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**RESPONSE OF JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN  
on the occasion of receiving the John W. Kluge Prize**

**at the Library of Congress  
December 5, 2006**

I am deeply honored by Mr. Kluge, Dr. Billington, and all of my colleagues whose confidence in my efforts has endured to the point that they supported my candidacy for this great honor. That the Library of Congress played a significant role in the entire process of selecting the recipients and administering the Kluge Award is not at all surprising to me.

I have the feeling that the Librarian of Congress and his staff have kept a wary eye on me for the past 67 years. I came to the Library of Congress for the first time in 1939 with every intention of rewriting the history of the United States in a way that would be palpably inclusive. It was not easy for a 24-year-old graduate student to persuade Willard Webb, the study room supervisor, that I qualified for a study room for whatever I was doing. I succeeded in persuading him, and almost every morning for the next several months, Mr. Webb, as he made his rounds, would stop and have a few words with me.

He commented that I must be quite interested in Thomas Jefferson, since I kept his Notes on Virginia on my desk and it was frequently open. One day he asked me if I found it helpful, and I told him that it was invaluable for what I was attempting to do, and that was to confront the numerous misconstructions of the history of the United States by some of the most influential thinkers in our history. He wondered what role Jefferson played in what I was attempting to do. I merely replied that his negative influence was enormous, although the average observer did not see beyond his obvious influence as a founding father and the author of our hallowed Declaration of Independence. I was not yet prepared to share with Mr. Webb my view of Jefferson's enormous influence in arguing that African-Americans were inferior to whites in many ways. He insisted, for example, that since blacks required less sleep than whites, even after a hard day's work, they could be induced by the slightest amusement to sit up until midnight. Yet, he continued, since their existence appeared to "participate more of sensation than reflection" they were disposed to sleep when abstracted from their diversions or unemployed in labor "like an animal whose body is at rest."

Thanks to Willard Webb and his successors, and thanks to Dr. Billington and his predecessors, I have been permitted to explore the wellspring of American history from the 17th century to the present. Thanks also to the John W. Kluge Center, I was able as one of the first Kluge Senior Fellows at the Library of Congress to explore even more

intensively certain aspects of recent American history. Meanwhile, I have spent days at a time, weeks at a time, and months at a time enjoying the resources of this eighth wonder of the world, the Library of Congress. What I have found, among many other things, has been a persistent effort even on the part of some who should know better to explain certain developments in American history as the inevitable result of using, say, Africans to play certain roles. Thus, the Jeffersonian argument goes as follows: If a slave works hard under the lash, he is quick to fall asleep when the lash no longer forces him to perform tasks. A remarkable finding! Further: If he does not manifest an attachment to a certain way of doing things, he is likely to be attached, by instinct, to another way of doing things. Fantastic, even if elementary! Finally, since “blacks secrete less by the kidneys and more by the glands of the skin, they have a strong and disagreeable odor,” to which I have added, “especially since, in all likelihood, they have worked in the fields or in the kitchens from 12 or 15 or even more hours a day.”

The more I have studied the history of our country over the last 70 years, the clearer it has become to me. By now, I have come to understand the nature of American society and the certainty of many of its own participants that their own position is clear and correct. I have attempted to reexamine the ideologies that undergird our system. I have also struggled to understand how it is that we could seek a land of freedom for the people of Europe and, at the very same time, establish a social and economic system that enslaved people who happen not to be from Europe. I have struggled to understand how it is that we could fight for independence and, at the very same time, use that newly won independence to enslave many who had joined in the fight for independence. As a student of history, I have attempted to explain it historically, but that explanation has not been all that satisfactory. That has left me no alternative but to use my knowledge of history, and whatever other knowledge and skills I have, to present the case for change in keeping with the express purpose of attaining the promised goals of equality for all peoples. In this way we can, perhaps, realize the goals that grow out of the tenets which we claim to have been committed from the beginning.

It is a sad fact that it was my generation that witnessed the first African-Americans achieving some recognition in the field of scholarship. Until then, few white Americans, even those who advocated a measure of political equality, subscribed to the view that African-Americans had the ability to think either abstractly or concretely or to understand and assimilate ideas that had been formulated by others. Much of the 20th century was spent by African-American scholars knocking on the door of American scholarship and seeking entry. Only here and there did the door open, and all too often it was opened grudgingly, if at all. It was this inability to open wide the door of American scholarship that caused W.E.B. Du Bois to comment in 1903 on his own intellectual loneliness when he said: “I sit with Shakespeare and he winces not. Across the color line I move arm in arm with Balzac and Dumas, where smiling men and welcoming women glide in gilded halls. From out the caves of evening that swing between the strong-limbed earth and the tracery of stars, I summon Aristotle and Aurelius and what soul I will, and they come all graciously with no scorn nor condescension. So, wed with Truth, I dwell above the Veil. Is this the life you grudge us, O knightly America? Is this the life you long to change into the dull red hideousness of Georgia? Are you so afraid lest peering from this high Pisgah, between Philistine and Amalekite, we sight the Promised Land?”

But it is not enough merely to sight the Promised Land in the distance, and Du Bois would be the first to be dissatisfied with such a modest goal. He insisted, always, that the people for whom he spoke should never be satisfied with something so ephemeral as a promised land. When he reached the conclusion that the land of his birth would never concede full and equal citizenship for him, he renounced it and denounced it and retreated to Ghana where he spent the remaining few years of his life. But we who are dissatisfied with the present conditions in this country should not retreat to Ghana or somewhere else, nor should we even desire to do so. Our past is here! Our loyalty is here! Our investment of more than three centuries is here! Our future is here!

Many years ago I discovered that there were various ways that a historian could utilize his training and talents to move the nation closer to the principles for which so many have made the supreme sacrifice to achieve. In 1948 Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel for the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, sought my assistance in breaking the color barrier at the University of Kentucky.

A young African-American was seeking admission to do graduate work in history at the University of Kentucky. When he was denied admission, Marshall sued and asked me to serve as an expert witness in the effort to establish the fact that the University of Kentucky was the only publicly supported institution where he could secure graduate training in history. Before I could testify regarding the inadequacy of the Kentucky's historically black college in training graduate students in history, the federal judge had ordered the admission of the African-American graduate student to the University of Kentucky. Even without my public participation in the argument, I discovered that my role as an expert witness could assist in bringing about change and equity in our society. And this could be done without compromising my scholarship one whit. Some years later, a variation of the same was true in *Brown v. The Board of Education* when I discovered that I could use my training and knowledge to assist counsel in gaining the admission of Linda Brown and the other plaintiffs to public schools that were not segregated. Some years later, in 1965, I discovered in the Selma-Montgomery March that I could be effective in joining other historians as well as crusaders of various stripes in marching and working together to impress high and arrogant powers to relent in their extreme and excessive use of racial and social bigotry in their effort to maintain the status quo.

I have been most fortunate in having the opportunity to participate in an exciting and rewarding educational experience over the past three-quarters of a century. At the same time I have been able to witness the partial transformation of our society into something more in keeping with the expressed aspirations of the Founding Fathers. I have been most fortunate in having the support of scholars and colleagues in many parts of the country and of the world. I can only hope that my work will be a part of the legacy not only of my students and others who find something valuable in my words but also of those who have found some validation of their own work in what I have said and done.

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