

Testimony of

Mr. Robert B. McDuff

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As a native of Mississippi, who lives there and was born and grew up there, and a person who has spent much of his 25 years as a lawyer representing African-American voters in voting rights cases in Mississippi and elsewhere, I have seen the dramatic changes in that state and I also see how far we have to go in order to achieve true equality of opportunity among the races. I am one of many people in that state, black and white, who understand the indispensable role the Voting Rights Act has played in the progress that has taken place, and who strongly believes that the provisions of the Act must be renewed in order to maintain and build upon that progress.

A great deal of progress also occurred in Mississippi and the South in the decade after the Civil War. But when federal protections were withdrawn at the end of Reconstruction, the promises of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments were extinguished as black citizens were excluded from public life by the Mississippi constitutional convention of 1890 and similar actions in state after state. It took Congress, with the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, to begin restoring the promises of the Civil War amendments after the decades of segregation and brutal discrimination that characterized the latter part of the nineteenth century and the better part of the twentieth.

These are different times. But it is important to remember the fragility of progress. The record of the Voting Rights Act in Mississippi demonstrates that we would not be where we are without it, that we still have a long way to go, and that we still encounter sobering reminders of the destructive role that race continues to play in public life. Now is not the time to withdraw the protections of Section 5 of the Act. I am one of many who believe that if we do withdraw those protections, some of the hard-earned gains of the past will be lost once again. This is a crucial time in the history of Mississippi and many other states, and the role of this provision in the ongoing progress in these states is too important to abandon it now.

Attached is a report I have prepared on the operation of the Voting Rights Act in Mississippi and the importance of Section 5 to that state.