

17 May
1957

“Give Us the Ballot,”
Address Delivered at the
Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom

17 May 1957
Washington, D.C.

Hoping to prod the federal government to fulfill the promise of the three-year-old Brown v. Board of Education decision, national civil rights leaders called for a rally on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial.¹ Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, and Stanley Levison organized the Prayer Pilgrimage, which brought together cochairmen A. Philip Randolph, Roy Wilkins, and King, along with a host of prominent civil rights supporters including Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, and entertainer Harry Belafonte.² Thomas Kilgore of Friendship Baptist Church in New York served as national director of the Pilgrimage. Some twenty thousand people listened to three hours of speeches, music, and testimony from southern activists.

Speaking last, King exhorts the president and members of Congress to ensure voting rights for African Americans and indicts both political parties for betraying the cause of justice: “The Democrats have betrayed it by capitulating to the prejudices and undemocratic practices of the southern Dixiecrats. The Republicans have betrayed it by capitulating to the blatant hypocrisy of right wing, reactionary northerners. These men so often have a high blood pressure of words and an anemia of deeds.”³

Although turnout for the Pilgrimage did not reach the organizers’ goal of fifty thousand, the event was well noted in the press, and King’s address in particular received much positive attention. Harold Sims, sent by the U.S. National Student Association to cover the Pilgrimage, described the day: “The air was filled with shouts of ‘amen’ and ‘hallelujah’ as the speakers sounded their voices in defense of civil rights. Handkerchiefs flew above the heads of the crowd as it listened to the fiery orators. . . . They were jubilant sounds . . . sounds of disillusioned souls discovering their country.”⁴ The following is taken from an audio recording of the event.

1. King, Roy Wilkins, and A. Philip Randolph, “Call to a Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom,” 5 April 1957; see also Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, and Stanley Levison, Memo regarding Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, February 1957.

2. Randolph was first to address the crowd. Other speakers included Howard University president Mordecai Johnson and Shuttlesworth, who declared, “the struggle will be hard and costly; some of us indeed may die; but let our trials and death—if come they must—be one more sacred installment [in] this American heritage for freedom.” (Shuttlesworth, Address at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, and Gerda Lerner, “Time for Freedom,” both dated 17 May 1957). See also King’s comments on Adam Clayton Powell, Jr.’s speech in his 16 July 1957 letter to Ramona Garrett, pp. 235–236 in this volume.

3. King’s handwritten draft contained several phrases he does not use in this address and closed with two verses from James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Ev’ry Voice and Sing,” also known as the Negro National Anthem.

4. Sims, “An American Student Speaks of Civil Rights Affirmation and Pledge of the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom,” 17 May 1957. Sims further reported that “the excited crowd surrounded Rev. King as he finished his talk shaking his hand, patting his shoulders. . . . These were people reborn with the

On the eve of the march on Washington by the NAACP, led by Martin Luther King Jr., this page is being reserved to tell of the NAACP conspiracy to destroy our Southern way of life

THIS ARTICLE TELLS THE WHITE PEOPLE OF MONTGOMERY AND THE SOUTH WHAT THE NAACP HAS DONE TO US AND WHAT THEY SEEK TO DO UNLESS WE DEFEND OUR RIGHTS

A special meeting of the NAACP, Montgomery, Ala., last night, before the march on Washington, was devoted to the NAACP's plan to destroy the Southern way of life.

Montgomery, Ala. Capital City and the NAACP, have been the center of the NAACP's plan to destroy the Southern way of life. The NAACP has been the center of the NAACP's plan to destroy the Southern way of life.

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Off The Bench

By Judge Walter B. Jones

I Speak For The White Race

THE NAACP's plan to destroy the Southern way of life is a conspiracy to destroy the Southern way of life. The NAACP has been the center of the NAACP's plan to destroy the Southern way of life.

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HEAR ROY HARRIS, FORMER SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE, IN THE GEORGIA LEGISLATURE
 SPEAK AT 7:30 P.M. MAY 16, FORT DIXIE GRAVES ARMORY

CITIZENS COUNCILS of ALABAMA

AN ORGANIZATION OF 100,000 WHITE ALABAMA FAMILIES UNITED TO MAINTAIN SEGREGATION

P.O. BOX 3006, EASTBROOK STATION MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

Alabama Citizens' Council advertisement protesting the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom (12 May 1957)
 Courtesy of the Montgomery Advertiser

209
 208,1

17 May
1957

Mr. Chairman, distinguished platform associates, fellow Americans. Three years ago the Supreme Court of this nation rendered in simple, eloquent, and unequivocal language a decision which will long be stenciled on the mental sheets of succeeding generations. For all men of goodwill, this May seventeenth 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 disinherited people throughout the world who had dared only to dream of freedom.

Unfortunately, this noble and sublime decision has not gone without opposition. This opposition has often risen to ominous proportions. Many states have risen up in open defiance. The legislative halls of the South ring loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification."

But even more, all types of conniving methods are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters. The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic tradition. And so our most urgent request to the president of the United States and every member of Congress is to give us the right to vote. [*Audience:*] (*Yes*)

Give us the ballot, and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights.

Give us the ballot (*Yes*), and we will no longer plead to the federal government for passage of an anti-lynching law; we will by the power of our vote write the law on the statute books of the South (*All right*) and bring an end to the dastardly acts of the hooded perpetrators of violence.

Give us the ballot (*Give us the ballot*), and we will transform the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs (*Yeah*) into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens.

Give us the ballot (*Give us the ballot*), and we will fill our legislative halls with men of goodwill (*All right now*) and send to the sacred halls of Congress men who will not sign a "Southern Manifesto" because of their devotion to the manifesto of justice.⁵ (*Tell 'em about it*)

Give us the ballot (*Yeah*), and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will do justly and love mercy (*Yeah*), and we will place at the head of the southern states governors who will, who have felt not only the tang of the human, but the glow of the Divine.

Give us the ballot (*Yes*), and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's decision of May seventeenth, 1954. (*That's right*)

spirit of a new age." Reporter James Hicks declared that King "emerged from the Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington as the number one leader of sixteen million Negroes in the United States. . . . At this point in his career the people will follow him anywhere" ("King Emerges as Top Negro Leader," *New York Amsterdam News*, 1 June 1957).

In contrast to the generally positive reaction to the Pilgrimage, George Schuyler complained in his 25 May *Pittsburgh Courier* column that the event would have "no influence whatever in the courts of civil rights legislation that a letter or telegram from each of the participants to the White House and the respective Senators and Representatives in Washington would not have had."

5. In March 1956, ninety southern congressmen and all but three southern senators signed the "Declaration of Constitutional Principles," also known as the "Southern Manifesto," which contended that desegregation was a subversion of the Constitution and pledged that southern politicians would firmly resist integration.

In this juncture of our nation's history, there is an urgent need for dedicated and courageous leadership. If we are to solve the problems ahead and make racial justice a reality, this leadership must be fourfold.

17 May
1957

First, there is need for strong, aggressive leadership from the federal government. So far, only the judicial branch of the government has evinced this quality of leadership. If the executive and legislative branches of the government were as concerned about the protection of our citizenship rights as the federal courts have been, then the transition from a segregated to an integrated society would be infinitely smoother. But we so often look to Washington in vain for this concern. In the midst of the tragic breakdown of law and order, the executive branch of the government is all too silent and apathetic. In the midst of the desperate need for civil rights legislation, the legislative branch of the government is all too stagnant and hypocritical.

This dearth of positive leadership from the federal government is not confined to one particular political party. Both political parties have betrayed the cause of justice. (*Oh yes*) The Democrats have betrayed it by capitulating to the prejudices and undemocratic practices of the southern Dixiecrats. The Republicans have betrayed it by capitulating to the blatant hypocrisy of right wing, reactionary northerners. These men so often have a high blood pressure of words and an anemia of deeds. [*laughter*]

In the midst of these prevailing conditions, we come to Washington today pleading with the president and members of Congress to provide a strong, moral, and courageous leadership for a situation that cannot permanently be evaded. We come humbly to say to the men in the forefront of our government that the civil rights issue is not an ephemeral, evanescent domestic issue that can be kicked about by reactionary guardians of the status quo; it is rather an eternal moral issue which may well determine the destiny of our nation (*Yeah*) in the ideological struggle with communism. The hour is late. The clock of destiny is ticking out. We must act now, before it is too late.

A second area in which there is need for strong leadership is from the white northern liberals. There is a dire need today for a liberalism which is truly liberal. What we are witnessing today in so many northern communities is a sort of quasi-liberalism which is based on the principle of looking sympathetically at all sides. It is a liberalism so bent on seeing all sides, that it fails to become committed to either side. It is a liberalism that is so objectively analytical that it is not subjectively committed. It is a liberalism which is neither hot nor cold, but lukewarm. (*All right*) We call for a liberalism from the North which will be thoroughly committed to the ideal of racial justice and will not be deterred by the propaganda and subtle words of those who say: "Slow up for a while; you're pushing too fast."

A third source that we must look to for strong leadership is from the moderates of the white South. It is unfortunate that at this time the leadership of the white South stems from the close-minded reactionaries. These persons gain prominence and power by the dissemination of false ideas and by deliberately appealing to the deepest hate responses within the human mind. It is my firm belief that this close-minded, reactionary, recalcitrant group constitutes a numerical minority. There are in the white South more open-minded moderates than appears on the surface. These persons are silent today because of fear of social, political and economic reprisals. God grant that the white moderates of the South will rise up courageously, without fear, and take up the leadership in this tense period of transition.

211

Mr. Chairman; Distinguished platform associates;
 fellow Americans

Three years ago the ~~United States~~ ^{Supreme Court of}
~~this nation~~ ^{Court} rendered in simple, elegant and
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 generations. For all men of goodwill,
 this May 17th decision ~~authorizing segregation~~
~~in public places~~ came as a joyous
 daybreak to end the long night of
~~enforced segregation~~ enforced segregation.
 It came as a great beacon light
 of hope to millions of disinherited
 people who had lifted their eyes

Handwritten draft of "Give Us the Ballot" (17 May 1957)

17 May
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I cannot close without stressing the urgent need for strong, courageous and intelligent leadership from the Negro community. We need a leadership that is calm and yet positive. This is no day for the rabble-rouser, whether he be Negro or white. (*All right*) We must realize that we are grappling with the most weighty social problem of this nation, and in grappling with such a complex problem there is no place for misguided emotionalism. (*All right, That's right*) We must work passionately and unrelentingly for the goal of freedom, but we must be sure that our hands are clean in the struggle. We must never struggle with falsehood, hate, or malice. We must never become bitter. I know how we feel sometime. There is the danger that those of us who have been forced so long to stand amid the tragic midnight of oppression—those of us who have been trampled over, those of us who have been kicked about—there is the danger that we will become bitter. But if we will become bitter and indulge in hate campaigns, the old, the new order which is emerging will be nothing but a duplication of the old order. (*Yeah, That's all right*)

We must meet hate with love. (*Yeah*) We must meet physical force with soul force. There is still a voice crying out through the vista of time, saying: "Love your enemies (*Yeah*), bless them that curse you (*Yes*), pray for them that despitefully use you."⁶ (*That's right, All right*) Then, and only then, can you matriculate into the university of eternal life. That same voice cries out in terms lifted to cosmic proportions: "He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword."⁷ (*Yeah, Lord*) And history is replete with the bleached bones of nations (*Yeah*) that failed to follow this command. (*All right*) We must follow nonviolence and love. (*Yes, Lord*)

Now, I'm not talking about a sentimental, shallow kind of love. (*Go ahead*) I'm not talking about *eros*, which is a sort of aesthetic, romantic love. I'm not even talking about *philia*, which is a sort of intimate affection between personal friends. But I'm talking about *agape*. (*Yes sir*) I'm talking about the love of God in the hearts of men. (*Yes*) I'm talking about a type of love which will cause you to love the person who does the evil deed while hating the deed that the person does. (*Go ahead*) We've got to love. (*Oh yes*)

There is another warning signal. We talk a great deal about our rights, and rightly so. We proudly proclaim that three-fourths of the peoples of the world are colored. We have the privilege of noticing in our generation the great drama of freedom and independence as it unfolds in Asia and Africa. All of these things are in line with the unfolding work of Providence. But we must be sure that we accept them in the right spirit. We must not seek to use our emerging freedom and our growing power to do the same thing to the white minority that has been done to us for so many centuries. (*Yes*) Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man. We must not become victimized with a philosophy of black supremacy. God is not interested merely in freeing black men and brown men and yellow men, but God is interested in freeing the whole human race. (*Yes, All right*) We must work with determination to create a society (*Yes*), not where black men are superior and other men are inferior and vice versa, but a society in which all

6. Cf. Matthew 5:44; Luke 6:27-28.

7. Cf. Matthew 26:52.

17 May men will live together as brothers (*Yes*) and respect the dignity and worth of human personality. (*Yes*)
1957

We must also avoid the temptation of being victimized with a psychology of victors. We have won marvelous victories. Through the work of the NAACP, we have been able to do some of the most amazing things of this generation. And I come this afternoon with nothing, nothing but praise for this great organization, the work that it has already done and the work that it will do in the future. And although they're outlawed in Alabama and other states, the fact still remains that this organization has done more to achieve civil rights for Negroes than any other organization we can point to. (*Yeah, Amen*) Certainly, this is fine.

But we must not, however, remain satisfied with a court victory over our white brothers. We must respond to every decision with an understanding of those who have opposed us and with an appreciation of the difficult adjustments that the court orders pose for them. We must act in such a way as to make possible a coming together of white people and colored people on the basis of a real harmony of interest and understanding. We must seek an integration based on mutual respect.

I conclude by saying that each of us must keep faith in the future. Let us not despair. Let us realize that as we struggle for justice and freedom, we have cosmic companionship. This is the long faith of the Hebraic-Christian tradition: that God is not some Aristotelian "unmoved mover" who merely contemplates upon Himself. He is not merely a self-knowing God, but an other-loving God (*Yeah*) forever working through history for the establishment of His kingdom.

And those of us who call the name of Jesus Christ find something of an event in our Christian faith that tells us this. There is something in our faith that says to us, "Never despair; never give up; never feel that the cause of righteousness and justice is doomed." There is something in our Christian faith, at the center of it, which says to us that Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the drums of Easter. (*That's right*) There is something in our faith that says evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy the palace and Christ the cross (*That's right*), but one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C. (*Yes*), so that even the name, the life of Caesar must be dated by his name. (*Yes*) There is something in this universe (*Yes, Yes*) which justifies Carlyle in saying: "No lie can live forever." (*All right*) There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying: "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." (*Yes, All right*) There is something in this universe (*Watch yourself*) which justifies James Russell Lowell in saying:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne. (*Oh yeah*)
Yet that scaffold sways the future,
And behind the dim unknown
Stands God (*All right*), within the shadow,
Keeping watch above His own.⁸ (*Yeah, Yes*)

214 8. Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (1837), part 1, book 3, chapter 1; William Cullen Bryant, *The Battlefield* (1839), stanza 9; and James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis* (1844), stanza 8.

Go out with that faith today. (*All right, Yes*) Go back to your homes in the South-land to that faith, with that faith today. Go back to Philadelphia, to New York, to Detroit and Chicago with that faith today (*That's right*), that the universe is on our side in the struggle. (*Sure is, Yes*) Stand up for justice. (*Yes*) Sometimes it gets hard, but it is always difficult to get out of Egypt, for the Red Sea always stands before you with discouraging dimensions. (*Yes*) And even after you've crossed the Red Sea, you have to move through a wilderness with prodigious hilltops of evil (*Yes*) and gigantic mountains of opposition. (*Yes*) But I say to you this afternoon: Keep moving. (*Go on ahead*) Let nothing slow you up. (*Go on ahead*) Move on with dignity and honor and respectability. (*Yes*)

21 May

1957

I realize that it will cause restless nights sometime. It might cause losing a job; it will cause suffering and sacrifice. (*That's right*) It might even cause physical death for some. But if physical death is the price that some must pay (*Yes sir*) to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death (*Yes sir*), then nothing can be more Christian. (*Yes sir*) Keep going today. (*Yes sir*) Keep moving amid every obstacle. (*Yes sir*) Keep moving amid every mountain of opposition. (*Yes sir, Yeah*) If you will do that with dignity (*Say it*), when the history books are written in the future, the historians will have to look back and say, "There lived a great people. (*Yes sir, Yes*) A people with 'fleecy locks and black complexion,' but a people who injected new meaning into the veins of civilization (*Yes*); a people which stood up with dignity and honor and saved Western civilization in her darkest hour (*Yes*); a people that gave new integrity and a new dimension of love to our civilization."⁹ (*Yeah, Look out*) When that happens, "the morning stars will sing together (*Yes sir*), and the sons of God will shout for joy."¹⁰ (*Yes sir, All right*) [*ap- plause*] (*Yes, That's wonderful, All right*)

At. MLKJP-GAMK.

9. Cf. William Cowper, "The Negro's Complaint" (1788).

10. Cf. Job 38:7.