

JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN: *historian, scholar, teacher of truth and advocate of racial justice.*

In September, 1995, when he presented John Hope Franklin the Presidential Medal of Freedom, President William Jefferson Clinton noted that Dr. Franklin "has always been a moral compass for America, pointing us in the direction of truth." No one knows the truth about our common past any better than this historian, who has both experienced and chronicled American history over more than five decades.

He was born in Rentiesville, Oklahoma, in 1915, and grew up in that great midwestern space. In 1941, at a time when this country was largely blind to the aspirations of black men and women, he earned a Ph.D. in history from Harvard University and set out on a career of research and writing. He faced obstacles that would have stopped an ordinary man dead in his tracks, but he was determined not to permit racial matters to interfere with his quest for truth.

A decade later he encountered a white historian, a close friend, who invited him to lunch. "I reminded him," Franklin later wrote, "that the Supreme Court restaurant was closed, and there was not another place in the vicinity where we could eat together." His friend wondered what he did for food. Franklin told him he ate a huge late breakfast at home and then brought a piece of fruit or candy to the library which he ate at lunch. Then, when he could bear the hunger no longer, he went home to an early dinner. His friend remarked that if he were a Negro, he would not be a scholar, if scholarship required sacrifices such as this,

and if life were as inconvenient as it appeared. "I assured him," Franklin concluded, "that for a Negro scholar, searching for the truth, the search for food in the city of Washington was one of the minor inconveniences."

In fifty years, John Hope Franklin has overcome the inconveniences, major as well as minor, and changed the way American scholars write about the history of race in the United States. "I look history straight in the eye," he has said, "and call it like it is." Calling it like it is has meant smashing the myths that once hid the ugly facts of slavery, reconstruction, disfranchisement and segregation, in the North as well as in the South. But "calling it like it is" has never meant confusing scholarship with advocacy. For example, he provided Thurgood Marshall with much of the research that underlay the Supreme Court's precedent-setting decision in Brown v. Board of Education, but he refused to distort the facts in order to achieve the victory. And "calling it like it is" has never meant allowing the search for historical truth and racial justice to overwhelm his innate courtesy and consideration for the feelings of all Americans.

During the last five decades, John Hope Franklin has touched the lives of countless students of American history. Some were fortunate enough to have him as a mentor in classrooms—at his alma mater, Fisk University in Nashville, or at St. Augustine's College in Raleigh, North Carolina College in Durham, Howard University, Brooklyn College, the University of Chicago, and Duke. And all have learned from his long list of publications, which includes such seminal works as From Slavery to Freedom, which only two years ago went into its seventh edition; Reconstruction After the Civil War; and George Washington Williams: A Biography that recounts the life of a distinguished black historian of an earlier generation. Washington and Lee University is proud to confer the degree of Doctor of Letters upon John Hope Franklin.