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Profile in Courage Essay Contest

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Carol Moseley Braun

In 1966, on a 98 degree day in Chicago, an angry white mob gathered to heckle Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as he marched against housing segregation. Someone in the mob threw a rock that knocked King down to one knee. Eighteen-year-old Carol Moseley Braun was mere inches away. Her "first instinct was to pick up a rock and throw it back" (Lee). But then she watched how King, her idol, unflinchingly reacted, and in that searing heat she learned lessons that would shape her future (btwadmin).

Decades later, on July 22, 1993, Moseley Braun hurried through the United States Senate Chamber floor to her desk (Senate Historical Office), on the precipice of putting into action those lessons she learned while coming of age in the heart of the civil rights movement. What was at stake for this new Senator, the first woman to hold this seat in Illinois and first African American woman elected to the United States Senate ("Black Americans" 622)? At stake was the promise of a future free from hate.

Since 1898 Congress has granted patent protection for the identifying insignia of various so-called "patriotic" organizations. These patent protections run for fourteen years and most are automatically renewed. On May 6, 1993, the patent renewal for the emblem of the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC), which features/ed the flag of the Confederate States of

America, came up for a vote before the Judiciary Committee. Moseley Braun declared her opposition, challenging many well-established senators. She contended that renewing such a patent would fly in the face of those "whose ancestors fought on a different side of the conflict or were held as human chattel under the flag of the Confederacy" (Senate Historical Office). It seemed that Moseley Braun was heard, with the committee voting against the renewal. Thinking the issue had been squashed, she was shocked when two and half months later, on July 22nd, she caught wind that, before an almost empty Chamber, Senator Jesse Helms, of North Carolina, was seeking approval of an amendment to renew the patent (Senate Historical Office).

How could it be? How could anyone in our government want to put their stamp of approval on an emblem that features our country's most glaring symbol of hate? Yet for almost a century, this patent had been routinely renewed, and despite the Judiciary Committee's objections, the Senate was once again on the verge of renewing it ("Black Americans" 624).

Helms took the Chamber floor, at first, with only three other Senators present. He expounded on his support of the members of the UDC (Senate Historical Office). "Most of them elderly, all of them gentle souls," not the kind "whom the Senate Judiciary Committee would deliberately offend or rebuke" (Helms). Helm's portrayal of the members of the UDC as sweet old ladies was a distraction and irrelevant to the point that their organization's emblem bore our nation's most painful symbol of hate.

Moseley Braun again presented her objections, stating that Helms was attempting to undo the work of the Judiciary Committee and arguing that the passage of his amendment would create

"divisions in our society." Thinking, once more, that she had presented a compelling case, Moseley Braun introduced a motion to table Helms' amendment. As a vote was called on her motion, senators leisurely strolled into the Chamber for what they thought was a vote on an inconsequential issue. Since most senators vote along party lines, and her party was in the majority, Moseley Braun figured her motion was well-positioned to pass. However nearly all southern senators, regardless of party affiliation, voted against her motion, and it was defeated (Senate Historical Office).

This defeat probably struck Moseley Braun much like that rock thrown at MLK in Chicago nearly thirty years prior, catching her off-guard and causing great pain. "When he got hit by this rock, he assumed an attitude of such grace that…was just inspirational," Moseley Braun reflected (Lee). The civil rights movement had pushed her to take "personal responsibility to defeat the forces of racism" (Alfaro). And so, like MLK, she harnessed the power of her voice and gracefully stood up for what she believed in. "If I have to stand here until this room freezes over, I am not going to see this amendment put on this legislation" (Moseley Braun).

With her plan to filibuster declared, Moseley Braun embarked on an even more impassioned plea. "This vote is about race….It is about the single most painful episode in American history" (Moseley Braun). Not even seven months into her term, this freshman Senator, as a female, as often the only African American, knew it was critical to her career to "try to get along with everybody." Speaking about issues in constrained, "non-emotional terms" was a calculated mechanism she adopted to be liked and to get ahead in politics (Moseley Braun). As John F. Kennedy recounted, "The way to get along," I [JFK] was told when I entered Congress, "is to go

along." But today was no day for playing nice. As JFK declared, "Only the very courageous will be able to take the hard and unpopular decisions" (Kennedy). And so, Moseley Braun resolutely stood at odds with her constituents, a lone voice, courageously battling this nation's biggest symbol of hatred.

"I'm going to call it like I see it…I was appalled…at a segment of my own Democratic party who would…vote for something like this." She continued, "The people in this country don't want to see a day in which flags like that are…approved by this United States Senate. And that's what this vote is about" (Moseley Braun). Soon, it became evident that many senators hadn't fully understood what they had just voted for, and they began to listen. A three hour debate ensued, ending with a motion to reconsider Moseley Braun's motion. With a vote of 75 to 25, Moseley Braun persuaded enough senators to flip their vote (Senate Historical Office). Thanks to the political courage of a relentless senator who refused to compromise her principles, the Senate rejected this symbol of hate. As Carol Moseley Braun later asserted, "It is not enough to think of yourself as a good person. What matters is what you do" (Alfaro).

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