

## **The Honorable Ronald V. Dellums** **U.S. Representative of California (1971–1998)**

### **Events: Civil Rights**

#### **Bringing the Human Family Together**

Representative Dellums recounts his experience of becoming the first African American to represent a majority white district.

*Interview recorded June 19, 2012*

I'm in a congressional district—if you don't mind me—I'm in a congressional district, 1970. Seventy-one percent white. Twenty-nine percent non-white, 18 percent African American, 11 percent Latino, Asian. Twelve-year incumbent Democratic Party, Fulbright Fellow, labor union, on paper, very strong, okay. So here's this young black guy that's going to run against a guy in a 71 percent white district. "What makes you think you can win? You're a black guy in a white district." And I said, "Your question assumes that there's a monolith known as 'the white community.'" I reject that. When I look out there, I don't see a monolith, 'the white community.' I see peace activists, I see labor union people, I see students, I see senior citizens, I see consumers—all of this. And if I speak to these concerns, and I will try desperately to do so, at the end of the day, when the dust settles, the majority of people here, based on these ideas, will put that coalition together, and we'll win the election."

So when I went out to talk to people, I said, "Look." And I never ran from who I am. I went out there, and I said, "Look, I'm a young black man in a society challenging racism. And I will take that responsibility very seriously. And if I'm elected to the Congress, I will go there and stand up to fight against the oppression of racism." I go to the Latino and Asian communities, and other people of color, and I said, "I am a member of part of this community that has been victimized as a result of skin color and culture, background. I will stand up for you as well, because we share that in common." To the women, "You don't have to be black to be treated as a victim, as an oppressed person. You're an oppressed group of people. I am learning. I will take these learnings to Washington and challenge all forms of oppression." Okay?

Then I would go to, you know, the broader white community, and say, "Look, at the end of the day, we're human beings, whatever our color. So preserving the environment, dealing with educational issues, dealing with broader economic issues, dealing with consumer questions—these are human issues. We're all, at the end of the day, human beings. I will go there and stand up for the human family and the quality of life for the human family. I also believe that peace is a superior idea, so I will go fight in the name of peace. I will go and raise my voice for that." So that—it's a long way of saying to you that I took on that broader responsibility because when I won, I became the first African American in American history to win in a predominately white district. And I tell young people that, in 1970, a predominately white district sent a tall, skinny, black guy to Washington to be their congressional Representative. Thirty eight years later, America sends a tall, skinny, black guy from Chicago to be the President of the United States. Moral of the story, the Bay Area was 38 years ahead of its time. It got beyond all that.