



## Book Review

# Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary

By Robert Rader  
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Thurgood Marshall was a towering figure in the civil rights movement. Not only was he lead counsel in *Brown v Board of Education*, the case in which the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed *de jure* segregation in the schools, but he became the first African American (he preferred “Negro” or “colored”; he never used “black”) to serve on the Supreme Court.

Juan Williams, the keynote speaker at this year’s CABE/CAPSS Convention, wrote *Thurgood Marshall: American Revolutionary*, in the late nineteen-nineties, years after the heyday of the civil rights movement. But the principles established by Marshall still have influence on court decisions and social policy years. We still struggle in Connecticut with segregation in our schools and with the issues brought about by our diverse society.

Marshall was the chief counsel for the National Association of Colored People (NAACP) for many years. He traveled widely across the country, especially during the 1940s and ‘50s, becoming involved in many lawsuits concerning the treatment of individual blacks in America, as well as cases which had a wider effect. His argument before the Supreme Court in the *Brown*, based, in part, on the effect of segregation on black children, led to the Court ruling overturning decades of *Plessy v Ferguson*’s “separate but equal doctrine”, which permitted segregated schools.

Marshall’s happiness in winning this tremendous victory in probably the most celebrated case of the Twentieth Century later turned to bitterness as the nation’s schools took years and years to desegregate. Reaching the goals of equal rights in all aspects of American life has to be realized.

Later in his life, Marshall became Solicitor General and in 1967, President Lyndon Johnson nominated him for the Supreme Court. He was confirmed by a somewhat divided Senate after a difficult nomination process. He was one of the Court’s most liberal members and watched as later presidents appointed more conservative justices. Many of the inroads he and other justices had made, particularly in the 1960s

and early 1970s, were later reversed. He resigned from the Court, a bitter man, in 1991.

In this well-researched biography, Williams delved deeply into Marshall’s personal as well as professional life. He interviewed Marshall at length and the book discusses his complex family life and his relationships, some good and some not, with many of the other leaders of the Civil Rights movement like Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP and Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. He also describes relationships with government officials, such as J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and President Richard Nixon.

A complicated man in complicated times, Marshall served as a role model for millions, even at a time when he was vilified by militants who resisted working within the “white man’s establishment”. Marshall died in 1993.

Here’s how Juan Williams summed up Marshall’s life:

“If history is biography, then Marshall’s story is that of the architect of American race relations for the twentieth century. He was a revolutionary of grand vision who laid the foundation stone for race relations in his time and for generations beyond.”

A few years ago, I was in Arlington National Cemetery, where Marshall is buried amongst the thousands and thousands of white crosses and Stars of David. Marshall’s grave is near that of fellow Justices Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., William O. Douglas, William J. Brennan and Potter Stewart. It seemed so fitting to me that this man who stood out in so many ways had the only black gravestone amongst all the graves in that area. It was dramatic and appropriate.

Juan Williams’ biography of Marshall is but one more of the many fine pieces of literature he has created. It tells the Marshall’s story on many levels and provides a wonderful bird’s eye view of the important legal cases in which Marshall was involved, without getting bogged down in the complicated details.

It really tells the story of the man, with all of his strengths and his foibles. I encourage board members to read this book if they are interested in this fascinating period of American history.