

Fairness for Black Farmers

by

U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman

(Submitted to The Washington Post)

Ten years ago, Congress approved reparations to survivors of the World War II internment camps, taking a momentous step to make amends for a fundamental failing of America to honor the basic civil rights of its citizens. In contrast to the headlines that announced that decision, largely unnoticed in the recent budget deal was a provision that allows the federal government to take a similarly historic step to redress wrongs committed against African American farmers. This is a new law that will help our nation heal some very old wounds.

Modern racial fears and suspicions are the ugly scars of slavery, which has its roots in agriculture. The big plantations of the South were the No. 1 market for slaves in America. After Reconstruction, many freed slaves stayed in the South working the land. In fact, most African Americans did not move to the cities until they were pushed off their farmland by bigotry: white bankers often denying credit; white neighbors sometimes refusing to sell land and an Agriculture Department that reflected our nation's misgivings on race and too often relegated justice to the backwaters.

With the civil rights movement, African American farmers began demanding better treatment from their government. They started filing civil rights complaints, which detailed heart-wrenching stories of land lost, marriages broken and families left in poverty. In an often hostile environment and with little outside help, these farmers waged a long and lonely civil rights struggle far from the focus of national attention.

Unfortunately, their efforts were met mostly by an indifferent federal government that sat on its hands. In 1983, the USDA went so far as to dismantle its civil rights investigative unit, leaving these cases to drift for years. When I began unearthing these old complaints as part of my own civil rights initiative, I knew that I would have to confront institutional indifference and bureaucratic ineptitude. But I did not expect that the very system of American law that protects our basic rights would itself be the biggest barrier to ensuring that justice delayed did not become justice denied.

Simply put, because these old cases had sat on a shelf for so long -- not because of the fault of the farmers, but because of USDA's own incompetence or worse -- these complaints could not be heard. None of these wrongs could be set right without an act of Congress. An act of Congress waiving the statute of limitations is rare in U.S. legal history. I was told many times that it could not be done. But, spurred on by the farmers, tough negotiating, the perseverance of top administration officials and Congressional leaders from both parties, the impossible was made possible in this case. Now, for farmers whose civil rights complaints went unaddressed, the door is open again. They finally will have their cases heard and, where justified, receive appropriate compensation.

We still have much work to do at USDA to improve our civil rights record. But this waiver was a significant step. I fought very hard to hold USDA accountable for its past shortcomings, not because I wanted to punish a department I deeply admire but because -- to paraphrase Martin Luther King Jr. -- an unaddressed injustice at any time is an injustice for all time. We have to begin healing our history -- for USDA, American agriculture and our country.

I became secretary of agriculture after many years in Congress, where the issue of civil rights was rarely raised in the context of farming. Then, I was only dimly aware of the connections between our nation's agricultural and racial roots. Now I know that we cannot achieve racial reconciliation in this country if we ignore these roots.

Any farmer can tell you what happens to roots left untended. The Bible admonishes us, "Justice, justice shall thou pursue." Our nation still has a long way to go to achieve a justice that can face up to the darkest chapter of our history and heal the rift it has left among our people. But when and if we do, I believe this tiny provision tucked away in a giant budget bill will find its rightful place in American history.

#