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**Professor Discusses Leadership, Obama and Civil Rights Pioneers  
CO.NX webchat transcript, February 26**

Walter Earl Fluker, the executive director of the Leadership Center at Morehouse College, answered questions in a February 6 CO.NX webchat on the legacy that defines President Obama's ethical leadership.

Following is the transcript:

(begin transcript)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE  
Bureau of International Information Programs  
Webchat Transcript

Leadership, Obama and America's Civil Rights Pioneers

Guest: Walter Earl Fluker, Morehouse College  
Date: February 26, 2009  
Time: 9:00 a.m. EST (1400 GMT)

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: Barack Hussein Obama, the 44th President of the United States of America, inherited a long legacy of civil rights pioneers pre-dating the black freedom struggles of the 1950's and 60's. He stands on the shoulders of men and women who went "up from slavery" (Booker T. Washington); envisioned a "talented tenth" who would lead the race (DuBois); fought against the systemic violence of lynching in "the red register" (Ida B. Wells); spoke as a lonely female "voice from the south" identifying early the intersections of race, class and gender construction (Anna Julia Cooper); sought the deepest in the nonviolent spiritual idiom of the race in "Jesus and Disinherited" (Howard Thurman); and served as leaders and guides of men and women who "prepared the way" for the emerging leaders of the modern civil rights movement led ably by the likes of Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Whitney Young, Diane Nash, Bob Moses and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure).

This webchat will emphasize this legacy as "the sociohistorical script" that defines President Barack Obama's ethical leadership represented in his morally-anchored CHARACTER, transformative CIVILITY, and sense of COMMUNITY.

Comment [ircabidjan 3]: Hello this is Christian and Korama from Abidjan.

Webchat Moderator (Kristin): Hello! Thanks for joining us!

Please feel free to introduce yourself and where you are joining us from. I am sitting in Washington, DC.

Comment [Saliou]: Sorry I am in Guinea, West Africa

Comment [Hervet]: hihervet from madagascar

Comment [guest]: I'm Tommy Mumba from Zambia, again I've come to the Webchat since I was there last now with the different issues on the culture system.

Comment [thierno mamdou diallo]: i am a student

Comment [IRC Lusaka]: Hello This Joseph Ngwira from IRC Lusaka.

Comment [ircabidjan 7]: hi my name's armande from abidjan

Webchat Moderator (Marie): Thanks for being here Jospheh and Armande!

Comment [Berthino]: Hi! This is berthino from Bamako. This is my first time to get connected to that chat. I have asked some questions and i am waiting for the answers.

Webchat Moderator (Kristin): Dr. Fluker is writing as fast as he can. Thanks for being

with us today! We are always happy to see new names from new locations.

Webchat Moderator (Kristin): Hello Thierno. Good to see you again.

Question [Sudeep Aditya]: Dr. Fluker, history has played testimony to the fact that the best Leadership has always emerged during the most trying times. What characteristics do you think President Obama and other Leaders have to display to emerge stronger from this crisis? Thanks for your views.

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: Thanks for the question, Sudeep. It is interesting that Barack Obama has emerged as the first black president of the U.S. during a period of great challenge. It is also profound, at least for me, that he arrived at this moment with a certain set of skills which I think characterize the best in a long and noble tradition of leaders who bring both a deep spiritual and moral commitment to humanity and pragmatic tools that allow for retooling, assessment, and appropriation of resources that are already a part of our culture and our humanity.

Therefore, I think history, if Barack Obama is successful, will judge him as one of the greatest presidents in our history. It is also a matter of note that President Obama was received and inaugurated during a period of great global crisis and that his popularity, his charisma, and intelligence were already well-received around the globe. I think this makes an interesting combination for hope and provides a context, perhaps, for rethinking how we understand political leadership at local, national, and global levels.

To answer the last part of the question, it is absolutely essential to have a new generation of leaders like President Obama, but not simply drawing upon his individual characteristics, but the kind of deep-thriving idiom of the times, which I think in many ways calls forth the great leaders. Sydney Hook, the great Yale historian, wrote a book entitled *The Hero in History*, where he makes a distinction between the eventful leader and the event-making leader. This distinction was crucial for Hook, and I think is perhaps a hint for us as we examine not only President Obama but the kind of leadership that is needed at this time. Eventful leaders tend to be caught in the throes of history and they are produced out of the exigencies of the time, but they do not necessarily bring anything new or novel to the equation of leadership.

Therefore, I think Barack Obama and the new generation of leadership that we need at this time needs to demonstrate Hook's idea of the event-making leader. I think our times and circumstances around the globe call for this.

Comment [thierno mamdou diallo]: that is very good

Comment [EDWIN ZULU\_ZAMBIA]: We can draw lessons from Lincoln, Luther and Mandela among others who helped to better the lives of mankind. These front runners fearlessly worked for the betterment of fellow man.

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: Thanks, Edwin, for your statement and all my best to the wonderful people of Zambia. Here again, given my last long statement, I believe that Lincoln, Luther, Mandela, and a long stream of women, represent these event-making leaders. Yes, they are front-runners who fearlessly worked for the betterment of human beings, but even more so, they brought a creative dimension to the struggle. Mandela was not only willing to work with his former oppressors for the redemption of his nation, but actually peacefully transition from power in a situation which could have gone another way if he had been a different kind of leader. This is what we need for the future: leaders who are willing to share power by sharing vision and hopes for the people.

Comment [lento]: I'm Lan from Madagascar.

Webchat Moderator (Kristin): Welcome, Lan!

Question [ircabidjan 6]: Can Barack Obama be quoted as civil right pioneer in America? If yes or no, why?

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: Thank you for your question and greetings to the people in Abidjan! Of course Barack Obama is both the recipient of the gallant struggles of the Civil Rights Era in America and, therefore, I guess it could be said that he represents that tradition. On the other hand, President Obama in many respects is part of a post-Civil Rights tradition. I think the uniqueness of his historical location is that he is able to combine both - that is, building on the legacy inherited from the struggle for Civil Rights in this country but also daring to move beyond some of the internal challenges of that tradition and to envision a new future that is both national and global. I cannot emphasize enough his global leadership, which speaks both to global civil society and we hope to global humanitarian challenges.

Comment [IRC Antananarivo - Ms Berthine]: Hi, this just a simple remark, I think that nowadays people do not really care who you are where are you from or what is the colour of your skin. What matters to them is your idea, your intellectual capacity, your way of talking and convincing people and especially how you talk about people's needs and how you meet them, that was true for Obama, Lincoln and Martin Luther King.

Webchat Moderator (Kristin): Great comment, Ms. Berthinehi.

Q [ircabidjan 3]: What kind of study we need to be a good leader?

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: Greetings to my friends in Abidjan and to the entire country of the Ivory Coast. I am working closely with a number of scholars who are looking carefully at the idea of ethical leadership. In fact, I've recently published a book entitled "*Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community.*" What I talk about in this book also represents the kind of work I do at Morehouse College and also what we do around the globe. These three ideas - character, civility, and community - I believe are essential for the emerging leadership around the globe.

Character can be translated in many ways. The way I use it is "character" as part of a larger story, character which looks at narrative and tries to understand what one's role is in relationship to the larger story. All leaders need to investigate what role they play in the larger drama. That does not mean that we are relieved from the serious challenges of morality, but it does give leaders a social/historical context.

Civility, as I use it, has to do with the public comportment of the leader. It might mean character in public space. Therefore, especially in democratic social systems, civility becomes absolutely essential for democratic governance and for civil society. Civility literally means that we can disagree without injuring, maiming, and killing one another over our disagreements. Moreover, it suggests that democracy is really a contentious debate about goods, services, policies, etc. that determine these issues of governance and living together that relies upon this strong, deep sense of civility.

Lastly, community appears to be self-evident. However, clearly the world hasn't caught up with community yet. We think that leaders must therefore demonstrate a sense of community in their relationships with others and - here's the secret - also in relationship with themselves. To envision oneself as a community of sorts allows one to have a better sense of what it means to have integrity, empathy, and a sense of hope. Moreover, it allows leaders to stand at the intersection where worlds often meet and collide and still demand justice, compassion, and call others to defiant acts of courage.

Webchat Moderator (Kristin): We see your questions coming in. Thank you for your patience. Dr. Fluker is answering as many questions as he can in the time allotted. We will also open our Global Forum after this Q&A for you to share your thoughts with each other.

Comment [mutinta chisamu]: I wish Obama all the best and looking up to him because he faces many challenges, how does he make his final decision.

Webchat Moderator (Kristin): It is true that President Obama faces many challenges. He will have many difficult choices to make in the next 4 years.

Comment [mutinta chisamu]: The success of Obama tell us that we can be who we want to be in life and gives hope to us.

Question [Boubacar]: Hello Dr. Fluker! I'm the Information Resource Center Director at the Embassy in Bamako. When it comes to civil rights, what do we really call pioneers?

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: Thank you for your question and greetings to all of our friends in Mali! Civil rights, by definition, rest upon this big notion of civility which we just mentioned. It comes from the Latin word "civitas," which has to do with the city or the political community. Therefore, rights pertain to certain communities, among these we know - rights for equality (voting rights, free access to public accommodation, equal rights for women, etc.) which our world is still challenged with.

The Civil Rights Movement in the U.S. had a long list of pioneers or forerunners who challenged systems of injustice related to race, class, and gender - certainly in the late 19th century, throughout the 20th. And we have remarkable people (like Martin Luther King, Jr., who is an alumnus of Morehouse College where I teach). But long before MLK Jr., there was Anna Julia Cooper. She was a 19th century black woman whose father was a white slave owner, but who never recognized her as his daughter. Anna Julia Cooper was one of the most brilliant and courageous leaders in the early struggle for Civil Rights in this country. Ida B. Wells, a young woman born at the turn of the

century, was a crusader against the horrible lynchings that took place in the deep south of America. Her fame spread throughout the world, especially to Great Britain.

Or Mary McLeod Bethune, whose faith led her from a small school in Florida to become a member of the "Negro Cabinet" under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. I mention these female crusaders for justice because they do not receive the honorable mention they deserve in most historical chronicles.

My point is that President Obama stands on the shoulders of so many unsung heroes and "sheroes" who made this day possible.

Webchat Moderator (Marie): For more information on Morehouse College where Dr. Fluker is a professor, please visit <http://www.morehouse.edu/>.

Walter Fluker is the executive director of the Leadership Center at Morehouse College. For more information please visit <http://www.morehouse.edu/centers/leadershipcenter/about.html>.

Comment [EDWIN ZULU\_ZAMBIA]: You are right - human rights are a must to all.

Answer [IRC Lusaka]: This is a defining moment not only in America but also history. Of race relations the world over. We never conceived this could happen sooner. I strongly believe that race conflict will not simply go away with this landmark victory of President Obama's election. To what extent did President Obama's personal leadership qualities help him overcome racial cynicism that others before him like Rev. Jackson or Shirley Chisholm did not bring to the campaign?

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: Thank you. It appears Zambia is really on the case today! I agree that this is a defining moment throughout the world for race relations and I would add for civic relations and the hope for a more just and equitable balance in how we think about the very earth that we live on.

I think that Barack Obama's personal leadership did help him overcome racial cynicism. I published an editorial in the US News and World Report to that effect. His pragmatic ability to ask the critical question - for him, at least - "does it work?" His moral vision and his leadership, I think, in many ways are defined by this pragmatism. Unlike his predecessors, who must be judged within the context of their own times, he is situated in a moment where public and social consciousness have been shaped by two costly wars; a frightened and confused citizenry that has experienced a financial crisis that is being compared with the Great Depression (it might be worse); and by, what I hope, is a broader and more sympathetic acceptance of difference. Not simply race, but difference.

So, in many ways, President Obama's leadership has to be understood within this historical context and the pragmatic moral vision which he brings to it. This pragmatic moral vision realizes that there are some things, though they might be right and just, that may not be practical to raise against some other items that demand priority. Race was highly problematic throughout the Obama campaign. But guess what? He was elected President of the United States of America.

Webchat Moderator (Kristin): In just a moment we will open up our Global Forum for your thoughts and reactions.

Question [Lutangu]: Can we see some leadership quality in African leaders in future like those of President Obama or what?

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: Thank you for this excellent question. This will be my last response. I appreciate the many questions from around the globe and I beg your understanding.

I believe African leaders in the future will come from places we had not thought. The traditional stream of African leadership, with which I have had the opportunity to work, has mirrored most of the models of Europe and the U.S. But more and more, there is a developing African leadership which seeks to overcome the inherent challenges wrought by tradition, religion, and historical circumstance.

Some of the visuals that we see in the West are often disparaging of African leadership. But I happen to know that there is an emerging leadership in Africa which embraces the notion of democracy and offers the best hope for that beautiful and wonderful continent and its many countries. Many of these leaders are already awakened.

Comment [mutinta chisamu]: We hope to have great African leaders like Obama.

Dr. Walter Earl Fluker: I again would like to thank everyone for their questions and for this wonderful opportunity to speak with you all around the globe!

You can find my book "*Ethical Leadership: The Quest for Character, Civility, and Community*" at [Amazon](#).

Comment [thierno mamdou diallo]: I thank you too much.

Webchat Moderator (Marie): The Webchat is now closed. We wish to thank Dr. Walter Earl Fluker for joining us today. A transcript of today's webchat will be posted to <http://co-nx.state.gov> and to <http://www.america.gov/multimedia/askamerica.html> within one business day. Speakers are chosen for their expertise and may not reflect the views of the U.S. Department of State.

(end transcript)

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