A Day of Inspiring Testimony, and a Record of Hostility to Civil Rights

Statement of NAACP Legal Defense Fund President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill on Jeff Sessions Hearings

In response to the hearing on the nomination of Senator Jeff Sessions to serve as United States Attorney General, Sherrilyn Ifill, President and Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) released the following statement:

“Today, the Senate Judiciary Committee heard passionate and inspiring testimony from three African American members of Congress: iconic civil rights leader, Congressman John Lewis (D-GA); Senator Corey Booker (D-NJ) and new Congressional Black Caucus Chair Congressman Cedric Richmond (D-LA). Each expressed their profound concerns about Senator Sessions’ ability to defend each and every American and build upon our ongoing progress towards equality.

“Senator Booker, who has faced stinging criticism from some Senate colleagues for breaching protocol by testifying against a Senate colleague, said that he was compelled to choose ‘conviction and country’ over the traditions of the Senate in speaking out against Sessions. Rep. John Lewis reminded the Committee that in making their decision about the nominee ‘it doesn’t matter how Sessions may smile and speak to you. We need an Attorney General who will speak out.’ Rep. Cedric Richmond, with nearly twenty members of the Congressional Black Caucus seated behind him, started off by challenging Committee Chairman Chuck Grassley (R-IA) for the unusual decision to have members of Congress testify last, which Richmond likened to being ‘sent to the back of the bus.’ He challenged the Committee to be either ‘courageous or complicit’ in voting on Senator Sessions.

“Senator Chris Coons (D-DE) introduced a stinging letter which surfaced yesterday but was written by Coretta Scott King in 1986 about Sessions’ abuse of prosecutorial discretion to target voting rights advocates.

“Further, the morning included testimony from civil rights advocates including Cornell Brooks, the President of the NAACP, and David Cole, the Legal Director of the ACLU. Oscar Vasquez, a “DREAMER” who was brought to the U.S. from Mexico and later served as an active duty combat officer in Afghanistan, and Amita Swadhin, an advocate for survivors of sexual assault, described the concerns of the immigrant community and victims of sexual assault about Jeff Sessions’ fitness to serve as Attorney General.

“Today has only provided further confirmation of what Senator Sessions’ record already demonstrates – that Senator Sessions has a profoundly troubling record on civil rights. Indeed, the hearing demonstrated Sessions’ shallow understanding of large swaths of the civil rights portfolio he would be entrusted with enforcing as Attorney General. Sessions said over and over again when confronted with his record that he will ‘follow the law.’ But the Attorney General of the United States is the chief enforcer of the nation’s civil rights laws. In that regard, he must be prepared to lead. The two-day hearing demonstrates that Senator Sessions is not prepared to lead in the enforcement of civil rights laws.”

For more insights on Sessions’ record on racial justice and equality, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund has released a report on Senator Sessions’ record on civil rights and a fact sheet on misleading statements made during the hearing.

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Founded in 1940, the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc. (LDF) is the nation’s first civil and human rights law organization and has been completely separate from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) since 1957—although LDF was originally founded by the NAACP and shares its commitment to equal rights. LDF’s Thurgood Marshall Institute is a multi-disciplinary and collaborative hub within LDF that launches targeted campaigns and undertakes innovative research to shape the civil rights narrative. In media attributions, please refer to us as the NAACP Legal Defense Fund or LDF.