

Robert H. Jackson Essay Contest

How did Robert H. Jackson's life show us how to protect the civil and human rights of others?

The Power of Words

At the mere age of fourteen, Robert H. Jackson had the power to change people's minds. He knew how to tie arguments together to make a convincing point. People at Frewsburg High School and Jamestown would listen to him intently as he'd raise his finger in a debate, point it and utter the words, "Mark you!" He loved the attention people paid to his words. Listening to great orators such as William Jennings Bryan allowed Jackson to hone his speaking skills and style. Jackson especially enjoyed playing the part of a lawyer in mock trials during his time with Frewsburg's Literary Society. Little did he know then that he'd play the part on a much grander scale, showing the world in Nuremberg, Germany just how powerful words can be.

On November 21, 1945, while taking a leave of absence from the United States Supreme Court to preside over the international tribunal where Nazi war criminals would be tried, Robert Jackson would demonstrate how strongly he felt about fairness and humanity. In "one of the great speeches of our time," according to CBS radio broadcaster William Shirer, Jackson clearly stated how even a war criminal was deserving of a fair trial. He did not want anyone to be convicted unless the evidence proved it. Thus, stepping up to the lectern in front of the judges, he began, "That four great nations, flushed with victory and stung with injury stay the hand of vengeance and voluntarily submit their captive enemies to the judgment of the law is one of the most significant tributes that Power has ever paid to reason."

What his forceful words meant was that *everyone*, including people as guilty in the public's eyes as the Nazis, must have a chance under the law. He would give them their say, despite what others might naturally think.

Robert Jackson also stood for civil rights. He believed, like President Barack Obama had said in his Inaugural Address, that blacks and whites should not be treated differently. Said Obama, "[We] cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass." In the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in 1954, Jackson agreed with Chief Justice Earl Warren that children should not be separated from each other in school as the Court had decided in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case in 1896. In fact, he felt it necessary to attend the announcement of the Supreme Court's decision, even though his doctors had advised him to get some more rest after a heart attack he had recently suffered.

There is no doubt that Robert H. Jackson did his best to protect the human and civil rights of others. He dedicated himself fully to the law, making sure that the law worked for all people. Ms. Jarrow's book showed me how Jackson used his words to educate people on standing up for what was right, not what was popular. That's certainly something I will strive to do, too.