Contest Winner

M. L. KING, Jr.
The elimination contest of the Washington high school, under the direction of the committee on Elks' orations, was held at the Service Men's Center Thursday morning at 10:30 o'clock.

From the Atlanta Daily World, 16 April 1944.
On 13 April 1944, in his junior year at Atlanta’s Booker T. Washington High School, King, Jr., won an oratorical contest sponsored by the black Elks. With the runner-up at Washington High, Hiram Kendall, he won the right to represent the school at the statewide contest held at First Baptist Church in Dublin, Georgia. Kendall was a runner-up at the state contest. The theme of both contests was “The Negro and the Constitution.” According to later accounts, during the bus trip to the contest, King and his teacher, Sarah Grace Bradley, were told by the driver to surrender their seats to newly boarding white passengers. King resisted at first, but his teacher finally persuaded him to leave his seat. They stood for several hours during the bus ride to Atlanta.

King’s oration was published in May 1944 at the end of his junior, and final, year at Washington High in the school annual, The Cornellian. More polished than other pieces that King wrote as a teenager, the essay probably benefited from adult editing and from King’s awareness of similar orations. Citing the experiences of the black opera singer Marian Anderson as an example, the oration outlines the contradictions between the nation’s biblical faith and constitutional values and the continuing problem of racial discrimination. But the conclusion is marked by a hopeful rhetorical flourish: “My heart throbs anew in the hope that inspired by the example of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, [America] will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom,” said the young King. “And I with my brother of blackest hue possessing at last my rightful heritage and holding my head erect, may stand beside the Saxon—a Negro—and yet a man!”

Negroes were first brought to America in 1620 when England legalized slavery both in England and the colonies and America; the institution grew and thrived for about 150 years upon the backs of these black men. The empire of King Cotton was built and the southland maintained a status of life and hospitality distinctly its own and not anywhere else.

On January 1, 1863 the proclamation emancipating the slaves which had been decreed by President Lincoln in September took effect—millions of Negroes faced a rising sun of a new day begun. Did they have habits of thrift or principles of honesty and integrity? Only a few! For their teachings and duties had been but two activities—love of Master, right or wrong, good or bad, and loyalty to work. What was to be the place for such men in the reconstruction of the south?

America gave its full pledge of freedom seventy-five years ago. Slavery has been a strange paradox in a nation founded on the principles that all men are
created free and equal. Finally after tumult and war, the nation in 1865 took
a new stand—freedom for all people. The new order was backed by amend-
ments to the national constitution making it the fundamental law that thence-
forth there should be no discrimination anywhere in the "land of the free" on
account of race, color or previous condition of servitude.

Black America still wears chains. The finest Negro is at the mercy of the
meanest white man. Even winners of our highest honors face the class color
bar. Look at a few of the paradoxes that mark daily life in America. Marian
Anderson was barred from singing in the Constitution Hall, ironically
enough, by the professional daughters of the very men who founded this
nation for liberty and equality. But this tale had a different ending. The
nation rose in protest, and gave a stunning rebuke to the Daughters of the
American Revolution and a tremendous ovation to the artist, Marian An-
derson, who sang in Washington on Easter Sunday and fittingly, before the
Lincoln Memorial. Ranking cabinet members and a justice of the supreme
court were seated about her. Seventy-five thousand people stood patiently
for hours to hear a great artist at a historic moment. She sang as never
before with tears in her eyes. When the words of "America" and "Nobody
Knows De Trouble I Seen" rang out over that great gathering, there was a
hush on thee sea of uplifted faces, black and white, and a new baptism of
liberty, equality and fraternity. That was a touching tribute, but Miss An-
derson may not as yet spend the night in any good hotel in America. Recently
she was again signally honored by being given the Bok reward as the most
distinguished resident of Philadelphia. Yet she cannot be served in many of
the public restaurants of her home city, even after it has declared her to be
its best citizen.²

So, with their right hand they raise to high places the great who have dark
skins, and with their left, they slap us down to keep us in "our places." "Yes,
America you have stripped me of my garments, you have robbed me of my
precious endowment."

We cannot have an enlightened democracy with one great group living in
ignorance. We cannot have a healthy nation with one tenth of the people
ill-nourished, sick, harboring germs of disease which recognize no color
lines—obey no Jim Crow laws. We cannot have a nation orderly and sound
with one group so ground down and thwarted that it is almost forced into
unsocial attitudes and crime. We cannot be truly Christian people so long as
we flaunt the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule.
We cannot come to full prosperity with one group so ill-delayed that it
cannot buy goods. So as we gird ourselves to defend democracy from foreign
attack, let us see to it that increasingly at home we give fair play and free
opportunity for all people.

2. Marian Anderson was barred from singing in Constitution Hall in 1939. She received the
Bok Award on 18 March 1941. See her autobiography, My Lord, What a Morning (New York:
Today thirteen million black sons and daughters of our forefathers continue the fight for the translation of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments from writing on the printed page to an actuality. We believe with them that "if freedom is good for any it is good for all," that we may conquer southern armies by the sword, but it is another thing to conquer southern hate, that if the franchise is given to Negroes, they will be vigilant and defend even with their arms, the ark of federal liberty from treason and destruction by her enemies.

The spirit of Lincoln still lives; that spirit born of the teachings of the Nazarene, who promised mercy to the merciful, who lifted the lowly, strengthened the weak, ate with publicans, and made the captives free. In the light of this divine example, the doctrines of demagogues shiver in their chaff. Already closer understanding links Saxon and Freedman in mutual sympathy.

America experiences a new birth of freedom in her sons and daughters; she incarnates the spirit of her martyred chief. Their loyalty is repledged; their devotion renewed to the work He left unfinished. My heart throbs anew in the hope that inspired by the example of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, they will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom. And I with my brother of blackest hue possessing at last my rightful heritage and holding my head erect, may stand beside the Saxon—a Negro—and yet a man!

PD. EPH.

To Alberta Williams King

11 June 1944
Simsbury, Conn.

Although King had just completed his junior year in high school, he spent the summer of 1944 working with Morehouse College students on a Connecticut tobacco farm owned by Cullman Brothers, Inc. This, the first of four letters he wrote that summer, comments on attending a nonsegregated church in Simbury and leading Sunday services for the other students in the program. King later traced his call to the ministry to "the summer of 1944 when I felt an inescapable urge to serve society." King asks his mother to see Clinton Nathaniel Cornell, principal of Booker T. Washington High School, about the results of the test he had taken to gain early admission to Morehouse.

1. At the top of the letter, King writes "Cullman Bro Inc.," as part of the return address.
2. See King, Application for Admission to Crozer Theological Seminary, February 1948, p. 144 in this volume.