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WILLIAM COLEMAN'S LEGACY

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William Coleman's Legacy

To describe Bill simply as a lawyer and public servant would be misleading.

By **Stephen Breyer**

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At the National Cathedral Saturday, many gathered—civil rights leaders, members of Congress, cabinet members, generals, judges, three Supreme Court justices, lawyers young and old—to celebrate the life of our friend William T. Coleman Jr. who died in March at 96. Among others, Colin Powell, Vernon Jordan and I spoke; Denyce Graves sang “Amazing Grace.”

Bill Coleman was truly a “man for all seasons.” His enormous natural talents and hard work helped him become a member of the Harvard Law Review; graduate from Harvard Law School with its top award, the Fay Diploma; and become a law clerk to Justice Felix Frankfurter. Those qualities later made him a leading lawyer, a wise counselor, President Ford’s transportation secretary, a recipient of the Medal of Freedom.

Yet to describe Bill simply as a lawyer and public servant would be misleading. He was an American of color who grew up at a time when that meant hardship and humiliation at the hands of a society that embraced invidious discrimination and legalized segregation. It was a world where his Philadelphia high school would disband the swim team rather than have him as a member; where he could not enter a U.S. Army officers club because of his race; where in our nation’s capital he struggled to find a restaurant where he could have lunch with his fellow Supreme Court law clerks; where, despite his prodigious abilities, he had difficulty finding an initial job—and more and much worse beside.

What was Bill Coleman’s reaction? Don’t agonize, just get down to work to rid our nation of this malignant disease. His method? Use what is best about America, its commitment to equal justice under law, to end what was worst about America, its blatant racial discrimination.

Bill worked directly. He helped integrate that officers club and end legal segregation in America. In a 1949 memo to Justice Frankfurter, Bill explained clearly why and how legal segregation was unconstitutional. And on the cover of Thurgood Marshall’s brief in *Brown v. Board of Education*, a brief that changed the course of history, is the name, among others, of William T. Coleman Jr.

He also worked indirectly through his powerful example. Those who saw Bill Coleman in action would understand that racial prejudice is not simply evil but absurd. As a cabinet member, as wise counselor to many presidents and countless young lawyers, as a lawyer-statesman, who, like Henry L. Stimson, saw law as a profession “imbued with a spirit of public service,” Bill was a nonprejudiced “first.” He was dedicated to cultivating what he called in 2010 “a new generation of leaders”—leaders who both are pragmatic problem-solvers and “are firmly rooted in strong principles that underlie the greatness of the American experiment.” Bill’s life shows the new generation the way.

“It is our duty,” Cicero tells us, “to honor and revere those whose lives are conspicuous for conduct in keeping with their high ethical standards and who, as true patriots, have rendered... efficient service to their country.” So let us contemplate the life of William T. Coleman Jr., the life of a true patriot, a good citizen, a great American.

Justice Breyer is an associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. As appeared in the Wall Street Journal, this version of the article is adapted from his eulogy at the National Cathedral Oct. 28.

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