Three years after the 1954 Brown vs. Board of Education decision by the U.S. Supreme Court, then MSU president John A. Hannah became the nation’s first chairman of the Civil Rights Commission—a post he held for 12 tumultuous years.

It was an era of confrontation and national division, as varying groups fought to either destroy or preserve the “separate but equal” doctrine. By 1962, it had become clear that the nation resolved decisively to move towards an unbiased society, and in retrospect, many historians credit the forceful and effective leadership of Hannah with making change possible. Father Hesburgh’s assessment of that leadership is excerpted here with permission from Dick Niehoff, author of the forthcoming book, John Hannah: Versatile Administrator and Distinguished Public Servant.
In the fall of 1957 I had a call from Sherman Adams asking if I would serve on the Civil Rights Commission. He mentioned that John Hannah was going to be chairman and that there would be three Republicans and three Democrats as required by law, as well as the decision of President Eisenhower. Three of the members would be Southerners and three Northerners. I had another call from Sherman Adams asking if I were a Republican or a Democrat since they had to be divided equally. I told him I was neither because I have always been independent in politics, and he said that no problem, he would put me into the open slot which I believe was Republican at that time since most Southerners tended to be Democratic.

As anyone can see from the disposition of the membership, John was going to have a very difficult time bringing any unity out of a group divided both politically and geographically and one might say especially in point of view. It would take a kind of genius to bring anything out of this commission by way of unanimous report and everyone thought it impossible anyway. But the Congress had hobbled and argued about the civil rights situation all during the summer of 1957, and their legislation establishing the Commission was a kind of compromise position. It had been said that no one could agree on anything, you appoint a commission to find an answer. In this case, they appointed a commission that agreed on very little outside of the Constitution of the United States. Anyway, as we began our work I was convinced that if anyone could bring unity out of this Commission, it was John Hannah because he had the respect of all of us and was a fair and intelligent and well-balanced human being.

We had the usual problems of assembling a staff. One of the first things John and I insisted on was that we have an assistant since neither of us were lawyers and I believe all the others were. Subsequently, we put together a very bright young staff of assistants who were very influential, especially the one who served me, Harris Woford. We also had very little money since we were given a few hundred thousand dollars out of the President’s emergency fund. What we lacked in resources and facilities we made up for in the dedication of our staff and our personal convictions, with John’s good leadership all along the way, to do something about a situation in America which could only be described as comparable to apartheid in South Africa.

One of the most interesting events that brought success to the first two years of the life of the Commission was the matter of a hearing in Shreveport, Louisiana, and the ensuing effort to produce a report for the President and the Congress. We had a series of partial reports from all of our public hearings. At the end of each of these individual public hearing reports we would have a section indicating what our findings were in a factual manner, from the testimony we had received. We would then have a section on our conclusions regarding equality of opportunity following these facts. And then finally we would have a section of recommendations for Federal law to correct the matter of denial of equal opportunity involved in this particular matter.

As can be imagined, there were long discussions on each one of these reports and quite a number of people and I believe all the others were, we gradually achieved a consensus based on the facts. One of the most interesting things of the Commission was that we were never found misrepresenting facts. Fixed by the startling facts that emerged from our hearings, it was difficult not to agree with our findings, our conclusions and our recommendations for new legislation, even though they were all very controversial in the public mind and especially in the Congress.

With reference to the final preparation and review of the 1959 Report, I suggested to John that we change the situation completely and thanks to a good trustee of Notre Dame, Ms. O’Shaughnessy, we were able to get her DC-3 airplane to fly us to northern Wisconsin where Notre Dame has a lodge at Land O’ Lakes. It is hard to describe the change of atmosphere when one goes from what we had been enduring in Shreveport to the pine-settled north woods where we took the whole Commission and staff out to a Notre Dame lodge for cocktails and charcoal broiled steaks on the lawn overlooking a beautiful lake.

I should say that half of our Commission were non-drinkers but at least they got cold Cokes. After dinner we arranged for everyone to go fishing. I guess the good Lord was on our side because everybody caught a lot of bass and walleye and when we arrived back at the lodge at sundown around 8:30 everyone was in a completely mellow mood.

We fixed up a table on the screened-in porch of the lodge and then between 8:30 and midnight as the full moon was rising over the lake and the loons crying in the distance, and everyone feeling good about the world generally and relieved to be out of Shreveport, we were able to get a practically unanimous decision on the whole report. As I recall, there were 12 recommendations and 11 of them passed unanimously. One of the recommendations on education, the former governor of Virginia decided to vote contrary since he thought it was too sociological. I recall at breakfast the next morning the Southerners looked at each other and said, “We were had last night,” but then the governor of Virginia said, “Yes we were had, but we agreed and we will be gentlemen about it.” Perhaps it was one of the best testimonies to John Hannah’s leadership. He had really brought order out of chaos and we had a very strong report to present to the President and the Congress, the result of which the Commission was renewed for a few more years and that went on for many years yet to come. It was always a precarious existence though and I recall once when we were renewed and kept from going out of existence at the final act of legislation in the dying Congress, the only way we were saved was by hooking the renewal of the Commission onto the peanut subsidy bill which no southerners were going to vote against.

Perhaps the real breakthrough for the Commission came in 1964 following the assassination of President Kennedy and the presidency of Lyndon Johnson. John and the Commission met with Lyndon Johnson right after the shooting and he said that he would like the test of his presidency to be the membership of poor people who were deprived and suffering at the beginning of his administration and what he hoped would be a much smaller number of people following his administration. However, to solve that problem structurally and organizationally and systematically, we simply had to change the law and we simply had to create new laws and new structures for equal opportunity. This happened with the civil rights law of 1964 which was passed after Lyndon Johnson addressed the joint session of Congress and with great courage for a southerner finished his speech by quoting the battle cry of Martin Luther King, “we shall overcome.” Johnson has been greatly criticized for many things, particularly for Vietnam, but he has not received anywhere near the praise he deserves for passing that ominous civil rights act in 1964 which was followed by the voting rights act in 1965 and subsequently the 1968 law on housing which had been stalled to death in 1967.

In his relationship with all of the commissioners, John was both fair and friendly. It was very hard to disagree with him when he stated a basic principle in very clear and forceful language. Also, he was most fair in giving those who deserved ample time to speak and that included the witnesses at all our hearings but he was both fearless and courageous in confronting the difficult kind of people we would call for testimony and were totally against everything we were doing. The whole matter was not without physical danger either because I recall at Jackson, Mississippi, the local NAACP group called the hotel and tried to get the numbers of our hotel rooms so we could be bombarded. In Nashville, Tennessee, we were staying in the Heritage Hotel and we got word in the middle of the hearing that a booth was being set up in the next ten minutes so we had to clear the room. When the FBI couldn’t find a bomb we decided to rub it in and we went back in the same room for lunch and continued the hearing after the afternoon.

I am sure there are not too many people who have accused John of having a deep sense of humor, but he had a deep sense of humor and he could laugh heartily at some of the almost impossible opposition that faced us at every turn. It seemed like every time we had a chance he could keep his cool in arguing with untrained senators and adversarial congressmen; there was no doubt that there was steel in his voice and when he was right and knew it, he did not suffer fools gladly. I think he had great character in keeping his temper under control and I am sure he has a considerable temper when aroused by injustices.

When I look back at the African, I say you’ve got to believe that one can live without apartheid with untrained senators and adversarial congressmen; there is no doubt that there was steel in his voice and when he was right and knew it, he did not suffer fools gladly. I think he had great character in keeping his temper under control and I am sure he has a considerable temper when aroused by injustices.

Father Hedburg, president of Notre Dame University from 1952–77, served as Civil Rights Commissioner from 1957 to 1960. He was also a director of the National Civil Rights Movement, a member of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and a member of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights. He was also a member of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.