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## Barack Obama

### *Senate Floor Speech Honoring the Life of Rosa Parks*

delivered 25 October 2005, Washington, D.C.



[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Mr. President, today the nation mourns a genuine American hero. As most of you know, Rosa Parks died yesterday in her home in Detroit. Through her courage, and by her example, Rosa Parks helped lay the foundation for a country that could begin to live up to its creed.

Her life and her brave actions reminded each and every one of us of our personal responsibilities to stand up for what's right and the central truth of the American experience that our greatness as a nation derives from seemingly ordinary people doing extraordinary things.

Rosa Parks' life was a lesson in perseverance. As a child, she grew up listening to the Ku Klux Klan ride by her house, fearing that her house would be burned down. In her small hometown in Alabama, she attended a one-room school for African-American children that only went through the sixth grade. When she moved to Montgomery, Alabama, to continue her schooling, she was forced to clean classrooms after school to pay her tuition. Although she attended Alabama State Teachers College, Rosa Parks would later -- later make her living as a seamstress and housekeeper.



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But she didn't accept that her opportunities were limited to sewing clothes or cleaning houses. In her 40s, Rosa Parks was appointed secretary of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP and was active in voter registration drives with the Montgomery Voter[s'] League. In the summer of 1955, she attended the Highlander Folk School, where she took classes in workers' rights and racial equality. Well before she made the headlines across the country, she was a highly respected member of the Montgomery community and a committed member of the civil rights effort.

Of course, her name became permanently etched in American history on December 1st, 1955, when she was arrested for refusing to give up her seat to a white passenger on a Montgomery bus. But what's not as well known is that it wasn't the first time Rosa Parks refused to acquiesce to the Jim Crow system. The same bus driver<sup>1</sup> who had her arrested, and had her thrown off the bus that day, had done the same the year before when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat.<sup>2</sup>

Some schoolchildren are taught that Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat because her feet were tired. But our nation's schoolbooks are only getting it half right. Ms. Parks once said: "The only tired I was, was tired of giving in."<sup>3</sup>

This solitary act of civil disobedience became a call to action. Her arrest led to a then relatively unknown pastor, Martin Luther King, Jr., to organize a bus boycott for the entire Montgomery [bus] system. That boycott lasted 381 days and culminated in a landmark Supreme Court decision finding that the city's segregation policies were unconstitutional.

This solitary act of civil disobedience was also the spark that ignited the beginning of the end for segregation and inspired millions around the country and ultimately around the world to get involved in the fight for racial equality.

Rosa Parks' persistence and determination did not end that day in Montgomery, nor did it end with the passage of the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act years later. She stayed active in the NAACP and other civil rights groups for years. From 1965 to 1988, Ms. Parks continued her public service by working for my good friend Congressman John Conyers. And in an example of her low-key demeanor, her job in Congressman Conyers' office did not involve appearances as a figurehead or celebrity; she helped homeless folks find housing.



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At the age of six -- At the age of 74, she opened the Rosa and Raymond Parks Institute for Self-Development, which offers education and job training programs for disadvantaged youth. And even into her 80s, Rosa Parks gave lectures and attended meetings with civil rights groups.

At the age of 86, Rosa Parks' courage and fortitude was recognized by President Bill Clinton, who awarded her the nation's highest honor for a civilian -- the Congressional Gold Medal.

As we honor the life of Rosa Parks, we should not limit our commemoration to lofty eulogies. Instead, let us commit to carrying on her fight, one solitary act at a time, and ensure that her passion continues to inspire as it did a half-century ago. That, in my view, is how we can best thank her for her immense contributions to our country.

In closing, Mr. President, Rosa Parks once said:

*As long as there is unemployment, war, crime and all the things that go to the infliction of man's inhumanity to man, regardless -- there is much to be done, and people need to work together.*

Now that she's passed, it's up to us to make sure that her message is shared. For while we will miss her cherished spirit, let's make sure to ensure that her legacy lives on in the heart of the nation.

And Mr. President, as a personal note, I think it is fair to say that were it not for that quiet moment of courage by Ms. Parks, I would not stand here before you today. I owe her great thanks, as does the nation. She will be sorely missed.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.

<sup>1</sup> James Blake

<sup>2</sup> Reference error -- either by chronology or person. Ms. Parks did indeed have a prejudicial encounter with the bus driver, James Blake, but it occurred some twelve years earlier. One year prior to Mr. Parks' 1955 Montgomery bus incident, Claudette Cloven became the first African-American woman arrested for violating Montgomery's bus segregation law.

<sup>3</sup> Parks, Rosa & Haskins, James. (1992). *Rosa Parks: my story*. New York: Dial Books. [via <https://blog.oup.com/2010/12/rosa-parks/>]

<sup>4</sup> Widely attributed; original source unclear.