

Hayden, et al. v. Pataki

Press Conference

January 15, 2003, New York City

REMARKS BY JOSEPH "JAZZ" HAYDEN

"UNFINISHED BUSINESS"

My name is Joseph Hayden. I am one of an estimated four million Americans, or one in fifty adults, who have currently or permanently lost their voting rights as a result of a felony conviction. I am also one of the 1.4 million African-American men, or 13% of black men, who are disfranchised at a rate seven times the national average. In seven states that deny the vote to ex-offenders, one in four black men is permanently disfranchised. Research has shown that given current rates of incarceration, three in ten of the next generation of black men can expect to be disfranchised at some point in their lifetime; these will be our children and our grandchildren. This means that in states that disfranchise ex-offenders, as many as 40% of the black men may permanently lose their right to vote. Today the nation celebrates the birthday of Martin Luther King Jr., a principled African-American leader whose vision of civil and human rights captured the imagination of Americans and the world. One of the greatest achievements of the struggle he led was the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, a piece of legislation that finally addressed all of the obstacles that were placed between former slaves and the ballot box. With the passage of this Voting Rights Act the black vote was liberated and African Americans were elected to public office in numbers not seen since the reconstruction period following the civil war. After having endured the terror of the Ku Klux Klan, the White Citizens Council and officially sanctioned apartheid, lynching, and voting mechanisms such as the Grandfather clause, the literacy test, and the poll tax, the civil rights of African Americans were finally recognized and legislation was finally put into place to enforce those rights. However, the victory was not complete, which brings me to the reason that we are all here today.

We are here today to take care of some unfinished business.

Yes, the civil rights movement was a great success. However, when it came to the right to vote, the movement stopped at the prison walls. And, it is the failure to cross over the prison walls and challenge the devastating effects of the criminal justice system that has created widespread disfranchisement that threatens to reverse many of the achievements of the civil rights movement.

For those of us that truly cherish Dr. King's legacy, and all that he struggled for, the struggle is far from over. For two million citizen-prisoners in U.S. prisons, the civil rights struggle is far from over and, for the 126,000 felons in New York State prisons and on parole the civil rights struggle will continue until the statutes denying them the right to vote are nullified and swept into the dustbin of history where they belong. We will not rest until we have the same democratic rights as citizen-prisoners in Maine and Vermont, our neighbors (where prisoners vote from their prison cells), and as prisoners throughout Canada whose Supreme Court has ruled that voting is a fundamental right, not a privilege that can be taken

away from anyone under any circumstance. American citizens should be able to do no less. Free the Vote.
Thank you.