schools. I knew that he would become one of the best of that faculty. His recent Emeritus appointment upon his retirement demonstrates the high esteem in which he is held. We have remained friends over the years, and I have also enjoyed the friendship of his lovely wife, Diane Phillips-Leatherberry, and daughter, Wendy.

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1. Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-452, 78 Stat. 508.
 2. Fred Jones, *Ohio Messy Neighbor, Fouls Air, Water*, PITTSBURGH PRESS, June 12, 1968, at 30.
 3. Water Quality Improvement Act of 1970, Pub. L. No. 91-224, 84 Stat. 91. This bill eventually led to the passage of the Clean Water Act in 1972. Federal Water Pollution Control Act Amendments of 1972, Pub. L. No. 92-500, 86 Stat. 816 (codified as amended at 33 U.S.C. §§ 1251–1387 (2006)).