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Desegregating the Cosmos Club

A Talk by John Hope Franklin

May 25, 2007

With an Introduction by the History Committee

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OCCASIONAL PAPERS SERIES

DESEGREGATING THE COSMOS CLUB

John Hope Franklin

INTRODUCTION BY THE HISTORY COMMITTEE

John Hope Franklin (1915-2009), who was welcomed to membership in the Cosmos Club almost fifty years ago, today smiles out in his kindly way from two of the Club's four walls of photo-portraits. A talk he delivered in May 2007 tells part of the story of how his membership came about. That evening, Franklin was introduced by Michael Winston, former vice-president of Howard University and president emeritus of the Alfred Harcourt Foundation, himself a historian trained at Berkeley. Here is some of the background for that talk.

In April 2006 Franklin had read selections from his long-awaited autobiography *Mirror to America* at a Club Book & Author event. A year later, under the auspices of the History Committee, he spoke in the Powell Room about the events that brought him into the Club and their meaning. His remarks described a signal, newsworthy event in the Club's history and an important step in the recognition of African-American intellectuals beyond the halls of academia. The talk, one of many he delivered around the country in his last years, took place just ten months before his death on March 25, 2009.

At his birth in 1915, little more than fifty years separated Franklin from slavery. At Fisk University, he went beyond his father's legal profession into the study of history, but he never forgot the crucial links between the two fields. A doctorate in history from Harvard confirmed his path. *From Slavery to Freedom* appeared in 1947 and its completely new Ninth Edition, co-edited with Evelyn Higginbotham, in January 2010; by now it has sold perhaps four million copies worldwide, including a dozen or more foreign-language editions. The book, while a popular success, revealed a tenacious and disciplined scholar, bent upon treating American history first, and the role of African Americans in that context. Resisting numerous alternatives, he hewed to the historian's passion for facts, haunting archives. Even for his own autobiography, declining to treat it as a memoir, he delved deep into the archives of the U. S. Census for Rentiesville, Oklahoma, to recapture the details of his childhood.

The circumstances of Franklin's Cosmos Club admission are detailed in his words, but his remarks touch only briefly on the period before 1962. By that year, he was already the most prominent African-American historian in the United States, not only for his books and academic positions, but also for his role in public policy. He first began helping Thurgood Marshall and the NAACP Legal Defense Fund in the case of *Lyman Johnson v. University of Kentucky*; he then joined historians Rayford W. Logan, C. Vann Woodward, and Alfred H. Kelly in conducting the research which underpinned Marshall's responses to the Supreme Court's questions about the intent of Congress in the Fourteenth Amendment and other issues related to the constitutionality of segregation in the public schools, in the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education*. His role as

public historian began with his appointment by President Kennedy in 1962 to the Fulbright supervisory board, leading to extensive overseas travel, and would continue when he was appointed by President Clinton to chair the advisory board for Clinton's Initiative on Race.

Franklin was on the faculty of Howard University from 1947 through 1956. His international scholarly activity led to his 1956 appointment to head the history department at Brooklyn College, a national news event. His books *The Militant South* appeared in 1956 and *Reconstruction After the Civil War* in 1961. (When Winston introduced Franklin's 2007 talk, he noted Franklin did "not seem to know how to write an unimportant book.") Franklin would go on to chair the history department at the University of Chicago, then move to semi-retirement as James B. Duke Professor Emeritus of History and for seven years Professor of Legal History in the Law School at Duke University. His list of honors includes some 140 honorary doctorates from the world's great universities and the naming of a research center for African and African-American history and culture at Duke.

The Cosmos Club's rejection in 1962 of the candidacy of the African-American journalist and diplomat Carl Rowan led to the resignation from the Club of eleven members, including Rowan's sponsors and the primary sponsor of President John F. Kennedy's candidacy for Club membership, which in turn led to the withdrawal the president's nomination. In the aftermath of a very public debate about perceived bias in the admission of members, the Club passed by an overwhelming voice vote the following declaration: "the exclusion of any person from membership on account of religion, color, race, or national origin is incompatible with the principles of the Cosmos Club." A group of friends and scholars resolved to test this newly stated policy against discrimination and tapped as a candidate for membership Franklin, who, with little or no enthusiasm, agreed. They presented to the Admissions Committee a candidate whose accomplishments made it easy to take the step that "desegregated the Cosmos Club."

In his introduction to Franklin's talk Winston dwelt on the man and the mind:

Even with obvious gifts of intellect and imagination, only a great spirit harnessed to an iron discipline could sustain a sensitive personality through the thicket of obstacles and discouragements that an ambitious graduate of Fisk University faced in 1935. In tributes from professional colleagues and students over the years, the words that recur are indefatigable, objectivity, grace, generosity, equanimity, and elegance.

This was the man the Admissions Committee considered and elected. In his understated talk, which follows, Franklin, remembered "cynics" who at the time of his admission to the Club said he would be a token member. He was "delighted" that they were proved wrong and gave full credit to the Club's officers and members. In his autobiography, he commented about other such breakthroughs: "I was an early beneficiary of the liberal forces that opened up the learned professions, especially in the field of history. I never entertained the thought that the gates opened exclusively for me and throughout my career I assumed some responsibility for keeping them open for others." Franklin's admission to the Club was followed by the admission of other African Americans of note in a variety of fields.

Acknowledgments: This contribution from the History Committee to the new series of Occasional Papers is the Committee's first in many years. We hope the series will grow into a rich fabric in time and initiate a long collective look at the Club's contributions to American social and intellectual life, through the careers and experiences of its members, through

friendships, affinities, and networks nurtured by Club colleagues. Three History Committee chairs – Ainslee Embrie, Fred Spilhaus, and John Graham – have supported this idea; Past Presidents Alan Fern and Robert Cleary offered crucial encouragement in the initial stages; and many others have warmly welcomed the idea. Gratified by their support, we now are ready to seek broader collaboration.

Finally, the contextual setting of this talk could not have been done without the help of many hands, beginning with John Hope Franklin himself, his able assistant Charity Greene, and his son John Whittington Franklin of the Smithsonian Institution. Michael Winston's graceful introduction of Franklin set the ideal tone. Joanne Pierre's tenacious memory proved indispensable. Various historians and colleagues read early drafts. To all these, our gratitude.

(The following text is a transcription of Franklin's May 2007 remarks with a few minor editorial corrections, most of which he approved before his death.)

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A TALK BY JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN-- MAY 25, 2007

From the time in 1947 when I joined the faculty of Howard University as professor of history, I began to hear about the Cosmos Club. It was not about its being an elite, intellectual, highly selective collection of men. That was taken for granted. Nor was it about its being segregated. Few organizations of any kind in Washington, in 1947, were open to all persons regardless of race. I well remember Alain Locke, professor of philosophy at Howard University and the first African-American Rhodes Scholar, giving a dinner for my wife and me to welcome us to Washington. He gave it at the dining room at the Union Station, where he could invite people of all races to the festive occasion. I can also recall having to take my lunch to the Library of Congress on Saturdays, when the in-house cafeteria was closed and no restaurant on Pennsylvania Avenue or Independence Avenue would serve African Americans. It could hardly have come as a shock to me to learn that the Club had no black members in 1947.

Although my colleagues at Howard University were black, white, Asian, and Hispanic, none of them, as far as I knew, was a member of the Club. The members whom I knew were historians I encountered at the Library of Congress, where I was doing research, as frequently as I could or dared. Howard University was not only the "Capstone of Negro Education," it was also the institution that extended to African-American scholars the cordial invitation to cease and desist from the endless search for truth, because even if they discovered new planets or new theories of the descent of man, it was of little consequence, as far as promotion at Howard University was concerned. Howard University was not only the "capstone" of Negro Education but it was also the "tombstone" that marked the end of the line for black scholars, the point beyond which they should not, could not venture. If he or she discovered new ways of calculating the distance between Jupiter and Saturn or a new way of evaluating Thomas Jefferson's place in the pantheon of eighteenth-century thinkers, it would not be rewarded by the offering of chairs at universities in the Ivy League or in the nation's major scientific and literary organizations. There were no places for the likes of them.

Then, it happened. My friends and neighbors at the Library of Congress began to mention, almost apologetically, the Club. It had become a newsworthy story that an African American had been denied admission to the Cosmos Club. Carl Rowan, a distinguished journalist, author of numerous highly acclaimed works including *Go South to Sorrow* and *The Pitiful and the Proud*, deputy assistant secretary of state, United States ambassador to Finland, and future director of the United States Information Agency, had been rejected by the Admissions Committee of the Club. This rejection of Rowan in 1961 became a major topic of table talk at the Library of Congress, the cafeteria of the United States Supreme Court, and the lunch-room at the Methodist Building near the Library, the nearest thing to eating clubs of which those of us who worked at the Library of Congress could boast. By the late spring of 1962, the rejection of Rowan had become a major topic of conversation even among many who did not know anything about the Club. It was discussed in the *Washington Post* and other local newspapers, including the gossip sheets on Capitol Hill. The word got out that President John F. Kennedy's name had been under consideration for membership but had been withdrawn following the Rowan debacle. Meanwhile, members of the Club whom I knew felt free to discuss the matter with me after the widespread publicity fueled by the rejection of Rowan and the city-wide discussion following the Kennedy withdrawal. They never raised with me the matter of membership, however, and since I was not in the least interested, I never raised it with them. Some members, including some of Rowan's sponsors, were so outraged by the rejection of

Rowan that they resigned from the Club, feeling that the only pressure for change would come as they, the “pilgrims,” worked on the case from the outside. Others claimed that a more sensible and effective tactic would be to work from the inside, as the “puritans” would do, thus purifying the Club of alleged racial discrimination.

The Club reached a crisis in the matter when the Admissions Committee, apparently suffering from overexposure if not embarrassment, sought to calm the waters by seeking to state clearly the Club’s policy with regard to race. On January 15, 1962, the Committee introduced a resolution at the Cosmos Club annual meeting stating that the Club’s members “do hereby declare that the exclusion of any person from membership on account of religion, color, race, or national origin is incompatible with the principles of the Cosmos Club.” The resolution was passed by an “overwhelming voice vote.” That did not settle the matter, however. When eleven members who had resigned because of the Rowan rejection sought readmission after the resolution had passed, the Board of Management refused, insisting that the resigning members had “acted with undue haste, without careful investigation of the facts, and upon unwarranted assumption as to the basis of the Admission Committee’s action.”

Several members who had resigned were friends of mine, among them Bruce Catton. He was as outraged by the action of the Board of Management as he had been by the action of the Admissions Committee in the Rowan case, but he had neither the time nor the interest to pursue the matter further. Other friends, including Wood Gray of the George Washington University and Boyd Shafer of the American Historical Association, were willing, even anxious, to test the will of the Cosmos Club, which had declared in its resolution that racial bias was incompatible with its principles. In conversations over lunch at the Library of Congress, members of the Club expressed their anxiety to test it and force it to live up to its resolution regarding racial bias.

They began to suggest that the best way to test the true intentions of the Club was to submit for admission to membership a person like me. I told them that there were plenty of distinguished scholars at Howard University who would be strong candidates for membership. In any case, I no longer lived in Washington, having moved to Brooklyn to chair the department of history at Brooklyn College of the City University of New York. Although I continued to visit Washington, I was usually preoccupied with my research and had no time to be involved with the Club. The more I talked, the more they were convinced that the mere submission of my name would open wide the gates of the Club. I was not so sure. In any case, my move to Brooklyn College would leave little if any time for clubbing in Washington. Since my appointment represented a clear and unequivocal victory over racial bias in education in Brooklyn, although the fight over housing continued, I was in no mood to take on yet another fight in the American racial jungle. I had not been a racial strategist or, indeed, any kind of strategist, in getting the job at Brooklyn College. It fell into my lap owing to my befriending several members of that department at the International Congress of Historical Sciences in Rome during the summer of 1956. The department there was, as I learned, engaged in a full-scale civil war, the kind only college faculty members can wage.

While I was thriving in leadership of the department, the Brooklyn real estate dealers and the so-called neighbors in the Brooklyn College residential area had not received me with open arms. Their conduct was a torrent of insults and sneers whenever I encountered them, open hostility to our eight-year-old son as he played alone on the sidewalk in our front yard, and with anonymous telephone calls urging me to move, in order to avoid serious consequences. Under the circumstances, a Cosmos Club membership fight seemed like child’s play compared to gaining a foothold in the Brooklyn College residential community.

There was yet another reason for my lack of interest in a Cosmos Club membership. No longer a resident of Washington and with numerous preoccupations elsewhere, I had less need for a club membership. While I deeply resented the racial segregation in Washington, I had made my peace with it. The Supreme Court cafeteria was my club during week-days, and I enjoyed the fellowship of my fellow historians from institutions all over the city. We had our way of enjoying ourselves. Each of us would argue over who had the worst university president in all the land. Sam Merrill would insist that there was no contest, since Curly Byrd was by far the worst. I would counter with the declaration that Mordecai Johnson, the greatest orator of all, was also the worst president of all. Those from Georgetown University and those from Johns Hopkins would submit their candidates, but they would be shouted down by those who were ever more certain of the defects of their leaders.

Then, it was back to the question of membership in the Cosmos Club. "But your credentials cannot be challenged," my friends argued, "and you should do it for the cause." But by that time I was preparing to leave for a year in England, and the most that I could do was to prepare for the Pitt Professorship of American History and Institutions at Cambridge University. Studying how to avoid an accident while driving on the left-hand side of the road was enough to take up all of my spare time. My Washington friends argued that I need not do anything. They would do everything, they insisted. All that I needed to do was to give them a full biographical essay (make it impressive), copies of all my books, and my British address and telephone number. Was that all? I asked. Absolutely all, they declared. There would be absolutely no need for me to do anything else. Just sit back, relax, and let them do the talking. Anything for the cause, I concluded; so I acceded to their request and went off to England in September 1962.

The autumn was busy enough: I was slow to master the task of driving an automobile in Britain. We had to get our young son settled into the Perse School for Boys and ourselves settled into the residence of the Pitt Professor while simultaneously getting adjusted to my "digs" in St. John's College, where I was a Senior Fellow. Happily, my immediate predecessor was a bachelor and lived in his College. Consequently, the University spent the year previous to our arrival refurbishing the home of the Pitt professor and installing central heating. I was not so sure that I wanted that when the meter reader came at the end of our first month and, after reading the meter, apologized on behalf of the "Gas Board" for not having read the meter during the previous year and assuring me that he would be pleased to recommend a plan for paying the bill in installments, since I could not possibly wish to pay it all at once. He was dumbfounded and relieved to learn that the bill covered only one month and that I was willing to settle it upon presentation. Adjusting to a lower temperature for our home was of greater concern to us than a possible Cosmos membership.

In the spring of 1962, President John F. Kennedy appointed me to a three-year term on the Board of Foreign Scholarships, commonly known as the Fulbright Board. Not many weeks after our arrival in England, I returned to the United States for my first meeting, at which time I was sworn in. I spent several days in Washington, during which time I heard nothing of the Club and, frankly, did not even think of it. The Cuban missile crisis gripped the country, and on my flight back to England the passengers had no little apprehension that at any moment we might be blown out of the sky. The return trip to England was filled with apprehension, read downright fear.

Since I did not hear from my Cosmos Club advocates during the autumn of 1962, I concluded, if I gave it any thought at all, that all was well with the application or that the strategists concluded that for one reason or another it was best to postpone consideration of my

name for membership for a more propitious moment. The matter was so far back in the recesses of my mind and interests that I gave it no thought whatever.

Then, on a Saturday morning, in December 1962, at about four-thirty A.M., our telephone rang. Who on earth could that be and what could it be about? I asked myself or my wife Aurelia as I staggered out of bed looking for the telephone. If the call was for me or Aurelia, I feared the worst, especially after the operator informed me that I had an overseas call coming in from the United States. Since my mother, father, and brother had long since departed this earth, it must be one of my two sisters or some member of Aurelia's family. The news could not be good. Before I could speculate further, the voice from the United States virtually leaped through the telephone with words of congratulation. What had I done to receive a message of commendation? A man's voice identified himself as a reporter from *Newsweek* magazine and wished to be among the first to congratulate me for being the first African American to be elected to membership in the Cosmos Club. I was speechless, not for the election but that such an incident would cause so much fanfare and celebration. During the ensuing days and weeks I received letters of congratulation and read news releases about what some regarded as an historic event.

I suppose it was historic, in the sense that any new experience is an historic event and any breach of the color bar an event worthy of celebration. But the Cosmos Club had insisted that it had no color bar. If that was true, what was there to celebrate? If that was true, was the failure to invite for membership W. E. B. Du Bois, Carter G. Woodson, Alain Locke, Rayford W. Logan, Frank Snowden, and numerous other distinguished African Americans an oversight or ignorance? I had no problem with the resolution of January 1962 as a face-saving device. The wise men of the Cosmos Club are also proud men, and I suspect that all or certainly most of them were greatly relieved that the racial barrier or whatever it was had at long last been lifted.

In the early sixties the cynics remarked, even in my presence, that mine would be a token membership. I was delighted that this proved not to be the case. Since 1962 many African-American men and women of distinction have become members of the Club. I have no idea how many African-American men and women are currently on the Club membership roster. I can only say that the men and women whose nominations I made or seconded have become members, and the list of new members published in the monthly newsletter [*Bulletin*] frequently contains the names of African Americans of distinction. Just recently I was pleased to note that the distinguished portrait artist Simmie Knox had been elected to membership: he is the first African American to have portraits of the President of the United States and the First Lady hang in the White House; a portrait of John Atanosoff, the inventor of the electronic computer, hangs in the Cosmos Club; and he incidentally painted portraits of me and my wife Aurelia for the Fisk University Library and of me for the Duke University Library.

Although I have never been a resident member, my entire family has enjoyed the Club and its facilities. During her lifetime Aurelia very much enjoyed coming here with family and friends, although she returned her wives' card when she learned that, unaccompanied by me, she was required to use the women's entrance out by the parking lot, a practice soon abandoned. My son John delighted in meeting us here and complying with the rules requiring him to select a tie from the stock maintained by the Club for wayward men and boys who wandered in without a tie. When he married Karen Roberts, the ceremony was performed in the Club garden, and the reception was in the Warne Lounge, and even when I am miles away, although I strive to be present, they regularly celebrate their anniversary with friends at the Club.

I am proud and honored to have been nominated and elected to membership in this venerable institution. I am delighted to have had a hand, albeit a very insignificant one, in urging

this club to grasp, courageously and unequivocally, the opportunity to open its doors to all men of whatever race and to participate, in the years that followed, in bringing down the last barrier to humankind by opening its doors, on an equal basis, to women. May we live long, prosper much, and keep the steady hand of equality firmly in control.

Editorial Note: The title John Hope Franklin gave to his May 2007 remarks, “Desegregating the Cosmos Club,” was his decision after considering the suggestion that he call it “Desegregating the Cosmos,” to evoke the title of his autobiographical *Mirror to America*. In the end, modesty dictated his decision. We may be forgiven for suggesting that the impact of his membership reached beyond the confines of the Club and contributed to a wave of change in American life.