

“Desegregation and the Future,”
Address Delivered at the Annual Luncheon
of the National Committee for Rural Schools

[15 December 1956]

[New York, N.Y.]

King delivers this address at New York City’s Commodore Hotel to the annual luncheon of the National Committee for Rural Schools, an organization that sought to improve and equalize public education in the rural South. Labor leader Benjamin F. McLaurin, one of the organizers of the committee, and Jack Stetson, rector of the International Ladies Garment Workers Institute, presided over the event. Preceding King’s address, Billy Flemming, a leader of the Clarendon County Improvement Association, reported on the desegregation movement in South Carolina and paid tribute to the courage of Judge J. Waties Waring, chair of the National Committee for Rural Schools. Social psychologist Kenneth Clark introduced King, observing of the Montgomery protest leaders that they had “the potential for truly great leadership; not just leadership of the American Negro, but . . . the potential for leadership of a spiritual, ethical and moral side of the American people who are sorely in need of such leadership.”¹ Referring to his recent experience with segregated dining policies at the Atlanta airport, King claims that equality is not only quantitative but also qualitative, “not only a matter of mathematics and geometry” but “a matter of psychology.”

1. For a complete transcript of this event, see Joseph F. Wilson, *Tearing Down the Color Bar* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 281–310.

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. I am delighted to have the opportunity of being here today and to be a part of this very rich fellowship. I'm very happy to share the platform with so many distinguished Americans, and I would like to say ditto to everything that has been said about these distinguished persons. I wish I had the time to make some statements about many of these persons because their names will long be remembered in America by those who are interested in freedom and human dignity.

Certainly, the name of Judge Waring and his wife will long be remembered, for his minority opinion has now become a majority opinion.² [*applause*] And I guess when he cast the dissenting vote in decision some years ago, there were those who said he was an impractical idealist. But history has proven that the impractical idealists of yesterday become the practical realists of today, and we are all indebted to him for what he has done in this nation.

And certainly, the very kind words that you have made about Rae Brandstein are greatly justifiable, but I have had the opportunity of knowing something of the work—of her work and the work of this great organization.³ And I want to join you in expressing my personal appreciation to her and to all of her associates in this very fine and noble organization. Those of us who live in the southland have felt the influence, the inspiration, and the help that has come from this organization, and we are deeply grateful.

And I am indebted to my good friend Dr. Clark for this very generous introduction. I hope one day I will be able to live up to it.

Now the time is passing on and I want to have you think with me for a few moments from this subject: desegregation and the future. I think we're all concerned about the question of desegregation, and certainly we are all concerned about the future. And I want to speak about desegregation and the future.

On May seventeenth, 1954, the Supreme Court of this nation rendered in simple and unequivocal terms one of the most momentous decisions ever rendered in the history of this nation. To all men of goodwill, this decision came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of human captivity. It came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of colored people throughout the world who had had a dim vision of the promised land of freedom and justice. It was a reaffirmation of the good old American doctrine of freedom and equality for all men. And this decision came as a legal and sociological deathblow to an evil that had occupied the throne of American life for several decades. Segregation has always been evil, and only the misguided reactionary clothed in the thin garments of irrational emotionalism will seek to defend it. Segregation is both rationally inexplicable and morally unjustifiable.

There are at least three basic reasons why segregation is evil. The first reason is that segregation inevitably makes for inequality. There was a time that we attempted to live with segregation. There were those who felt that we could live by a doctrine of separate but equal, and so back in 1896 the Supreme Court of this

2. Julius Waties Waring wrote the sole dissenting opinion in *Briggs v. Elliott*, a 1951 federal district court decision that the Supreme Court reversed in its *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954.

472 3. Brandstein, executive secretary of the National Committee for Rural Schools, had arranged King's appearance (see King to Brandstein, 1 August 1956, pp. 332–333 in this volume).

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nation, through the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision, established the doctrine of separate but equal as the law of the land. But we all know what happened as a result of that doctrine: there was always a strict enforcement of the separate without the slightest intention to abide by the equal. And so as a result of the old *Plessy* doctrine, we ended up being plunged across the abyss of exploitation, where we experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.

But even if it had been possible to provide the Negro with equal facilities in terms of external construction and quantitative distribution, we would have still confronted inequality. If it had been possible to give Negro children the same number of schools proportionately and the same type of buildings as white children, the Negro children would have still confronted inequality in the sense that they would not have had the opportunity of communicating with all children. You see, equality is not only a matter of mathematics and geometry, but it's a matter of psychology. It's not only a quantitative something, but it is a qualitative something. And it is possible to have quantitative equality and qualitative inequality. The doctrine of separate but equal can never be.

I experienced this the other day. I was taking a flight to Virginia and took a plane out of Montgomery and had to change in Atlanta, Georgia. And we got in Atlanta and we were getting ready to take off and the train developed—the plane developed a little motor trouble, and of course I was very happy that they discovered that trouble before we got in the air. [*laughter*] And so we had to get off and go back into the waiting room, and it took about two or three hours to put in a new transmission, I believe it was. We were to have lunch on the flight, and so while we were waiting they gave all of us tickets to go in the Dobbs House in the Atlanta airport and have lunch. I was the only Negro passenger on the plane, and I followed everybody else going into the Dobbs House to get lunch.⁴ When I got there the—one of the waiters ushered me back, and I thought they were giving me a very nice comfortable seat with everybody else. And I discovered they were leading me to a compartment in the back. And this compartment was around you, you were completely closed in, cut off from everybody else, so I immediately said that I couldn't afford to eat there. I went on back and took a seat out in the main dining room with everybody else and I waited there, and nobody served me. I waited a long time, everybody else was being served. So finally I asked for the manager, and he came out and started talking, and I told him the situation and he talked in very sympathetic terms. And I never will forget what he said to me. He said, "Now Reverend, this is the law; this is the state law and the city ordinance and we have to do it. We can't serve you out here, but now, everything is the same. Everything is equal back there; you will get the same food; you will be served out of the same dishes and everything else; you will get the same service as everybody out here." And I looked at him and started wondering if he really believed that. And I started talking with him. I said, "Now, I don't see how I can get the same service. Number one, I confront aesthetic inequality. I can't see all these beautiful pictures that you have around the walls here. [*laughter*] We don't have them back there." [*applause*]

4. For another account of this incident, see King to Robinson, 3 October 1956, pp. 391–393 in this volume.

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“But not only that, I just don’t like sitting back there and it does something to me. It makes me almost angry. I know that I shouldn’t get angry. I know that I shouldn’t become bitter, but when you put me back there something happens to my soul, so that I confront inequality in the sense that I have a greater potential for the accumulation of bitterness because you put me back there. [laughter] And then not only that, I met a young man from Mobile who was my seat mate, a white fella from Mobile, Alabama, and we were discussing some very interesting things. And when we got in the dining room, if we followed what you’re saying, we would have to be separated. And this means that I can’t communicate with this young man. I am completely cut off from communication. So I confront inequality on three levels: I confront aesthetic inequality; I confront inequality in the sense of a greater potential for the accumulation of bitterness; and I confronted inequality in the sense that I can’t communicate with the person who was my seat mate.”

And I came to see what the Supreme Court meant when they came out saying that separate facilities are *inherently* unequal. There is no such thing as separate but equal. Separation, segregation, *inevitably* makes for inequality, and I think that is the first reason why segregation is evil, because it inevitably makes for inequality. [applause]

But not only that, segregation is evil because it scars the soul of both the segregated and the segregator. And I’ve said all along, as we struggle we must come to see that we are not merely trying to help the Negro. Segregation is as injurious to the white man as it is to the Negro. The festering sore of segregation debilitates the segregated as well as the segregator. It gives the segregated a false sense of inferiority, and it gives the segregator a false sense of superiority. It is equally damaging. And this is why we must forever take a stand against segregation, because it does something to the soul. And the Supreme Court came to see that also.

And thanks to the noble work of such persons as Dr. Kenneth Clark and other social psychologists who came to see, through long study, that segregation does something to the personality. That is why the Supreme Court said that segregation generates a sense and feeling of inferiority within children that distorts their personality. This is why the Negro parent must forever say to his child, “You are somebody, you belong, you count.” Because the Negro child forever stands before a system that stares him in the face saying, “You are not equal to; you do not belong; you cannot be.” Segregation distorts the personality of the segregated as well as the segregator.

Then there is a third reason why segregation is evil. That is because it ends up depersonalizing the segregated. That’s the end results of segregation. The segregated becomes merely a thing to be used, not a person to be respected. He is merely a depersonalized cog in a vast economic machine. And this is why segregation is utterly evil and utterly un-Christian. It substitutes an “I/It” relationship for the “I/Thou” relationship.⁵ It relegates the segregated to the status of a thing, rather than elevated to the status of a person, and so segregation will always be evil because it ends up depersonalizing the segregated.

5. King alludes to Martin Buber. See note 7 to “Paul’s Letter to American Christians,” 4 November 1956, p. 418 in this volume.

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The Supreme Court decision of May seventeenth came in to correct a great evil. And thanks for this great decision, as a result of this decision, we can now gradually see old man segregation on his deathbed, if I may speak figuratively, and most of us are very happy to see the brother pass on because he has been a disturbing factor in the community for many years. [*laughter, applause*]

But this is not the only side of the story. We know all too well that there is another side. This decision has not gone without opposition. Many states have risen up in open defiance. We all know that the legislative halls of the South ring loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification." And in so many sections of the South, a new modern form of the Ku Klux Klan has arisen in the form of white citizens councils. The methods of these councils range from threats and intimidation to actual economic reprisals against Negro men and women. Also these methods extend to white persons in the South who will dare take a stand for justice. These are the devotees of these councils so often stand up and preach sermons and give long talks about the nonviolence. They piously claim that they don't believe in violence, but we know all too well that their methods and public denouncements create the very atmosphere for violence. They must be held responsible for all of the terror, the mob rule, and brutal murders that have encompassed the South over the last several years. And I say to you this afternoon that it is an indictment on America and democracy that these ungodly and unethical and un-Christian and un-American councils have been able to exist all of these months without a modicum of criticism from the federal government. It is tragic. [*applause*] And so we must face the tragic fact that we are far from the promised land in the struggle for a desegregated society. Segregation is still a glaring fact in America. Yes, we still confront it in the South in its glaring and conspicuous forms. We still confront it in the North in its hidden and subtle forms. [*applause*]

Now it might be true, as I said, that old man segregation is on his deathbed, but as I said so often before, 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 keep the old order alive. [*laughter, applause*]

Segregation, segregation is still with us. We still confront it as a fact in this nation. So in the light of this great decision by the Supreme Court and the open opposition to it by reactionary and recalcitrant forces, the question which we now confront is this: How will we proceed to bring about a desegregated society in the future? What are we to do? What can we do to speed up the process of integration and make this whole move toward a desegregated society a final reality? What must we do to make it a reality in the future?

And I would like to take a few minutes to suggest two or three things that we must do, all of us, all people of goodwill. I think the first thing is this: we must continue to demand that the federal government will use all of its constitutional powers to enforce the law of the land. And I think this is one of the greatest areas that we must work in. It is tragic that the executive and legislative branches of our government have been so quiet in this whole movement. They have failed to follow the example so courageously set by the judicial branch. And now we must demand that the legislative and the executive branches of our government will take a definite stand and do something about enforcing these laws which are on the books. We all— [*applause*]

I know this afternoon our minds leap the mighty Atlantic and our minds and hearts go over to Hungary and we are concerned about what's happening there.

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I'm sure that we are all grateful to our government for doing the right thing about Hungary and taking the proper attitude and being concerned about the Hungarians as they confront the desperate situation that they stand amid everyday.⁶ But it is strange that the American government can be so much concerned about the Hungarians and have not the slightest concern about the Negroes in Mississippi and Alabama, in Georgia, in South Carolina. [*applause*]

Unless we in this nation wake up and decide to do something about the condition in America, we will never be able to defeat communism. We must do something about this problem. And I say that it is not just one party, but all of the political parties have a responsibility here. Actually, the Negro has been betrayed by both the Republican and the Democratic Party. [*applause*] The Democrats have betrayed him by capitulating to the whims and caprices of the southern Dixiecrats. The Republicans have betrayed him by capitulating to the blatant hypocrisy of reactionary right-wing northern Republicans. And this coalition of southern Dixiecrats and right-wing reactionary northern Republicans defeats every bill and every move towards liberal legislation in the area of civil rights. And if we are not careful, the same thing will happen in the next few days when Congress reconvenes. Nothing will be done about the filibuster and all of these other things that prevent any real move in the area of civil rights. We must be concerned enough all over this nation and demand that the federal government will become more aggressive, will rise up and take a stand and stop being so quiet and do something about the conditions which so many citizens of the South are confronting today.

There is a second thing which we must do in order to make segregation a dead factor and integration a reality in our society. And that is, we must continue to struggle through the courts, through legislation or legalism. Now I am aware of the fact that there are those who sincerely believe that this isn't the way. They would argue that you cannot legislate morals. Their contention is that integration must come into being through education. Well, I am sympathetic toward that view. I will agree that you can't legislate morals. I will agree that through the law you can't change one's internal feelings. But that isn't what we seek to do through the law. We are not seeking so much to change attitudes through the law, but to control behavior. We are not so much seeking to change one's internal feelings, but to control the external effects of those internal feelings. That's what we seek to do through the law. [*applause*]

I realize that the law cannot make an employer love me or have compassion for me, education and religion will have to do that, but it can at least keep him from refusing to hire me because of the color of my skin. And that is what we seek to do through the law. We seek to control the external effects of internal feelings that are prejudiced, and so we must continue to struggle through legalism. And at this point I must stress the need, the urgent need of our continuing to support the organization which has mastered the area of legal strategy, and that is the NAACP. [*applause*]

Let nobody fool you. They might outlaw the NAACP in Alabama. They might

6. King refers to the Hungarian revolution, which began on 23 October 1956. On 4 November 1956 the Soviet Union forcibly ended the rebellion.

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outlaw the NAACP in Louisiana. They may outlaw it in Texas, and it looks like in Georgia they are getting ready to outlaw it. But it remains eternally true that this organization has done more to achieve the civil rights of Negroes than any other organization that we can point to [*applause*], and at this moment we cannot desert the NAACP. We must stand by it more than ever before. It might prove out that in future years this organization will prove to be America's greatest friend. By fighting its battles purely within the framework of legal democracy, it has saved the Negro from turning to foreign ideologies in order to solve his problems. We're all indebted to this great organization. [*applause*]

Now along with this, we've got to continue to go down in our pockets and give money for the cause of freedom. As you know, litigation is rising to heightening proportions every day, and it seems to be the strategy of the white citizens councils to delay integration as long as possible. I think they have about recognized now that segregation is dying, and they've conceded to that. They know as well as we know that segregation is on its deathbed, and what they are seeking to do now is to delay it as long as possible by keeping the Negro bogged down in litigation. As one attorney general said, I believe from Georgia, that "we are prepared for a century of litigation," and that's what they are attempting to do. And in order to block this stalling process, in order to block this delaying process, we must pile up great resources of money in order to block it. That means that we must continue to give generously and liberally for the cause of freedom. And I'm sure our hearts go out now to all of the organizations over the nation that have been concerned about these conditions. Negro people in the South will be confronted with many tragedies in these years of transition. They will confront economic reprisals and boycotts and threats and intimidation. And thanks to a great organization, like this organization, that has served to meet this real need, we need more of this. Because as this period of transition stands before us, many things will happen. We will need the aid and the cooperation of people of goodwill all over the nation. So I stress the need of continual financial support as we struggle for freedom and justice in America.

May I stress the need for courageous, intelligent, and dedicated leadership. I can never overlook this, for if we are to make a desegregated society a reality in the future, we will have to have dedicated, courageous, and intelligent leaders. In this period of transition and growing social change, we will need leaders who are positive and yet calm. Leaders who avoid the extremes of hotheadedness and Uncle Tomism. Leaders who somehow understand the issues. Leaders of sound integrity. Leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with justice. Leaders not in love with money, but in love with humanity. Leaders who can subject their particular egos to the greatness of the cause. God give us leaders. [*applause*] A time like this demands great souls with pure hearts and ready hands. Leaders whom the lust of office does not kill. Leaders whom the spoils of life cannot buy. Leaders who possess opinions and a will. Leaders who will not lie. Leaders who can stand before the demagogue and damn his treacherous flatteries without winking. Tall leaders, sun-crowned, who live above the fog in public duty and in private thinking.⁷ This is one of the great needs of the hour, but as we move

7. In these four sentences King paraphrases the poem "Wanted" (1872) by Josiah Gilbert Holland.

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And then I come to a final point. And I think this is probably more important than any of the others. If integration is to be a reality in the future, the Negro must decide himself to stand up courageously and protest against segregation wherever he finds it. Yes, we must depend on the law. We must depend on the courts. We must depend on financial support. But, in the final analysis, the Negro himself must assume the basic responsibility; for no other reason than laws cannot enforce themselves. The thing that we face now is to implement these laws. Segregation is already legally dead, but it is still factually alive. It confronted its legal death on May seventeenth, 1954. The problem which we confront now is to lift the noble precepts of our democracy from the dusty files of unimplemented court decisions, and the Negro himself must do something about this. And integration will not be some lavish dish that the white man will pass out on a silver platter while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite. He himself must be concerned. [*applause*]

So it means that we must rise up and protest courageously wherever we find segregation. Yes, we must do it nonviolently. We cannot afford to use violence in the struggle. If the Negro succumbs to the temptation of using violence in his struggle, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness and our chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos. There is still a voice crying out through the vista of time saying to every potential Peter, "Put up your sword."⁸ History is replete with the bleached bones of nations and communities that failed to follow the command of Jesus at this point. No, violence is not the way. Hate is not the way. Bitterness is not the way. We must stand up with love in our hearts, with a lack of bitterness and yet a determination to protest courageously for justice and freedom in this land. [*applause*]

I realize that this will also mean suffering and sacrifice. It might even mean going to jail, but if such is the case we must be willing to fill up the jailhouses of the South. It might even mean physical death. But as Dr. Kenneth Clark said in a speech here last year, if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a life of permanent psychological death, then nothing could be more honorable. We must somehow confront physical force with soul force and stand up courageously for justice and freedom. And this dynamic unity, this amazing self-respect, this willingness to suffer, and this refusal to hit back will cause the oppressors to become ashamed of their own methods and we will be able to transform enemies into friends. We will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of injustice to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and goodwill. We can do this if we protest courageously, if we stand up with courage, if we stand up nonviolently. And this is the thing which will make integration a reality in our nation. This is the challenge that stands before all of us. If we will do this we will be able by the help of God to create a new world. A world in which men will be able to live together as brothers. A world in which men "will

beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks.”⁹ A world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes. A world in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. And that will be the day when all of us will be able to stand up and sing with new meaning: “My country ’tis of thee, / Sweet land of liberty, / Of thee I sing / Land where my fathers died, / Land of the pilgrim’s pride, / From every mountain side, / Let freedom ring.”

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That must become literally true. Freedom must ring from *every* mountainside. And yes, let it ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let it ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let it ring from the mighty Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let it ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that, from every mountainside, let freedom ring. Let it ring from every molehill in Mississippi, from every mountain and hill in Alabama, from Stone Mountain in Georgia, from Lookout Mountain in Tennessee, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.¹⁰ And when that happens, the morning *stars* will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.¹¹ God bless you. [*applause*]

At. CSKC.

9. Isaiah 2:4.

10. King may have adapted these sentences from Archibald Carey, Jr.’s, address to the 1952 Republican National Convention (see note 23, “Facing the Challenge of a New Age,” 3 December 1956, p. 463 in this volume).

11. Job 38:7.