

“Remarks in Acceptance of the Forty-second
Spingarn Medal at the Forty-eighth
Annual NAACP Convention”

28 June 1957
Detroit, Mich.

During the NAACP national convention in Detroit, King received the Spingarn Medal “for the highest and noblest achievement by an American Negro.”¹ Richard S. Emrich, Protestant Episcopal bishop of Michigan, presented the award, commending King for his courage and commitment to nonviolence: “It would have been easy for a lesser man to have seen the situation as a struggle of race against race,” but “the Rev. Mr. King knew that you do not create fellowship by violence, or justice by injustice, or good laws by lawlessness, or love by hatred.”²

In his acceptance remarks, King relates that he “would like to feel that you are really honoring the 50,000 Negro citizens of Montgomery.” He also praises the NAACP for giving “hope and courage to a disinherited people who dared only to dream of freedom” and urges “every freedom loving person” to double their financial support of the organization. In a letter to Wilkins on 10 July, King wrote that “the meeting Friday night along with the presentation of the award will certainly remain one of the high moments of my life.”

1. Established in 1914 by NAACP board chairman Joel E. Spingarn, the award's continuation was made possible by a trust fund established under the terms of his will. Past recipients included W. E. B. Du Bois, George Washington Carver, Mary McLeod Bethune, and A. Philip Randolph.

2. Emrich concluded his remarks by reading the award citation: “He has given voice to the voiceless, courage to the fearful, and strength to the weak. Endowed with a great spirit and a brilliant intellect, he has utilized his exceptional talents in efforts to secure for all Americans the human rights ordained by God and the political rights vouchsafed by the Constitution of the United States” (Emrich, Remarks on Presentation of the Forty-second Spingarn Medal to Martin Luther King, Jr., 28 June

Mr. Chairman, Bishop Emrich, members of the Board of Directors of this great organization, Secretary [Roy] Wilkins, delegates to the 48th annual convention, ladies and gentlemen:

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I am delighted to accept this great award from the hands of the distinguished Bishop of the Protestant Episcopal Diocese of the State of Michigan.

Words are inadequate for me to express my appreciation to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for bestowing upon me this great honor. This is an honor that I will cherish so long as the chords of memory shall lengthen. You may be assured that I accept this award with profound gratitude and deep humility.

In accepting this award I would like to feel that you are really honoring the 50,000 Negro citizens of Montgomery, Alabama, who more than a year ago came to see that it is ultimately more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation. The names of most of these people will probably never make the headlines, but they are the real heroes of Montgomery. They are really what Jesus called the salt of the earth. Their quiet dignity and determined courage will be a source of inspiration to generations yet unborn.

To these noble persons, to my mother and father, to my devoted wife who has been a constant source of consolation to me through all the difficulties of the past year, to my abiding friend and competent associate, Ralph Abernathy, and to all of the Negro ministers of Montgomery, Alabama, I proudly dedicate this award.

In receiving this award I would like to take the opportunity to express my personal appreciation to the NAACP for the great and noble work that it has done over the years. For almost a half century you have fought courageously and indefatigably for the rights of Negro people. You have always kept your struggle on the highest level of dignity and judiciousness. You have not stooped to the vociferous rabble rousing that is so characteristic of the current white hate groups. Long after the names of the reactionary guardians of white supremacy will have passed away in shame, the names of [Walter] White, Wilkins and [Thurgood] Marshall will prevail as eternal symbols of a righteous struggle. One day America will realize that the NAACP has proved to be one of its best friends, for by fighting so persistently for the rights of Negroes, purely within the framework of legal democracy, it has saved the Negro from turning to some foreign ideology for the solution of his problem.³ The NAACP has given hope and courage to a disinherited people who dared only to dream of freedom. There are some of us who will never forget this. I would urge every freedom loving person to double his financial support of the NAACP at this time in order to make it clear to those who are seeking to outlaw the NAACP that we will stand by this noble organization for better or for worse, until death do us part. It would not only be passing negligence, but tragic ingratitude if we failed to give our utmost loyalty to the NAACP at this time.

Now we turn to a brief discussion of the struggle ahead.

3. In a draft of this speech King wrote: "Long after the names of the reactionary, vociferous guardians of white supremacy will have been forgotten, the names of Spingarn, White, Tobias, Wilkins and Marshall will still prevail. America must never forget that the NAACP has proved to be one of its greatest friends" (King, Draft, Remarks in Acceptance of the Spingarn Medal, 28 June 1957).

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I would like to open my message this evening by using my imagination a bit. If I were standing at the beginning of time, and the Almighty gave me a panoramic view of the whole of history, and then proceeded to ask me which age I would prefer to live in, strangely enough I would bypass the great glory of Greek culture with its days around the Parthenon, with its Plato and Aristotle, its Sophocles and Euripides; I would bypass the days of the Hebrew Exodus with all of its moving and fascinating quality; I would bypass the days when the Roman Empire stood at the zenith of its power with all of its intricate and astounding military machinery; I would bypass the days of the Renaissance with all of the artistic and intellectual contributions that they gave to the culture of the world; I would even bypass the French and American Revolutions; and finally I would turn to the Almighty and say, "If you will allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th Century, I will be happy." Now I would make this request because something is happening in the world today that has never happened before. In the past periods of history revolutions have been isolated, confined to a particular nation. But today we have the privilege of witnessing a world revolution. The drama of freedom and justice is unfolding today in a way unprecedented before. This is truly a great time to be alive.

This is a great time to be alive in America. We stand today on the threshold of the most constructive period of our nation's history.

Now I am aware of the fact that there are those who would argue that we stand amid the most ghastly period of our nation's history. They would contend that the rhythmic beat of the deep rumblings of discontent from the Southland, the tragic reign of violence and terror, the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the stentorian outcry of "interposition" and "nullification" are all indicative of the deep and tragic midnight that encompasses our national life. They would argue that we are retrogressing instead of progressing. But far from representing retrogression and tragic meaninglessness, the present tensions represent the usual pains that accompany the birth of anything new. It seems to be both historically and biologically true that there can be no birth and growth without birth and growing pains. Whenever there is the emergence of the new there is the recalcitrance of the old. And so the tensions which we witness in the Southland today are indicative of the fact that a new South is being born and the old South is passing away.

As we look over the long sweep of race relations in America we notice that there has been something of an evolutionary growth over the years. There have been at least three distinct periods in the history of race relations in this nation, each representing growth over a former period. It is interesting to note that in each period there finally came a decision from the Supreme Court to give legal and constitutional validity to the dominant thought patterns of that particular period. The first period in the area of race relations extended from 1619 to 1863. This was the period of slavery. During this period the Negro was an "it" rather than a "He," a thing to be used rather than a person to be respected. He was merely a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine. In 1857, toward the end of this period, there finally came a decision from the Supreme Court to give legal and constitutional validity to the whole system of slavery. The decision, known as the Dred Scott decision, stated in substance that the Negro is not a citizen of this nation; he is merely property subject to the dictates of his owner.

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The second period in the development of race relations in America extended, broadly speaking, from 1863 to 1954. We may refer to this as the period of seg-

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regation. In 1896, through the famous Plessy versus Ferguson decision, the Supreme Court established the doctrine of separate but equal as the law of the land. Through this decision the dominant thought patterns of this second stage of race relations were given legal and constitutional validity. Now we must admit that this second stage was something of an improvement over the first stage of race relations, because it at least freed the Negro from the bondage of physical slavery. But it was not the best stage, because segregation is at bottom nothing but slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity. So the end results of this second period was that the Negro ended up being plunged across the abyss of exploitation where he experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.

The third period in the development of race relations in America had its beginning on May 17, 1954.⁴ This is the period of complete and constructive integration. The Supreme Court decision which came to give legal and constitutional validity to the dominant thought patterns of this period said in substance that the old Plessy doctrine must go, that separate facilities were inherently unequal, and to segregate a child on the basis of his race is to deny that child equal protection of the law. And so as the result of this decision we find ourselves standing on the threshold of the third and most constructive period in the development of race relations in the history of our nation. We have broken loose from the Egypt of slavery; we have moved through the wilderness of "separate but equal," and now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration. The great moral challenge that confronts each of us at this moment is to work passionately and unrelentingly for the complete realization of the ideals and principles of this third period. We must not rest until segregation and discrimination have been liquidated from every area of our nation's life.

Now there is a bit of urgency about this matter. We don't have long to solve this problem. It is an inescapable must, now! In the midst of all of the pleas for gradualism and slowing up, we must courageously keep moving. We must recognize that both our self-respect and the prestige of our nation are at stake. If we slow up at this time we would not only be betraying the best interest of our race, but also the best interest of our nation. It is one of the ironies of present history that the Negro, in his struggle for freedom, is no longer struggling for himself alone, but he is really struggling to save America. The uncommitted peoples of the world will not follow America so long as she has this internal problem of race. The 1,600,000,000 colored peoples of Asia and Africa are saying in no uncertain terms that racism and colonialism must go. Just a few weeks ago, while traveling in Africa and Europe, I had the opportunity to talk with many of the influential leaders of Asia and Africa. The issue of colonialism and racism was the major theme of almost every conversation. Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah of the new nation of Ghana and his finance minister said to me, "Our sympathies are with America and the free world.⁵ But we will make it clear through the United Nations and other diplomatic channels that beautiful words and extensive handouts cannot be substitutes for the simple responsibilities of treating our colored brothers in America as first-class human beings." So if we are to be a first class nation,

4. King refers to the date of the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

5. Ghana's first finance minister was K. A. Gbedemah.

28 June 1957 we cannot have second-class citizens. Oh I wish that someone could get this over to the Senate. The passage of the civil rights bill which is now before the Senate will do more to increase the prestige of our nation in international affairs than all of the billions of dollars that we spend for defense. We can expect a filibuster in the Senate. But if the senators in support of the bill are really committed to the ideal of civil rights they will extend this session of the Senate, and stay in Washington all summer if necessary, until the filibustering tactics have been defeated and the bill has been passed.

There are several things that each of us must do to bring this third period into complete fulfillment. Time will not permit me to discuss these things in detail, but just to mention a few in passing. We must continue the struggle through legislation. No one should underestimate the power of this method. We must continue to gain the ballot. More and more I am coming to see that one of the most important steps that the Negro can take is that short walk to the voting booth. We must continue to urge the federal government to use all of its constitutional powers to enforce the law of the land. We must invest big money in the cause of freedom. The struggle ahead will take large sums of money. In the past we have given all too little for this great struggle. I am ashamed of the fact that we as a race spend more money for whiskey and big parties than we spend for the cause of civil rights. We spend more on big cars than we spend for the cause of justice. It will be a tragic indictment of both the self-respect and practical wisdom of the Negro if history reveals that at the height of the 20th Century the Negro spent more for frivolities than for the cause of freedom. We must never let it be said that we spent more for the evanescent and ephemeral than for the eternal values of freedom and justice.

Finally, if we are to bring this third period to its full realization, 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. Two or three things must be said about this method that are quite vital. First, it must be stressed that passive resistance does not mean cowardice or stagnant passivity; it does resist. It simply means that the resister is not physically aggressive toward the opponent, but his mind and emotion are always active, constantly seeking to persuade the opponent that he is wrong. This method is passive physically, but strongly active spiritually.

A second thing that can be said about this method is that it does not seek to defeat or humiliate the opponent, but to win his friendship and understanding. As we struggle for justice we will have to boycott at times, but we must always remember that a boycott is not an end within itself; it is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame in the oppressor. The end is reconciliation and redemption.

A third thing that can be said about this method is that it seeks to defeat systems of evil rather than individuals who happen to be caught up in the system. Our aim must be to defeat injustice and not white persons who happen to be unjust.

A fourth thing that can be said about this method is that it avoids not only external physical violence, but also internal violence of spirit. It not only refuses to shoot a man, but it refuses to hate him. As we struggle to bring this third period into being we must not hate or become bitter. We must respond to every abuse with a redemptive love.

232 With this method in the forefront we can stand firm against segregation. In every local community we must stand up with love in our hearts and non-violence as our method, and refuse to cooperate with segregation.

Realism impels me to admit that close adherence to this method will mean suffering and sacrifice. It might even mean going to jail. If this is the case we must with dignity and love fill up the jails of the South.

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Someone will ask; how will we face the acts of cruelty and violence that might come as a result of our standing up for justice? What will be our defense? Certainly it must not be retaliatory violence. We must find our defense in the inherent power of unity and courage. Our defense is to meet every act of violence toward an individual Negro with the fact that there are thousands of others who will present themselves in his place as potential victims. Every time one school teacher is fired for standing up courageously for justice, it must be faced with the fact that there are thousands of more to be fired. If the oppressors bomb the home of one Negro for his courage, this must be met with the fact that they must be required to bomb the home of every other Negro in that community. This dynamic unity, this amazing self-respect, this willingness to suffer, and this refusal to hit back will soon cause the oppressor to become ashamed of his own method. He will be forced to stand before the world and his God splattered with the blood and reeking with the stench of his Negro brother.

If we will join together in doing all of these things we will be able to speed up the full realization of the third period which is before us. This is our glorious challenge and overwhelming responsibility.