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Father Ted

Advisor to Nine U.S. Presidents Turns 90

Father Theodore Hesburgh, president emeritus of the University of Notre Dame and advisor to nine U.S. presidents, celebrates his 90th birthday this week. Last year, Hauenstein Center Assistant Director Brian Flanagan -- an '03 Notre Dame graduate -- took a group of Leadership Fellows to the university to talk with Father Hesburgh about his career working with U. S. presidents. Following is a transcript of their conversation.

Brian Flanagan: Father Hesburgh, thank you for taking the time to meet with us today -- it's a privilege. At the Hauenstein Center, we are currently hosting an online tournament of the presidents, asking participants: Which U.S. president has had the most impact on the world? Maybe the best place to start is to ask you that very question. In your opinion, which U.S. president has had the greatest impact on the world?

Father Hesburgh: I've got to say that I spent fifteen years on the only Civil Rights Commission we've ever had in America -- a presidential commission established by the Congress. We had very much power. We could go anywhere in the country and subpoena anyone to show up. As a matter of fact, we were having trouble with the attorney general, John Lishua. I went to Washington and set up a meeting there because I made a study of the District of Columbia and it turned out that they were one of the worst offenders. We said that every American citizen ought to have all the rights of American citizens. The fact is that blacks couldn't vote in the South. They couldn't go to a good school because they could only go to black schools. That was backed up by separate but equal decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1898. They couldn't get good jobs because they weren't well educated. Because they couldn't get jobs, they couldn't get a house and a car like everybody else does. And on top of that, and most fundamental of all, they had a problem voting in many parts. They'd simply go into register, they'd put them in a pile, and it was lost.

Anyway, we came up with a whole series of tough reports -- we had hearings all over the country. We had a commission of three southerners and three northerners, and Eisenhower added to that three democrats and three republicans. Even though I'm independent, they put me down first as a Republican then as a Democrat... I was none of those things but they had to do it because of the law. We were appointed by Eisenhower and then of course Kennedy came along and Kennedy's big ambition was to be president for two terms. Every time those guys were elected and they walked into the Oval Office they wanted to be there for eight years, not just four. It's very hard to do something in just four years so it's understandable, but they all figure they'll get eight years. Very few of them have, as a matter of fact, since the first President Bush.

So, we came up with this very strong law which we put together after having hearings in maybe 100 different places: North, South, East, West. We had to give it to the president and to Congress. Then the Congress had to pass the law. This law was so tough that Kennedy just kind of threw it under the door of the Senate and the House without any backing or pushing. I think Jack Kennedy figured -- he never said so out loud -- that he would get through that first term and avoid the big controversy on Civil Rights. He was a Democrat. The South at that time was fully Democratic and they were the ones that had all the laws against blacks opportunity. They were all kind of hidden, but the fact was that in many states there wasn't a single black registered to vote because they managed to lose their registration.

Well, we put in a ruling that this was a law that would cover everything, and we had a hooker on it that if you were a federal organization like the whole government in Washington, you would have to abide by it. I made a study of the 40 biggest governmental offices -- commerce, defense, state, and all the rest of them. Well commerce hires 40 thousand people and state has a lot more than that. And yet the blacks were always down there pushing brooms after hours -- they didn't get any of the good jobs hardly at all. Well the Kennedy's knew that if they pushed that law, that would put the whole South against them and they'd never get a second term. I think his strategy probably was -- although he didn't tell me this -- that he would kind of slide through the first four years without causing a big controversy in the South and then in the second four years he'd be able to work on this law. But there was no chance on earth he could ever get that law through. Then he got shot and Lyndon Johnson became president.

Lyndon Johnson was a southerner. He understood everything about Civil Rights. He had been head of the House of Representatives; he had been head of the Senate; and he certainly knew now as president what law they needed. He looked at our law, which was the result of seven or eight years of hearings all over the country. We really addressed everything -- it was a really tough law -- and we had that hooker on it that if you didn't obey this law, you lost all federal support. Take a state like Mississippi, which was one of the worst on Civil Rights. They put 200 million a year income tax into the federal government and took out 600 million a year for the state of Mississippi. They had great roads and great universities and great hospitals, but this law with this hooker on it meant they'd lose 600 million bucks the first year. The Kennedys got cold feet when they saw that tough law.

But then Johnson got in. I knew him pretty well and talked to him a lot. I think in his own heart he thought: "I'm not a popular guy. I never could be elected president, but I was vice president and now I am president. I'm going to do something about this." He got in in November when Kennedy was shot. In early December, the beginning of the New Year, he pulled together the whole House and the whole Senate under the great dome in the capitol, and he said "Ladies and gentleman..." (There weren't many ladies in the Congress at that time either. That's another result of the law; I think women were more helped by the Civil Rights law than blacks or the Mexicans, but everybody was helped.) He said "We're going to make the promise of Thomas Jefferson come true -- that all men (and women) are created equal, and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." That was a common term, but nobody ever heard pursuit of happiness -- they said life, liberty, civil status. He said "how can you pursue happiness if you're an American citizen, you've been in this country for almost two centuries, and you can't vote, you can't get a decent job, you can't go to a decent school to prepare for a decent job. Everything Americans take for granted you can't do simply because you're black."

He said, "I am giving you my bill" -- you see it became his bill -- and he slapped it down and gave everyone a copy of this bill that we had written. Plus the hooker at the bottom, that if you don't obey the provisions of this bill, you are cut off of all federal support because you're not doing what the federal government says you have to do. They were within their rights because the federal government has to support, ultimately, Civil Rights -- they were in the Constitution.

Well, he didn't have the chance of an ice burgh in hell to get that through. But he was a tough guy, and he used to always keep track of all the Senators and all the Congressmen when he was their head. He had all kinds of insight -- and of course J. Edgar Hoover loved to come over at night to the White House and tell him all the foibles of these congressman and senators. Johnson kept a little book when he was head of the House and head of the Senate and he had all those guys in his book and he knew what they had done wrong.

He knew that none of them, from the South, would vote for this bill, and without the South -- which was largely Democratic -- he couldn't get it through. So he started calling them in one by one. Then he decided on a better idea, and he would call them at three o'clock in the morning. (I don't know when he slept.) But take a senator from Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia -- I don't care where, they were all in the same category with very few exceptions. And at three in the morning he'd say "Senator, this is your president." The guy would be coming out of a deep sleep would say "President of what?" Johnson would say "the president of these United States."

"I understand, senator, that you're not going to vote for my bill," Johnson would say. The senator would say "Well Mr. President, you're a southerner. If I vote for that bill they'll never elect me again."

Johnson would say "Let remind you they've elected you for about six terms over 30 years." The senator would say "Yeah, but if I vote for a



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strong Civil Rights bill they'll kill me."

Johnson would say "If you don't vote for my bill I'll kill you." The senator said "Mr. President that's terrible language" -- now he's fully awake.

And Johnson would say, "Well let me put it this way. Supposing you tell me you're not going to vote for my bill...."

"Of course I'm not! I can't! they'll kill me!"

"Well," he would say, "I'll tell you how you'll be killed. Suppose there's an article in the *Washington Post* -- front page, right hand column -- and the headline is rather simple. It says 'What is the senator from Alabama doing every Friday afternoon at 5:30 in room 424 of the Mayflower Hotel? Is he up there to say the Our Father with somebody?'"

The guy says "My God, you'll kill me."

Johnson says "You got it right. You'd better vote for my bill." And you know he gave them the bill in January, first week, and in early July both houses voted for that bill.

I have to say honestly that nobody before Johnson could have gotten that bill through because they weren't as astute politically as he was. He had been in the government for 35 years. He had been head of the Senate and head of the House, and he's president of the United States. I'd say nobody before him could have gotten that bill through -- not Kennedy, not Eisenhower, certainly not the little guy from Missouri. (Truman's mind was right. He desegregated the armed forces after World War II. We had had 13 billion people in uniform but they fought a segregated war. No black soldier could eat with a white soldier or live in the barracks of whites -- everything was segregated.)

Johnson just went through them one by one, and he had them all dead to rice -- he had all kinds of political things he could pull on them. When that law got through it was a super revolution.

I don't think any of the guys after him -- Bush Sr., or Carter, or Clinton, or certainly the current president -- could ever have got that bill passed in the Senate and the House. The only reason it got through is that Lyndon Johnson personally harangued every member, and he black mailed those who weren't going to vote for him. Just sheer guts and threatening -- not a very nice way to act but he got the Civil Rights Bill of 1962 through. He needed a little strengthening on the voting side and he put in another bill the next year and got that one through. That changed the face of America. Over night, all the things that blacks could not do legally before, now they could do. In fact it was mandated they do it. And I don't think Johnson gets credit for that. The simple fact is that nobody before him and nobody since could do that.

If you asked me for the three biggest names for getting freedom for the American people, the first of course was Thomas Jefferson. What came out in the Declaration [of Independence] were those wonderful words, that all men (leaving out women) are created equal, and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, among which are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

The pursuit of happiness entailed giving blacks all the rights that whites had -- politically, socially, every other way... educationally. I came here to Notre Dame in 1934 -- not a single black student was enrolled. I came back to teach when I got my doctorate in '45 -- one black student. We had the Navy here then: we had 15,000 Navy trainees during the war going through here. We got more Naval officers than anybody in the world except Annapolis. In the middle of a World War fought for peace and justice, they [African Americans] had no officers, practically, in the whole Navy or Army or Army Air Corps. The exception was the black squad in Tuscaloosa that was put together by Eleanor Roosevelt, who really squeezed her husband to give them some airplanes, to give them training, and to send them to Italy, where they became the most famous squadron in that country. They never lost a bomber they guarded -- and we lost 60 bombers in Italy before they came in.

Many other presidents were very good, but the real roadblock was to get a law on Civil Rights that applied to every American, and Jefferson said the right words. Lincoln inherited a country with slavery, and he said the right words in the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed the slaves, finally, in 1863. Then we went on all those years from Lincoln to Johnson, and blacks still didn't have the kinds of rights that Jefferson put in the Declaration and Lincoln opened up by saying there's no more slavery; they're all free American citizens.

So if I were going to put up a statue to commemorate Civil Rights, I'd put one up for Lyndon Johnson. He did what no president before him or after him could have done. But there is a beautiful thing about law: once the law is on the books, approved by the president, the House, and the Senate, that is a law bearing on all Americans. That law was the toughest law conceivable on human rights in this nation. It's the law today. If you try to keep a black from voting today or registering to vote (which was done universally before that law) you'd go to jail for 10 years, conceivably. Or at least you'd get fined 10,000 bucks, which is a pretty big fine for every time you do something. Or if you keep ten folks from voting, a \$100,000 fine right off the bat and a possible prison term.

So I'd say of all those presidents, Johnson doesn't have a big name in history but he ought to have a very big name. If you asked me who are the three people who created real freedom for all, not just blacks, but Mexicans, and women, and now Asians as well -- you've got to say that the guy that did the job was Johnson. Jefferson, Lincoln, and Johnson -- that's the trilogy; these are the guys that pulled it off. It took a long time. But it happened in 1964.

Melissa Ware: In the Leadership Academy we pick a particular president to study, focusing on his decisions and leadership. I chose Lyndon Johnson.

Hesburgh: Good for you, dear.

Ware: It's really been great.

Hesburgh: Has what I've told you helped?

Ware: Yes it has. I have to tell you as an African American, it's been hard for me to find my own personal connection to leadership and the presidency. I see individuals with so much power who often times ignore the inequalities and the social injustices suffered by so many people who are either in poverty or who don't have equal rights, whether its women, or minorities or whomever. Ralph Ellison wrote a quotation about Lyndon Johnson, I don't know if you're familiar with it. He says something to the effect that 'many people do not respect or admire Lyndon Johnson for what he did, for Civil Rights, but I think that's a very great thing indeed.'

Hesburgh: It's at the heart of what America is as an ideal for all citizens, but it didn't exist when they signed the Declaration of Independence, or when Lincoln signed the wonderful manifesto, the Emancipation Proclamation. Incidentally, Lincoln wrote that very short bill himself, and he called his cabinet together and he passed the bill around -- he had written it personally in longhand. He got his cabinet together -- in those days there were only eight people in the cabinet -- and he said I want you all to read that, and they all thought it was terrible. What it does essentially is wipe out slavery, we're talking about millions of people who were considered personal property. He said 'now we're going to vote on it.' It went around the table: nay, nay, nay, nay, nay, nay, nay, nay, eight nays. He said 'now I'm voting, and I vote yea,' which you could do as president. That's how we got the wonderful Emancipation Proclamation. But we went from 1863 to Lyndon Johnson before it became a reality, and Lyndon Johnson made it a reality.

Now, it wasn't that the other guys didn't know it was right. Kennedy during the campaign gave a speech here, 4,000 students attended, when he was running for president. He gave a speech on human rights in America. It was a beautiful speech. He said all the right things and was elected president by a slim margin, 50,000 votes, which was probably stolen by the mayor of Chicago. Anyways, he was elected president and he recognizes that, so it wasn't a question of not knowing it was right or wrong. Jack Kennedy knew perfectly well and I think in his heart of hearts he figured he would do something about it when he was elected. I don't think he could have done it, he didn't have the kind of trump cards that Johnson had. He would, of course, consider it awful to get the FBI to fill him in on all the senators, he had been a senator himself. If they had filled them in on him he'd have never been president. Well anyway, that's an interesting part of the story.

Ware: I've read a lot of the oral histories and I've listened to some of the recordings.

Hesburgh: Caro's pretty good too; Caro's third book is all on this thing. I read it carefully and it covers a lot. I think I know a lot more about it because I was in the middle of it and I helped write the law. I helped go through those fights. We had hearings everywhere in the country.

Ware: Because you knew him, my question is do you believe that in Johnson's heart of hearts he was truly invested in the ideals he fought for?

Hesburgh: He had to, because otherwise he couldn't have done it. He was putting his life on the line. He was standing up to the Congress. Every president has to go to the Congress and it's one thing to lull those guys out of the water, he didn't make any bones about it, he told them exactly what he had on them. He had that from J. Edgar Hoover unless he picked up gossip himself. He had them all down in his little notebook and it was that one thing that got that law through. What I can say from what I know of Lyndon Johnson personally and what I knew of the situation, is that no guy before him or after him -- and there were some pretty hefty guys -- could have gotten that law through. I can't see our current president getting that law through. So, give him credit.

Emily VanderWoude: Well I first wanted to thank you very much for being so generous with your time today. I'm curious to know what kind of advice you would give to aspiring leaders of our generation who are coming to deal with the same problems you were invested in, for example, young leaders continuing the fight for civil and human rights.

Hesburgh: I once met a young, black girl in Denver. Her father was president of the University of Denver and I was out there for a civil rights hearing. I don't recall where we met him, Dr. Rice, but when we met him his daughter came out and we met her too. She was only about 19 or 20 years-old; she was a graduate of the University of Denver and a beautiful piano player. She was a figure skater... she could have gone to the Olympics, at least for tryouts -- she was that good. And she was a ballroom dancer. She had three very top avocations, you might say. And she was a very self contained young girl. Her name was Condi Rice, Condolezza Rice.

I say, "Condi, you've got to go get a doctorate, a master's degree," and she said, "daddy and I are going east after I graduate to look at Harvard, Princeton, and Yale." I said, "You can't go to those places without going by Notre Dame first. Come by Notre Dame and I'll show you around," and she said, "That's a good idea." So they came here first. They spent a couple of days here, we were taking her around, and she wound up coming here for her master's degree in International Studies. She was proctor in one of our residence halls. She got not only a good degree in International Studies, but I got her to take Russian. It's kind of unusual for this young black girl to be studying Russian.

Her dad said, 'you better get a doctorate at Stanford,' so she did that. She got elected as the most popular teacher the second year she was at Stanford. And then she decided that she would go for further graduate studies and she got a chance to go to Russia. Of course she had Russian here and probably took some more at Stanford, so she went over there and spent a whole year learning Russian, and she got a post-doc in International Relations. On her way home, like a lot of people, she went through Washington and by chance met President George H. W. Bush. He said, 'Condi, what have you been doing?' And she said, 'I've been in Russia all year.' He said 'do you speak Russian?' She said, 'Of course, fluently.' He said, 'I don't have a single person in the White House that can pick up the phone and talk to Russia.' And she said, 'Well, I can.' He said well then you better come and work for me; I need you. She did, and she became a real member of the family.

Of course he didn't get re-elected. She went back to be Provost at the University of Stanford. When the first President Bush's son called up and said, 'dad, I'm thinking about running for president.' He said, 'you'd better pick up the phone and call Condi Rice at Stanford and get her to come and spend the next year with you, because you need someone who can drill you each day on International Relations. That's your weak point.'

So [George W. Bush] talked her out of Stanford and she went down and spent a year in Texas with the family and prepped him on International Relations. He got elected he took her to the White House and put her in charge of National Security. In the White House, it's the most important thing they have apart from the presidency.

He got her to work with problems of diplomacy. Then when Colin Powell left, he put her in charge. So we've got the second woman in history, first black woman, to be secretary of state. It all boiled down to her knowing Russian and International Studies.

I think that the biggest thing we do is get good education. Young people should take all of the opportunities open now, and not hit for the bottom but hit for the top -- get into the best schools, take the toughest programs, get doctorate degrees from all the top schools in the nation -- and then, on top of that, be really be outstanding. You can't look at Condi Rice and the job she's doing on the toughest parts of the earth like in Jerusalem and not say she's a well educated, very smart lady. She's not a heck of a lot older than your parents, she may be younger. I'd say that's the best way to move forward: don't hit for the bottom, hit for the top.

Kimberly Techjema: Reading your book, you're a very inspirational individual who has accomplished so much in your lifetime. How do you find the time and the inspiration?

Hesburgh: I retired when I was seventy years old. I had a very simple life, from one to thirty-five: I was getting my degree, teaching her for five years in the theology department. I had just turned 32 when the president picked me to be the executive vice president, which is a dumb thing to do with a 32 year-old but he was re-organizing. He named four functional vice-presidents, for academics, student affairs, alumni, and fundraising. I was in charge of all of them as executive vice president.

After three years as executive vice president I became president. I had just turned 35 the week before. After that I had 35 years as president. It was a very demanding job. You have to write a good deal; I wrote about 12 books in the process. You have to speak a great deal. You learn a lot from the people you're around.

I also tried to be a good priest. I offered mass every day. I've been a priest now 62 years and I've only missed mass maybe three times. I've offered mass on an operating table in the South Pole and lots of other interesting places including the Kremlin. But I've offered many more masses than I've spent days as a priest -- there were many days I had to do two or three masses. That kept me rooted in my vocation and in the principles of my job.

I was fortunate because I also had 16 different jobs with the federal government. I was also chairman of the board for the Rockefeller Foundation, which was the third biggest foundation. The Catholic Church appointed me to help write the charter for the International Atomic Energy Agency, which you're hearing a lot about now. They were active with the atom bomb and Iran and so forth. When I did that job I went to Vienna every year for the annual meeting to represent the Vatican. I learned a lot about international politics and a lot about the scientists involved in atomic energy. You've got to get out there and mix it up with various things you're confident in. And when you get a job you learn all about it and you work hard at it.

The secret is to do one thing at a time. What I'm doing right now, for example, is talking to you guys, and I don't have anything else on my mind but that. You have to do that with everything you do and it's amazing how much you can get done. You have to focus your life -- you give full attention to what you do, you do it quickly, and hopefully intelligently.

Now of course I was lucky: I was a priest, I didn't have a family (which would have been wonderful), I didn't have a wife (which would have been even more wonderful, but you give up something to get something, and that's the way the rules are). I didn't have to worry about a family and kids. I was in a different category so I was able to give 100% of my life to work all the time.

The kids here had a saying here, "What's the difference between Father Hesburgh and God? Well God is everywhere, and Hesburgh is everywhere but Notre Dame." Well that wasn't really true we did a lot at Notre Dame, I spent more than half my time here, but I did do a lot of work overseas on these other tasks.

Kathy Rent: I feel very privileged to be a part of this. It's a delight to be able to meet you.

Hesburgh: Well I'm delighted to meet you.

Rent: Mandi Bird is a part of the Leadership Academy, as are all these other students. I know your time is limited so I'm going to let her ask a

question.

Mandi Bird: I would like to know the top five books you would recommend for a well-educated leader.

Hesburgh: That's hard honey, because if you've seen my office it's lined with books. I've got macular regeneration, and this eye is gone and half of this eye is gone and I can't read anymore which is a big cross. If I have a half hour to lose, I just go out into the hall and grab the first student and they're wonderful about it, they come in and read to me.

I keep up with the *New York Times* for world news and occasionally I flip through *Time Magazine*, or whoever I have reading for me does. I get, of course, the local Notre Dame stuff I have to keep up on just to be informed. But I would be hard put to say what books, because I've been reading books all my life and God knows how many I've read I haven't counted them.

Languages are very important. I was fortunate: I had four years of Latin, and three years of French in high school, I came out here and studied Greek because I was in seminary and most of the scripture is in Greek. After my second year here and a year of novitiate, which is a boot camp for being a priest in the order, I went to Europe to study at Gregorian University which is probably the top Catholic university in the Jesuit order. Over there I lived in a house where you had to speak French, and on the street, of course, you had to do Italian. Once I got back here and got ordained after the war, I decided Spanish was more important because of Latin America, and I got very involved there. So today I'm probably better at Spanish than I am at Italian. I can still hack it, yesterday I was talking to a guy in Italian.

If I were your age today I would learn Spanish as soon as I could. I'd get a Spanish nanny at home for your children. By age 5 they should know Spanish. Beginning at five, I would start learning -- of all things -- Chinese because the force of the world is Chinese. It's a tough language but I like it much easier than Japanese. After that I'd like to learn Arabic, and I doubt I'd get that far. Chinese is tough and Arabic is probably even tougher, and both of them have a different way of writing.

I just think languages are neglected in America. I spent a good deal of my time overseas in international bodies, and I found languages are wonderful because you have immediate access to people that don't know your language. But books -- I just have to say I love books and I've read a lot of them -- and I'd be hard pressed to give you a list of ten off hand if I think about it for a while maybe I could. You're going to have to find your own way I think.

Well guys I gotta run, but I appreciate your coming.

Flanagan: Thank you so much for having us. We have a book for you that Ralph Hauenstein recently authored about his experiences during World War II. He was head of intelligence in the European theatre during the war. He signed a copy for you. Maybe you can pull a student in here later to read.

Hesburgh: Terrific. I want you to know that I have over two thousand books in the library that are signed by their authors, including guys like Franklin Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, and others. So this will go in my collection and I'm grateful thank him for signing it.

Flanagan: We also have a Hauenstein Center mug for you.

Hesburgh: Mugs are always useful.