

June 1956 the unity of the nation and the presence of Almighty God. For as we said all along, this is a spiritual movement.<sup>4</sup>

PD. *Fellowship* 22 (May 1956): 5–7.

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4. Miller promised King that the article would end with an appeal for funds, but it was omitted in the final copy. King concluded his interview with Smiley with a discussion of the financial situation of the MIA: “Along with [prayers from other communities] there is always a pressing need for funds. This is a very expensive movement, our local operations like the car pool, running of an office, are now running into about \$3000.00–\$3500.00 a week, and of course we have court cases before us, and we are involved in a great deal of litigation which will be very expensive. We can see now that that will cost with the present indictments and the other suit in the federal court, both will cost some \$16,000.00–\$18,000.00. So that you can see that our expenses are high and that we need financial assistance at every point. So that through your prayers and your financial assistance, we will be greatly benefited” (King, interview by Smiley). See also Miller to King, 10 April 1956.

### “The ‘New Negro’ of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story”

June 1956  
New York, N.Y.

*This article, printed in the Socialist Party–sponsored journal, the Socialist Call, was drawn from an address King delivered on 17 May at the annual dinner of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, commemorating the second anniversary of the Supreme Court’s school desegregation decision. Expounding on three basic attitudes regarding progress in race relations, King dismisses both “extreme optimism” and “extreme pessimism,” arguing instead for a “realistic” approach that acknowledges substantial progress but recognizes that “we have a long long way to go.” He then discusses the emergence of the “new Negro” in the South, “with a new sense of dignity and destiny,” particularly in Montgomery, and urges an interrelated strategy of education, legal reform, and nonviolent resistance to move African Americans toward “the promised land.” Significant variations between the article and a typed draft of the speech, containing marginal handwritten comments by King, are noted.<sup>1</sup>*

There are three basic attitudes that one can take toward the question of progress in the area of race relations. The first is the attitude of extreme optimism. The optimist would contend that we have come a long way in race relations. He would point proudly to the marvelous strides that have been made in the area of civil rights over the last few decades. From this he would conclude that the problem is just about solved, and that we can sit comfortably by the wayside and wait for the coming of the inevitable.

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The second attitude that one can take toward the question of progress in the area of race relations is that of extreme pessimism. The pessimist would argue that we have made only minor strides in the area of race relations. He would contend that the present tension which we witness in certain sections of the nation is fit testimony to the fact that we have created more problems than we have solved.

### The Taint of Sin

He would turn to the realm of orthodox theology and seek to show that hovering over every man is the tragic taint of original sin, and that at bottom nature cannot be changed.<sup>2</sup> He would turn to the realm of psychology and seek to show the determinative effects of habit structures, and the gripping effect of certain attitudes that are instilled in the child at an early age. Once these attitudes and habits are adapted, he contends, they are permanent and inflexible. So the pessimist would conclude that we can do nothing toward progress in race relations. The extreme pessimist and the extreme optimist have at least one thing in common: they both agree that we must sit down and do nothing in the area of race relations. The optimist says do nothing because integration is inevitable. The pessimist says do nothing because integration is impossible.

The third attitude that one can take toward the question of progress in race relations is the realistic attitude. Like the synthesis of Hegelian philosophy, the realistic attitude seeks to reconcile the truths of two opposites and avoid the extremes of both. So the realist in race relations would agree with the optimist in saying, we have come a long way, but he would balance that by agreeing with the pessimist that we have a long long way to go. It is this realistic position that I would like to set forth: We have come a long long way, and we have a long long way to go.

Let us notice first that we have come a long long way.<sup>3</sup> It was in the year of 1619 that the Negro slaves first landed on the shores of this nation. They were brought here from the soils of Africa, and unlike the Pilgrim fathers who landed at Plymouth a year later, they were brought against their wills. For more than two hundred years Africa was raped and plundered, her native kingdoms disorganized, her people and rulers demoralized, and the whole continent inflicted with pains and burdens unparalleled by any other race in the history of the civilized world.

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2. In "Realistic Look" King inserted another sentence: "He would argue that we are retrogressing instead of progressing."

3. The following account of African-American history became a standard aspect of King's oratory during this period. See, for example, "The Montgomery Story," 27 June 1956; "Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony," 23 July 1956; "The Birth of a New Age," 11 August 1956; and "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 3 December 1956, pp. 300-301, 322-324, 341-342, and 454-456 in this volume, respectively.

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## The Dred Scott Decision

Throughout slavery the Negro was considered a thing to be used, not a person to be respected. He was merely a depersonalized cog in the vast plantation machine. The famous Dred Scott decision of 1857 clearly expressed the status of the Negro during slavery. In this decision the United States Supreme Court affirmed, in substance, that the Negro is not a citizen of the United States; he is merely property subject to the dictates of his owner.

With the growth of slavery it became necessary to give some defense for it. It seems to be a fact of life that human nature cannot continue to do wrong without eventually reaching out for some rationalization which will help to clothe an obvious wrong in the beautiful garments of righteousness. This is exactly what the slave owners did. They fell victim to the danger that forever confronts religion and a too literalistic interpretation of the Bible. There is always the danger that religion and the Bible not properly interpreted can be used as forces to crystallize the status-quo. This is exactly what happened. It was argued from pulpits that Negroes were inferior by nature. There were even pseudo-scientists who sought to prove that in brain size and lung capacity Negroes were inferior to whites.<sup>4</sup>

In time many Negroes lost faith in themselves and came to believe that perhaps they were inferior. The tragedy of physical slavery was that it gradually led to the paralysis of mental slavery; the Negro's mind and soul became enslaved. So long as the Negro was willing to accept this "place" assigned to him, racial peace was maintained. But it was an uneasy peace in which the Negro was forced patiently to accept injustice, insult and exploitation. Truly it was an obnoxious negative peace, for true peace is not merely the absence of some negative force—confusion, tension, war—but the presence of some positive force—justice, good will, brotherhood. For years the Negro accepted this negative peace.

## The Negro Masses Revaluated

Then something happened to the Negro. The Negro masses began to re-evaluate themselves. They came to feel that they were somebody. Their religion revealed to them that God loves all of his children, and that the important thing about a man "is not his specificity but his fundamentum," not the texture of his hair or the color of his skin, but the texture and quality of his soul. So he can now cry out with the eloquent poet:

Fleecy locks and black complexion  
cannot forfeit nature's claim  
Skin may differ, but affection  
Dwells in black and white the same.  
And were I so tall as to reach the pole  
Or to grasp the ocean at a span,

I must be measured by my soul  
The mind is the standard of the man.<sup>5</sup>

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With this new self-respect and new sense of dignity on the part of the Negro, the South's negative peace was rapidly undermined. The tension which we are witnessing in race relations in the South today is to be explained in part by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of himself and his determination to struggle and sacrifice until the walls of injustice crumble.

### The Meaning of Montgomery

This is at bottom the meaning of what is happening in Montgomery. You cannot understand the bus protest in Montgomery without understanding that there is a new Negro in the South, with a new sense of dignity, and destiny. For years the Negroes of Montgomery have suffered abuses, indignities and injustices on the buses. The story of these numerous injustices are too well known to mention. But there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of exploitation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing in the piercing chill of an Alpine November.

The story of Montgomery is the story of 50,000 Negroes who are tired of injustices and oppression, and who are willing to substitute tired feet for tired souls, and walk and walk until the walls of injustice are crushed by the battering rams of historical necessity. This is the new Negro. We have come a long way since 1619.

Not only has the Negro come a long way in the recognition of his own intrinsic worth, but he has come a long long way in achieving civil rights. For many years we were forced to live with segregation. In 1896, through the famous *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, the Supreme Court of this nation established the doctrine of separate-but-equal as the law of the land. Segregation had both legal and moral sanction. But then came May 17, 1954.<sup>6</sup> It was on this date that the Supreme Court gave a death blow to the old *Plessy* doctrine, insisting that separate facilities are inherently unequal and that to segregate a child because of his race is to deny him the equal protection of the law. If I may speak figuratively, we now see in our generation Old Man Segregation on his death bed. There will be some who will mourn his death, but most of us will be proud to see him pass on. He has been a

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5. These lines are from two British eighteenth-century poems. The first four lines of this passage are quoted from "The Negro's Complaint" (1788) by William Cowper, and the remaining lines are quoted from *Horae Lyricae*, "False Greatness" (1706), by Isaac Watts. Although King often used this passage in his oratory, he was unaware who its authors were. When asked on one occasion, he concluded after investigation that the author was "unknown" (King to M. B. Powell, 1 August 1956).

6. In "Realistic Look" King correctly dates the Supreme Court decision *Brown v. Board of Education* as 17 May 1954.

June 1956      problem and burden to the whole community. Yes, we have come a long long way since 1896.

### The Long Road to Travel

But we cannot stop here. To stop here would mean to become victims of an optimism which would blind our eyes to the true realities of the situation. To stop here would mean to become victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality. We must go on to affirm that we have a long long way to go.

Let's not fool ourselves. We are far from the promised land, both North and South. In the South we still confront segregation in its glaring and conspicuous forms. In the North we confront it in its hidden and subtle forms. Segregation is still a fact. It is true that segregation is on its death bed. But history has proven that social systems have a great last-minute breathing power. And the guardians of the status-quo are always on hand with their oxygen tents to preserve the dying order. But if democracy is to live, segregation must die. The underlying philosophy of democracy is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation, and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together. Segregation is a cancer in the body politic which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized.

### Toward Eliminating Segregation

So we must work with grim and bold determination to eliminate segregation from every area of American life. We must continue to struggle through legislation. There are those who contend that integration can come only through education, if for no other reason than that morals cannot be legislated. I choose, however, to be dialectical at this point. It isn't either legislation or education; it's both legislation and education. I quite agree that it is impossible to change a man's internal feeling merely through law. This was never the intention of the law.

The law does not seek to change one's internal feelings, it seeks to control the external effects of those internal feelings. For instance, the law cannot make a man love me—religion and education must do that . . . but it can keep him from lynching me. The law cannot make an employer have compassion for me, but it can keep him from refusing to hire me because of the color of my skin. Religion and education must change one's internal feelings, but it is scarcely a moral act to encourage others to patiently accept injustice until a man's heart gets right. All that we seek through legislation is to control the external effects of one's internal feelings.

Along with this emphasis on legislation, we must have the moral courage to stand up and protest against injustice wherever we find it. Wherever we find segregation we must have the fortitude to passively resist it.

We must not think in terms of retaliatory violence. To attempt to use the method of violence in our struggle would be both impractical and immoral. Violence creates many more problems than it solves. There is a voice crying through

the vista of time saying: "He who lives by the sword shall perish by the sword."<sup>7</sup> History is replete with the bleached bones of nations who failed to follow this truth. So we must not seek to fight our battles for freedom with weapons or arms. The method must be that of nonviolent resistance, using love as the regulating ideal. The Negro in his struggle for justice must never succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter.

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### The Technique of Resistance

We have tried this method in Montgomery, and it has worked amazingly well. It has given the Negro in Montgomery a new sense of dignity, and a new determination to tell the truth. Through this persistent protest the Negro is saying to his oppressors, "I don't like the way I am being treated." The truth of the matter is he never did like it, but he was afraid to say it. Now through passive resistance he says it in vociferous terms.

This method is not at all new. A little brown man in India tried it. For years his people had been trampled over by the iron feet of British rule. He watched the British Empire. He noticed her vast and intricate military machinery. He noticed the boundless outreach of her empire. Yet in the midst of this he decided to use another method. He decided to confront physical force with soul force. Through this method of passive resistance Mahatma Gandhi was able to free his people from the political domination, the economic exploitation and the humiliation inflicted upon them by Britain.

We've come a long long way, but we have a long long way to go. I am mindful that there are those who are urging us to adopt a policy of moderation, still others are preaching the "slow up" gospel. They are telling us we are going too fast, which causes us to wonder, how fast is too fast? But in the midst of all of this both Negro and white persons of goodwill realize that we can't afford to slow up. We have a moral obligation to press on.

Our self respect is at stake: but even more, the prestige of our nation is at stake. The rhythmic beat of the deep rumblings of discontent from Africa and Asia are at bottom expressions of their determination not to follow any power that denies basic human rights to a segment of its citizens. So in order to save the prestige of our nation and prevent the uncommitted peoples of the world from falling into the hands of a communistic ideology we must press on. We have a long long way to go.

### The Cause of the 'Maladjusted'

There are certain technical words in the vocabulary of every academic discipline which tend to become stereotypes and clichés. Psychologists have a word which is probably used more frequently than any other word in modern psychol-

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7. Cf. Matthew 26:52 and Revelations 13:10.

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I never intend to adjust myself to the viciousness of lynch-mobs. I never intend to become adjusted to the evils of segregation and discrimination. I never intend to adjust myself to the tragic inequalities of an economic system which takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. I never intend to become adjusted to the madness of militarism and the self-defeating method of physical violence.

History still has a choice place for those who have the moral courage to be maladjusted. The salvation of the world lies in the hands of the maladjusted. The challenge to you is to be maladjusted; as maladjusted as the prophet Amos, who, in the midst of the injustices of his day, could cry out in words that echo across the centuries, “Let judgement run down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”;<sup>8</sup> as maladjusted as Lincoln, who, about a century ago, had the vision to see that this nation could not survive half free and half slave. As maladjusted as Jefferson, who, in the midst of an age amazingly adjusted to slavery, was maladjusted enough to cry out in words lifted to cosmic proportions, “All men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

The world is in desperate need of such maladjusted persons. It is only through such maladjustment that we will emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of “man’s inhumanity to man” to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.

PD. *Socialist Call* 24 (June 1956): 16–19; copy in MLKJrP-GAMK: Box 107.

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8. Amos 5:24.

## To Arthur R. James

1 June 1956  
[Montgomery, Ala.]

*King belatedly answers a 29 March letter from James, pastor of Central Baptist Church and president of the United Baptist Convention of Delaware.<sup>1</sup> James had written on*

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1. Arthur R. James (1887–1972), born in Balcarres, Jamaica, did his undergraduate work at McMaster University in Ontario and received his master’s degree from Crozer Theological Seminary. In 1931 James became pastor of the Shiloh Baptist Church in Wilmington, Delaware, and also headed the Wilmington branch of the NAACP. He helped found Central Baptist Church in 1943, where he served until 1962. James also presided over the United Baptist Convention of Delaware and served as a trustee of the Delaware Baptist Convention. In 1950 James became the first black city magistrate in Delaware’s history.