

IN MEMORIAM

WILLIAM T. COLEMAN, JR.

1920 - 2017



The NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund (LDF) mourns the loss of William T. Coleman, Jr., a key member of the legal team that litigated *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark desegregation case in which the Supreme Court declared state laws establishing separate public schools for African American and white students to be unconstitutional. Coleman served on LDF's board from 1958 to 1997 and remained an Emeritus Chair at his death. Coleman's trailblazing legal career catapulted him to the top of his profession. He was the first African American to serve on the board of editors of the Harvard Law Review, the first African American to clerk for the U.S. Supreme Court, and the second African American to serve in a cabinet level position in the federal government.

"William Coleman played a leading role in the effort to advance the principle of equal justice under law for every American," said [Sherrilyn Ifill](#), President and Director-Counsel of LDF. "He was a key architect of the legal strategy in *Brown v. Board of Education*. His legal career was one of unmatched excellence. His service to LDF, including as chair of our board, was critical to the strength and effectiveness of our organization over decades."

Coleman was born and raised in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Civil rights pioneer W.E.B. DuBois, one of the co-founders of the NAACP, and famed Black poet Langston Hughes were frequent dinner guests at his home. Although he grew up in a middle-class family, Coleman attended segregated elementary schools and was just one of seven Black students at Germantown High School, where he encountered what he described as "Yankee-style racism."



*LDF's second Director-Counsel, Jack Greenberg with LDF Senior Board member Vernon Jordan and William T. Coleman, Jr.*

Once, after giving a well-received presentation in English class, his teacher, who was white, said, “Someday, William, you will make a wonderful chauffeur.” When he decided to go out for the high school swimming team, the team disbanded rather than integrate. Tryouts for Germantown High’s new swim team were held—the day after Coleman graduated. Undeterred, Coleman left high school having won varsity letters in track and field as well as a letter of admission to the University of Pennsylvania. He graduated summa cum laude with a double major, political science and economics, in 1941.

Coleman was accepted at Harvard Law School but left in 1943 to enlist in the Army Air Corps—though not before asking himself “whether it made sense to fight for freedom and liberty in Europe and Asia when racial segregation was still so rampant in the United States.” He trained with the famed Tuskegee Airmen and spent part of his service as a defense team member in court-martial proceedings, in one case defending African-American airmen who had been arrested for challenging segregation at an officer’s club.

Coleman returned to law school after his military service ended in 1945. He received his L.L.B. degree magna cum laude from Harvard in 1946, graduating first in his class. He was the first African American man to serve on the board of editors of the Harvard Law Review. Soon after graduation, he began his illustrious legal career. He served as a law clerk to Judge Herbert F. Goodrich of the Third Circuit’s U.S. Court of Appeals, and, one year later, as a law clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, becoming the first African American to clerk for the U.S. Supreme Court. “My year with Justice

Frankfurter remains among the most meaningful and enjoyable of my life,” Coleman recalled in his memoir, *Counsel for the Situation*. “Each day was a thrill walking up the steps into the grand Supreme Court building.”

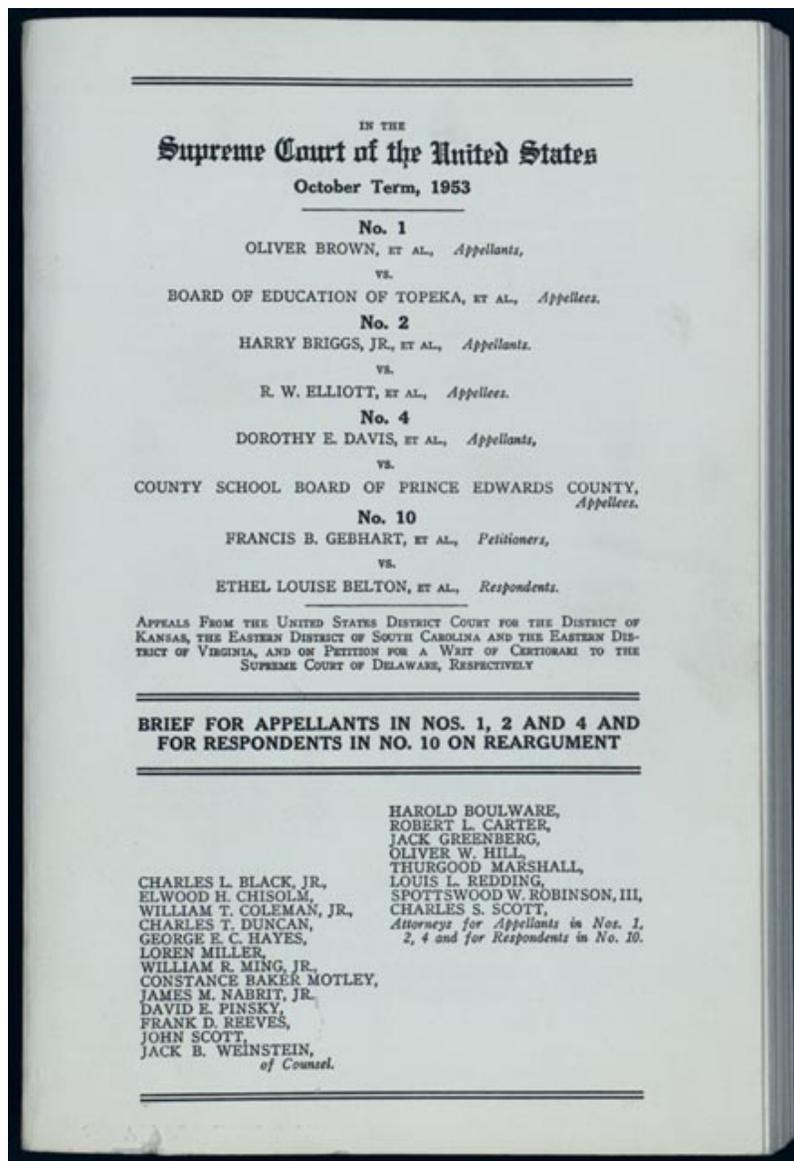
While Coleman had accomplished much at just 29 years old, he found it difficult to find work at a law firm after his Supreme Court clerkship. “In those days, many Wall Street firms did not accept any minorities, including women, Latinos, and Jews and in some cases even Catholics,” Coleman remarked in his memoir. With a wife and two children to support at that point in his career, he placed a call with Louis Weiss of Paul, Weiss, Wharton, and Garrison in New York and was granted an interview. He was hired on the spot.

“I have often wondered what the backroom conversations might have been among the partners. After all, this may well have been the first time ever a major law firm in any U.S. city had hired a person of color as an associate,” Coleman wrote.



*William T. Coleman Jr. walking up the steps of the Supreme Court of the United States*

It wasn't long before Thurgood Marshall, LDF's first Director-Counsel and future Supreme Court Justice, tapped Coleman to work with LDF on five cases that culminated in *Brown v. Board of Education*. "After I hung up the phone that December day, a surge of elation quickly yielded to trepidation," he said of the experience. "I had just been invited by Thurgood Marshall to a three-day summit of preeminent civil rights lawyers and legal scholars. We were going to plot a strategy to take our great nation to the next milestone in the struggle for equal rights for all Americans regardless of color." Coleman was integral to the case, serving as co-author and architect of the brief presented to the Supreme Court in *Brown*. The case, in which the Supreme Court declared the doctrine of "separate but equal" unconstitutional, has been called "the most important American governmental act of any kind since the Emancipation Proclamation," by former professor, Yale Law School dean, and federal judge Louis H. Pollak.



*Brief for Appellants in the cases of Brown v. Board of Education: Oliver Brown, et al. v. Board of Education, Kansas et al.; . . . in the United States Supreme Court-October Term, 1953. Washington: GPO, 1953. Pamphlet. NAACP Records, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress (73)*

After this historic victory, Coleman returned to private practice. In 1958, Thurgood Marshall once again reached out to Coleman, this time requesting that he become a member of LDF's Board of Directors. He was president of the board until 1975 and continued to serve as a member thereafter. During his time with LDF, he argued several cases before the United States Supreme Court, including *Bradley v. Sch. Bd. of the City of Richmond (I)* (1973), *Bradley v. Sch. Bd. of the City of Richmond (II)* (1974), and *McLaughlin v. Florida* (1964), a landmark case in which the Court declared unconstitutional a Florida law that prohibited interracial cohabitation between people of the opposite sex. This case was a significant preamble to *Loving v. Virginia*, which ultimately declared statutes banning inter-racial marriage unconstitutional.

Altogether, Coleman argued 19 cases before the Supreme Court and was in frequent correspondence with LDF's Directors-Counsel over many decades, proposing strategies to tackle civil rights issues that required urgent attention.



*William T. Coleman Jr. with President Gerald R. Ford and Elaine R. Jones, who served as Coleman's Special Assistant at the Department of Transportation and would later become LDF's fourth President and Director-Counsel*

In addition to his work with LDF, Coleman distinguished himself in public service, holding advisory or consultant positions to several U.S. presidents. He was a member of President Dwight Eisenhower's Committee on Government Employment Policy (1959-1961), a senior consultant and assistant counsel to the President's Commission on the Assassination of President John F. Kennedy (1964), and a member of the U.S. delegation to the twenty-fourth session of the United Nations General Assembly. He was senior partner in the law firm of Dilworth, Paxson, Kalish, Levy & Coleman in Philadelphia.

On March 7, 1975, President Gerald R. Ford appointed him as Secretary of Transportation, making Coleman only the second African American to serve in a cabinet post. In that position, he asked a young LDF attorney, Elaine Jones, to serve as his Special Assistant. Jones later returned to LDF after her service at the Department of Transportation; she rose to become the Director-Counsel in 1993.

"Among the giants of civil rights, public service and excellence in the practice of law, William Coleman stands alone," said Anthony Foxx, former Secretary of Transportation under President Barack Obama. "As a Secretary of Transportation, he cast a long shadow that remains to this day. He was a tremendous role model to me. I will miss him greatly and so will his country."

"Over the years I can think of no one who commanded more respect in the US Supreme Court than Bill Coleman," said Theodore M. Shaw, former LDF President and Director-Counsel.

Coleman returned to private practice again in 1977, when he joined the law firm of O'Melveny & Meyers, where he was a senior partner and senior counsel until his death.



*William T. Coleman III receives LDF's 75th anniversary award on behalf of his father William T. Coleman, Jr. from former LDF President and Director-Counsel Elaine R. Jones and current LDF President and Director-Counsel Sherrilyn Ifill*

Coleman received numerous awards for his contributions fighting for equal justice both in and out of the courts. In 1995, he was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. In 1997, LDF honored Coleman with the Thurgood Marshall Lifetime Achievement Award at that year's National Equal Justice Award Dinner (NEJAD). LDF further celebrated Coleman's contribution most recently at its 75th anniversary dinner in Philadelphia, PA. His son, William Coleman, III, accepted the award on his father's behalf.

Coleman was born on July 7, 1920 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania to William Thaddeus Coleman, Sr. and Laura Beatrice Coleman. He is survived by his wife, Lovida Coleman, and three children: Lovida H. Coleman Jr., William T. Coleman III, and Hardin L. Coleman.

Above all else, William Coleman was devoted to the work of the Legal Defense Fund. When Thurgood Marshall asked him to join the team that litigated *Brown v. Board*, he replied, "Let me know the time and the place, Mr. Marshall. I'll be there."