

Statement of Vernon Bernard Parker
Nominee for Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights
U.S. Department of Agriculture
Before The
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
United States Senate

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Mr. Chairman, I would like to thank the President and Secretary Veneman for putting their trust in me, and nominating me for such a challenging position. I would also like to thank my lovely wife Lisa and my son Ian for their undying love and support while going through this process.

Mr. Chairman, the great theologian Martin Luther once said that: "Everything that is done in this world is done by hope."

It is with great hope that I appear before this committee today. My hope lies, in that, if confirmed, I will be able to make a difference in the lives of those who may have had their hopes and dreams put on hold or destroyed because of injustice.

Today, there are many people who rely on the Department of Agriculture; they are honest Americans, to whom our society has decided to lend a hand through government. This government lent me such a hand. As a child, I was the beneficiary of U.S.D.A. programs. I still remember lining up in the cafeteria before school to be served a hot breakfast. As public servants, it is our duty to respect the dignity, and foster the promises to those who are touched by government programs; these are simple and basic American values.

At times obstacles get in the way of these values. Racism and poverty for example, all too often, work in synergy to rob many people of their hopes and dreams. If confirmed, it is my intention to work to root out discriminatory practices as weeds in the garden of democracy. I will work to develop systems to promote equality of access and opportunity, and to work toward the day when the special focus of this job will become unnecessary, because that focus will have fully been moved to the hearts of every employee within the Department. In creating this position, you did not take it lightly, nor will I. I will rely greatly on my past life and work experiences.

As a child, I was blessed by a loving extended family, a grandmother, a mother, and many caring aunts, all of whom instilled in me a deep faith in God, faith in each other, and a deep belief in America, and its values. As a child, I suffered poverty and felt the discord of racism. During an unfortunate time in my life, my family needed government assistance. And I remember the embarrassment on my mother's and grandmother's faces when they could not understand the forms that they had to fill out at the welfare office for food stamps. I saw individuals take advantage of them because of their lack of sophistication, and because they could not read that well. They both were products of the segregated south.

I vividly remember them having to ask the person behind the desk for help when filling out these forms. I remember the look on their faces when the person helping was anything but helpful. And I remember them questioning whether they were being treated differently because of race, saying "If I were white, I bet they would not have talked to me like that, or if I were white they would have helped me." I remember the joy on their faces when someone would help, and many times that person helping would be white. Mostly I remember them telling me not to hate or judge another person by the color of their skin, because in the end, we will be judged by our resolve not to judge others.

It is my understanding, that today, at the Department of Agriculture, there may be people who have been, or are being denied services because of the color of their skin, or their gender, people like my mother and grandmother. This is a practice which must be abolished. Abraham Lincoln some 141 years ago created the People's Agency, today known as the USDA. This same President, three years after creating The People's Agency, freed a people, by signing the Emancipation Proclamation. And there is no agency in our government whose mission is more bound to basic American values than the Department of Agriculture.

As public servants it is up to us to ensure that the letter and spirit of that proclamation is carried out. We are caretakers of the public trust; there is no higher service, other than service to God and family. We must, as I said earlier, root out discriminatory practices. And at the same time, we must use discernment to properly identify justifiable cases, and identify and shelve those cases that have no merit, because finding racism where there is none, has a numbing effect on rooting out legitimate cases.

If confirmed, I will rely on two overriding principles to guide me in achieving these goals. First, it is critical that we work together, and commit the resources to do the job. If we don't, we will remain at status quo. We can pay now or pay later. We can either invest in the prevention of Civil Rights abuses, or we can invest in the next landmark settlement eclipsing the nearly \$1 billion already committed to by this government.

Second, if confirmed, I will work to knock down roadblocks that hinder people from achieving their dreams. The President and Secretary Veneman have a strong commitment to this principle. This principle extends to those who may not be in this room today, but whose lives are very real, and whose dreams are rooted in the American dream, equality and justice for all.

The prevention of Civil Rights abuses at the USDA is an investment in our values, a decision of the Congress and the President to see that the resources of this government reach all those Congress intended to benefit. We must use the Legislative and Executive authorities to get the job done, rather than wait for courts to act as government administrators.

Mr. Chairman, not only is compassion needed to fulfill the challenges of this position, so is an understanding of government. My background in government has given me the unique opportunity to facilitate change. While working at the United States Office of Personnel Management (OPM), I helped champion landmark legislation. I worked very closely with then Director of OPM, Constance Berry Newman, to overhaul the federal pay system, and present to Congress Pay Reform (locality pay), which was signed into law. As General Counsel of OPM, I supervised many attorneys and support staff. I enjoyed more than anything, the

management aspect of the job. I also worked very closely with the United States Department of Justice on voting rights, as they affected Native Americans. Finally, in my capacity as General Counsel, I worked very closely with the EEOC and MSPB on Title VII issues. Finally, I had the honor to serve as a member of the Administrative Conference of the United States.

I have also had the opportunity to practice law in the private sector, which gave me a different perspective from that of the public sector. The study and practice of law has taught me to utilize analytical reasoning in problem solving.

Finally Mr. Chairman, my service as a Pastor over the last two years has given me the great insight as to how to bring fragmented groups together. A great deal of pasturing involves restoring: restoring individuals and restoring relationships. I will use these tools to restore broken relationships that exists between the clients of the USDA and the USDA.

In closing, I am reminded of the words in Matthew where Christ said: "whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." And conversely, "whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

Mr. Chairman, I thank you for your time and consideration.