

contents

Volume 98 | Issue 3, March 2021



Departments

4 222 West State Street

Michael F. Cerra

6 COVID Recovery

Shawn Klein

12 NJ Now

48 Gold Dome

Ben Dworkin, Ph.D.

50 Finance Center

Joshua Pine, Rose Kim, and Anita Yadavalli

51 Legal Q&A

Frank Marshall, Esq.

52 Legislative Update

Lori Buckelew, Andrew LaFevre & Paul A. Penna,
Frank Marshall, Esq.

54 Business Card Directory

56 Local Governing / Supporters

32 Conference Connections: Exercising Political Courage

A Remote Discussion at the NJ League of Municipalities
Conference

Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver, State of New Jersey; Jonathan Holloway,
President, Rutgers University; and John Farmer Jr., Director, Eagleton
Institute of Politics

38 Jersey City Safety

Setting our vision on zero crash fatalities

Steven Fulop, Mayor, City of Jersey City; Member, NJLM Executive Board

44 Autonomous Vehicles

State and municipal governments need to stay in the same lane

Avi D. Kelin, Esq., Genova Burns



Conference

Connections

Exercising Political Courage

Observations from a Remote Discussion at the NJ League of Municipalities Conference with Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver, Rutgers University President Jonathan Holloway, and Eagleton Institute of Politics Director John Farmer Jr.

JOHN WEINGART, *Associate Director, Eagleton Institute of Politics,
Director, Center on the American Governor*



New Jersey State League of Municipalities
105th Annual Conference - presented virtually
November 16-20 #njleague



Clockwise from top: Eagleton Institute's John Farmer and John Weingart with Lt. Gov. Sheila Oliver and Rutgers University President Jonathan Holloway

The text that follows was edited for space, but an expanded version can be found at www.njlm.org/magazine.

At each year's annual conference, the League in collaboration with the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University includes a Holland Session on Ethics in Government. The program is named for Art Holland, a Rutgers alum who was elected Mayor of Trenton in 1959 and served for all but four of the next 30 years. Mayor Holland became well known for his openness to the public and for the ethical standards of his administration.

This year's topic, Exercising Political Courage, was discussed by three distinguished leaders: Lieutenant Governor Sheila Y. Oliver, Rutgers University President Jonathan Holloway and Eagleton Institute of Politics Director John J. Farmer Jr.

Q John J. Farmer Jr.: *What we're here to talk about today is exactly what does the idea of political courage mean for our time. How do you make the hard calls? What's the thinking process that's involved? Lieutenant Governor Oliver, would you go first?*

Sheila Oliver: Thank you. You know, I'm a Baby Boomer and I grew up in a kinder and gentler time. Early in my life, maybe because I was an avid reader and I went to Sunday school, I think I developed this keen sense of what's right and what's wrong and for speaking up when you know something is wrong.

Now that I have become Lieutenant Governor and the Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs, I have an even keener sense of the necessity of operating with the highest ethical standards. I think political courage rises when you are asked to go with the flow and you know as an ethical public servant, you must speak up. I think that if you exert that type of leadership, you earn a great deal of respect from the people who you are working with and I believe that your various constituencies have that much more respect for you.

Q John J. Farmer Jr.: *Thank you. President Holloway, you're an eminent historian as well as President of Rutgers, so could you give us some reflections on political courage from an historical perspective as well as your own personal story?*

Jonathan Holloway: Thank you. I want to start with a story that comes from 2015 or 2016. I was working as Dean of Yale College and was in charge of all aspects of the undergraduate experience. We were having quite a year, with lots of controversies on campus. During

the spring there was a controversy over the naming of buildings on campus and when the names were announced for two new residential colleges, students were furious with the decision.

Now, my boss was the president of this private university. I served at his pleasure in an environment that was very hierarchical and appropriately so. We were both in a large chapel on the campus, with about 1,200 students filling the place in an electrified moment. Students expressed their anger and at the end of this very difficult hour, as about a dozen students were gathered around the president and asking him polite but really pointed questions.

I was standing off to the side when a student with whom I had a very strong relationship came up to me. We'll call this student Jeff. He said he was taking a class on principled leadership from Stanley McChrystal, the retired general, and that General McChrystal had been talking about the need for people to speak up when they feel something wrong has happened. Jeff said, "You're a campus leader, what do you think of that idea?"

I said that I understood but the first thing to know is that my job as dean is to support the president. The only opinion that matters right now should be the president's but, I said, let's presume that I felt very differently than the president did on this decision. And he said, "Yes, what would you do? A principled leader has to stand up and make a statement."

I said, "Well, let's presume I disagreed with the president so strongly that I felt the need to take that stand. Then my last sentence from a principled position would have to be, 'I have to resign the deanship. And I want to tell you, Jeff, I'm not ready to resign the deanship over this issue. I don't think this issue is big enough because there are so many other things that need to be done.'"

As he seemed to be mulling it over, I added, "Think about the things that you care about where you know I share some of your views. If I'm no longer there, who else in the administration is going to fight for you?"

I tell this story because I wanted to add a nuance to the ways in which one can

be a principled leader. You need to figure out if the stakes are high enough.

Sometimes I feel that being that principled leader is to figure out, "Ok, how do I navigate this moment so I can continue to fight from a position of power or influence when I think we have a real crisis coming down the line?" And that's a judgment call, it's very difficult.

That was not a pleasant process to navigate. No matter what you decide, you've wronged somebody, and you have to navigate how you move forward in an ethical sense, in a principled sense, so you can keep doing your job.

Now, you asked earlier about people I admire and the list is either way too long or way too short. One could admire political leaders or activist leaders and such, but I actually admire the people whose names we don't know—the people who, for instance, saw Martin Luther King when he came into town and then were still there after Reverend King had moved on. They were in a much more dangerous moment and yet they still kept up that political movement. Those people are completely astonishing to me, and I know that I would not be where I am had it not been for so many other people who were working hard to imagine a day when Rutgers might be ready to have the first Black president in its history.

Sheila Oliver: The individual who had the most profound influence on me was Shirley Chisholm. Here's this woman born in the Caribbean, and her parents come to the United States during a period when women weren't expected to go to college. She goes and graduates with a business degree and ends up working in education, but begins to go to community meetings where she, too, begins to speak for people who can't speak for themselves. She runs for local elected office and then ends up being the first Black woman in Congress.

Q John J. Farmer Jr.: *President Holloway, you mentioned the incident at Yale and I'm wondering, how much of our history—and particularly with respect to political courage—should be reconsidered in light of our current state of thinking.*

The example that comes to mind for me comes from revisiting "Profiles in Courage" by John Kennedy. One of the people future President Kennedy celebrated was a former high-ranking Confederate Officer and future U.S. Senator, Lucius Lamar, who had actually drafted the ordinance of secession for Mississippi. Kennedy celebrated Senator Lamar's role in ending what he referred to as the "carpetbag republican rule" in Mississippi. That's the perspective from 1950s America. But now that reversal is considered really the beginnings of Jim Crow and the Black codes that were passed. And so how should we think of such historical figures in light of our current situation?

Jonathan Holloway: You know when we eventually got around to having a blue ribbon commission to address naming practices at Yale, one of the first things the chair of that commission said was that we need to bring humility to our understanding of the past. It is easy

for all of us in our present day to say, "Well I would have never done X, Y, or Z at a particular moment in time."

And, you know, maybe you wouldn't have 50 years earlier, but we need to confront questions like that. I think the history of this country is even more exceptional when we think about those unsightly parts of our history because there's still something that we're aiming towards, that we're believing, and that we want to see realized.

So, I think that we don't need more mythology, we need tough, fair histories that challenge us because in that challenging, we are a better people.

Q John J. Farmer Jr.: Lieutenant Governor Oliver, you made some news over the summer by responding to the Defund the Police Movement by rejecting out of hand the idea of completely defunding the police. What went into that decision by you to come out publically on that subject?

Sheila Oliver: Well, as we watched what was erupting all over the country with many saying that police organizations were at the very depth of the status of people of color in this country, I rejected that. We know that public safety and law enforcement agencies serve a purpose.

Now is there police brutality? Yes, there is. Has the power and authority of law enforcement been used for an illicit purpose through our history? Yes, it has. But we cannot define all police officers and police organizations and paint them with a brush saying that we need to just abolish them.

One of the things I think that we're up against in this country is that yes we do love our exceptionalism, but we should not love our American exceptionalism to the extent that we do not learn and develop perspectives from other types of societies and cultures around the world.

We did not see political courage during the discussions about defunding the police.



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Unfortunately, we saw elected officials and other leaders across the country fold in to supporting that concept because they felt it was politically expedient. Candidates and other community leaders felt that they had to stand with the people who stood for defunding the police.

Q John J. Farmer Jr.: *The issue of defunding the police is an aspect of a larger problem I guess, which is that the country is polarized to the point where it feels to me as if it takes courage to even say something at a family gathering when you know that certain people don't hold your opinions.*

I'm wondering, does daily life now require political courage just to have conversations with folks and what do you think is the long-term solution to that polarization?

Jonathan Holloway: I'll jump in with my modest thoughts first. These devices, these smartphones, have radicalized politics, and I mean that in good and bad ways. We see all the ways that they've brought people together to change the country or to change societies in ways that are deeply needed. But my goodness, they also have weaponized how we speak to one another.

What I would love to find is a way to tap into the organizing abilities of social media and then to find a way to embrace decency again. Now when I say embrace decency, I'm not saying look the other way because complaining is indecent, but the notion of barriers and limits having been blown apart by hashtag politics, social media politics so we now don't have the space to speak in error. We don't have the space to say, "That's really not what I meant to say, I'm sort of thinking on the fly here." And that's a real detriment.

I think we often forget at the end of the day that our public figures are all human beings and therefore are deeply

About the Speakers



Lieutenant Governor Sheila Oliver is a self-described "Jersey Girl," born and raised in Newark.

Lieutenant Governor Oliver has advocated for social justice, women's equality, and education, ultimately becoming the first woman of color to serve in a statewide elected office in New Jersey history. She also serves as Commissioner of the Department of Community Affairs, where she has led efforts to strengthen and expand

initiatives for fair and affordable housing, community revitalization, homelessness prevention, and local government services that support New Jersey's 565 municipalities.

Lieutenant Governor Oliver has worked in the public, non-profit, and private sectors, and has taught numerous college courses. She has served as a member of both the East Orange Board of Education and the Essex County Board of Chosen Freeholders.

In 2003, she was elected to serve the 34th Legislative District in the New Jersey General Assembly and became the first African-American woman in state history to serve as Assembly Speaker, and just the second in the nation's history to lead a state legislative house.

Lieutenant Governor Oliver graduated cum laude from Lincoln University, and received her MS in Community Organization, Planning, and Administration from Columbia University. She has received honorary doctorates from the New Jersey Institute of Technology, Lincoln University, Montclair University, and Berkeley and Essex County Colleges. She is a 40-plus-year resident of East Orange.



Dr. Jonathan Holloway is the president of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and serves as a University Professor and Distinguished Professor.

Previously, Dr. Holloway was provost of Northwestern University from 2017 to 2020 and a member of the faculty of Yale University from 1999 to 2017. He served as Dean of Yale College and the Edmund S. Morgan Professor of African American

Studies, History, and American Studies.

President Holloway's scholarly work specializes in post-emancipation U.S. history with a focus on social and intellectual history. He is the author of *The Cause of Freedom: A Concise History of African Americans*, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919-1941*, and *Jim Crow Wisdom: Memory and Identity in Black America Since 1940*. He is working on a new book, *A History of Absence: Race and the Making of the Modern World*.

Dr. Holloway, who began his academic career at the University of California, San Diego, received a bachelor's degree Stanford University and a Ph.D. in history from Yale University.

He serves on boards of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and the Academic Leadership Institute.

In April 2020, Governor Phil Murphy appointed him to the Governor's Restart and Recovery Commission, and in May 2020, NJ Assembly Speaker Craig Coughlin appointed him to his Economic Advisory Council.



John J. Farmer Jr. is the former attorney general for New Jersey, senior counsel for the 9/11 Commission, was an assistant U.S. Attorney, and worked at Riker, Danzig, Scherer, Hyland & Perretti LLP. He is the former law school dean, is currently special counsel to the President of Rutgers and on the faculty at the Eagleton Institute of Politics.

Professor Farmer received his J.D. from Georgetown University Law Center and received his B.A. from Georgetown

University. He began his career as a law clerk to Associate Justice Alan B. Handler of the New Jersey Supreme Court.

Professor Farmer served as senior counsel and team leader for the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States (commonly known as the 9/11 Commission).

He has been a frequent contributor to the *Star-Ledger* and the *New York Times* and has had articles published in the *Rutgers Law Review*, *Seton Hall Law Review*, and other journals. Farmer has also lectured extensively on post 9/11 safety and security issues.

Professor Farmer is president of the board of trustees of the New Jersey Institute for Social Justice and a former member of the New Jersey Governor's Ethics Advisory Board.

fallible and far from perfect. I use the word 'grace' a lot. And I think that we need to find a way to have that word, these kind of old fashioned [words], be put back into our common language because we are attacking ourselves at this point and I think democracy is suffering.

Sheila Oliver: I think Jonathan is absolutely right. In terms of being able to raise very sensitive issues amongst people with divergent views, I think that has to be done with the ability to think from the other person's perspective and to engage in these kinds of conversations without being combative, confrontational. Everyone can walk away having learned something about that issue on the other side. And that is what we have to get back to in this country, that's what we have to get back to in New Jersey.

Q John J. Farmer Jr.: *I want to turn to the unique challenges that are posed by the current experience we're having with COVID-19. I remember distinctly at the end of June when the*

presidents of other Big Ten universities were announcing that they were going to be fully open and on President Holloway's literally first day on the job he had to make the decision for Rutgers. I'm wondering what went into that decision. You had to know that at the time parents were going to be unhappy and alums were going to be unhappy and students were going to be unhappy. So why didn't you go with the flow and say, "We're going to try to be open," and sort of hedge it that way as opposed to just making the decision that you made?


Jonathan Holloway: Yes, a fun way to start, my very first press conference was sharing that news. It was actually an easy-uncomfortable but easy-decision, though in difficult circumstances.

We did not have the confidence that we could provide or guarantee the health and safety of the students, the faculty, and the staff and all three components are critical.

Q John J. Farmer Jr.: *Jonathan, you have the last word.*

Jonathan Holloway: I just want to emphasize what the Lieutenant Governor said. I would like to get to a point where we wake up in the morning as Americans, not as a democrat, as a republican or as a socialist or a progressive, whatever.

I'm not criticizing any particular party, we need a healthy robust range of parties, but I want us to wake up and recognize that we share more in common than we don't. If you start the day with that orientation, you come out in a different place, the nature of your disagreements are different.

We should have disagreements, that's healthy, that's what a democracy is all about, that's how you find out what the best ideas are, but if you start from the place of sharing as common sensibility, it changes the nature of the disagreement. That's where we need to get to. 

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