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Press Conference - Los Angeles, California - Remarks on a Black Vice Presidential Candidate

Edmund S. Muskie

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The following is a verbatim transcript of a spontaneous press conference held in front of the Century Plaza Hotel, Los Angeles, California, on September 8, 1971, by Senator Edmund Muskie and Mr. Roosevelt Grier for the national and the California press. Portions of this material appeared that evening on Los Angeles television and radio stations, and the following morning on the NBC television network.

REPORTER: What was the purpose of your meeting with black leaders in Watts yesterday?

MUSKIE: The question was particularly of how we could move effectively to deal with the problems that concern black people, including the elections. And so I was asked in that context whether a black candidate for Vice President could be considered for the 1972 election if I were a candidate for the Presidency. I said that in my judgment such a ticket was not electable now. I said I regretted that--it shouldn't be so--, what my judgment was, and that such a ticket would be defeated, and that if it were, it would be a setback to our efforts to implement our commitment to equality for blacks in this country. I think we must work to eliminate this wrong. I consider it a wrong but I don't think we've done so yet. So, this is the choice that faces blacks and those of us who are committed to the ideals of equality in America -- how best we move effectively in the direction of equality, including political equality, which will make it realistically possible for blacks, Mexican-Americans, and representatives of any other minority to aspire to the Vice-Presidency or the Presidency of the United States. That ought to be our goal.

REPORTER: You are saying right now that this is not a practical time for a black man to be running?

MUSKIE: ...as of yesterday, and it's my judgment as of today. I would be delighted if the basis of that judgment changed between now and a year from now.

REPORTER: We were under the impression that that meeting yesterday was confidential.

MUSKIE: It was private in the sense that only in such a setting is it possible to hold an open discussion. But I'm never under the illusion that if anything significant is said in such a meeting that it can be concealed. So, when I was asked the question, I was fully aware that both the question and the answer would in some way surface to public view. I've not been disappointed.

REPORTER: Senator, are you saying that it's the wrong time for a black man to run for Vice President or are you saying that there isn't a black man qualified to run?

MUSKIE: Oh no, there are blacks who are qualified to run--qualified to aspire to the Vice Presidency. I know some of them, and they ought to be eligible for consideration.

REPORTER: Well, when do you think the right time would be?

MUSKIE: Well, I think we can begin to make the right time in this campaign. You know, by surfacing this issue now, we might even make next year the right time. It'll be interesting, the questions that are raised now. It's open to discussion. The American people are going to debate it. Everyone who aspires to the Presidency is going to be asked to express an opinion on it, I suspect, within the next few days. So, now it's in the dialogue. People can consider it -- consider the justice of the request and the possibility. And it may be that by surfacing it, we've enlarged the possibility of an earlier resolution to the problem.

REPORTER: Are you saying that you might change your mind, Senator?

MUSKIE: Not my mind, my judgment.

REPORTER: Rosie, what do you think of the Senator's opinion about a black man not being able to run for Vice President?

ROSIE GRIER: Well, he stated it very clearly.

REPORTER: Do you agree with him?

ROSIE GRIER: I sure do.

REPORTER: Why?

ROSIE GRIER: Well, because I mean you have to look at the thing realistically. And what he's trying to give -- clear, level-headed thinking -- the way a man really should consider the possibilities. When you're running for an office like this, I mean it's a very big office, and sure there are a lot of black people that would love to have a black person run for Vice President, but he's a man who is trying to do something to help him to win -- to maybe clear that hurdle for the next time.

REPORTER: When do you think will be the right time?

ROSIE GRIER: We'll know within ourselves when it's the right time. You'll know too. You won't have to ask me.

REPORTER: Thank you.