

Interview at Bennett College

[11 February 1958]
Greensboro, N.C.

On 11 February King delivered "A Realistic Look at Race Relations" to an over-packed audience at Bennett College's Annie Merner Pfeiffer Chapel.¹ In his address King stressed the importance of the ballot, while noting the limitations of the two major political parties. "I'm not here to tell you how to vote," he said. "That isn't my concern. I'm not a politician. I have no political ambitions. I don't think the Republican party

1. King's address was sponsored by the Greensboro branch of the NAACP, which struggled to find a location for his appearance until Willa Player, president of Bennett College, invited King to speak at the school (Willa Player, Interview by William H. Chafe, 1979; for further discussion of King's address see Introduction, p. 38).

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*is a party full of the almighty God nor is the Democratic party. They both have weaknesses. And I'm not inextricably bound to either party. I'm not concerned about telling you what party to vote for. But what I'm saying is this, that we must gain the ballot and use it wisely."*²

While at Bennett College, King speaks with student reporters from the Bennett Banner, answering their questions about Eisenhower's use of federal troops in the integration of Central High School and the state of race relations in Montgomery since the bus boycott. The following is taken from an audio recording.

[*Interviewer 1:*] Doctor King, we read about what's going on in Alabama and Montgomery but actually what, what does that mean in terms, what are the people thinking?

[*King:*] Well are you speaking now of the Negro people or the white people, or?

[*Interviewer 1:*] Primarily of the Negro people but I don't suppose you can separate the two.

[*King:*] Well, I would say that the Negro people of Montgomery are more determined now, I guess, than ever before to achieve first-class citizenship, or human dignity, whatever you want to call it. There is a determination now more than ever before. The bus boycott instilled within the Negro a sense of dignity and a sense of destiny that is still a part of, this sense of dignity and destiny. So that on the one hand you find this determination by Negroes. On the other hand you have a group, I would say—I don't know how many because it's difficult to tell—but you have a group of persons in the white community who are somewhat bitter because of the bus protest and they feel that giving in at that point was only a way of giving in on problems in other areas, an eventual breakdown of the whole system. So that there are many of these persons are bitter and they are just as determined to preserve segregation as Negroes are to lift the thing. Then, we can't stop there, there are persons of goodwill in the white community of Montgomery who are quite silent today because of fear. But nevertheless persons of deep concern, and persons who are really willing to comply with the law of the land. Now this just gives some idea of some of the attitudes that prevail and I'm sure there are other attitudes that prevail. But these are the main ones that we [*King pauses mid-sentence*]

[*Interviewer 1:*] Doctor, may I ask you one more question? What do the Negroes think, what do the Negroes in Montgomery think about what's happening in Arkansas [*remainder inaudible*]?

[*King:*] Well, there are so many facets to the Arkansas situation, and I haven't talked with all too many people about it. Are you thinking mainly of what they think of Governor [*Orval*] Faubus or what they think of the president sending

2. During a sermon in Atlanta one month earlier, King revealed that he had been offered money by both political parties to rally black voters for the 1956 election: "They told me they had \$75,000 to spend towards obtaining the Negro vote. A large part of this money would have been set aside for my own advantage. I studied their offers long and prayed over it again and again. Then I told them I couldn't do it. I knew it would have given me an opportunity to educate my children and would have given me my first possessions in the world, but I could not sacrifice my soul in the structure of partisan politics" ("King Warns Leaders Of Partisan Politics," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 14 January 1958).

federal troops in or what they think of the children themselves who have been able to stand up amid this?

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[*Interviewer 1:*] The Negro students who've been able to go to school and stand on [*remainder inaudible*].

[*King:*] Oh, well I think the general consensus is that these nine children who have gone to Central High need the greatest commendation and praise for their ability to stand with so much dignity amid such tragic, not only intimidation but harassments and actual violence, because many of them faced violence. So there has been a tremendous respect and I think it has given the people themselves a new sense of dignity. The fact that these little, these young people could stand up with so much courage and yet so much dignity in the midst of all of the abuses that they've had to confront.

[*Interviewer 2:*] Doctor King, I understand you're heading a group which is trying to stimulate voting and registration among the Negroes in the South. Now just exactly what is the program and what has been the success of it?

[*King:*] Well, the program really hasn't started yet. We will have tomorrow night in twenty-one cities across the South, simultaneous mass meetings which will kick off the voting crusade. This is the, we're calling it the Crusade for Citizenship, attempting to double the number of Negro registered voters by 1960. We can't say yet what will come as the results of it, it hasn't been started. But we feel that with the cooperation of all of the segments and all of the agencies that work in this area in the South we will be able to do the job. But it hasn't been started yet. It starts out tomorrow and we hope to fire up these, these mass meetings are just serving to stimulate interest and let the public know that we are beginning this South-wide crusade. And then we will get to the grassroots and we will go into communities and set up some type of voting committee where you have no existing committees and help others where you have existing committees, help them in any way that we possibly can, financially, staff wise, and in terms of educational literature.

[*Interviewer 2:*] Doctor King, I have another question. Do you think that Eisenhower handled the situation, the Little Rock situation, do you think it was effective at all or just what is your opinion about the method in which he did handle it?

[*King:*] Well I think he, I think it's unfortunate for young people, young high school students, to have to go to school under the protection of federal troops. I think it's even more unfortunate for the governor of the state of Arkansas, through irresponsible statements and actions, to leave the president with no other alternative. Under our system, which is a system of law and a system—I should say supposedly of law—the president had no other alternative, that's what I'm saying. It had come to the point that integration or segregation was no longer the question. The question was anarchy or law and order. And the president had no alternative. Even if he had been a segregationist, I don't think he would've had any other alternative because it had come to the point that there was a breakdown of law and order, and this was all the president could do. Now, on the other hand, I think certain constructive things could have been done by the administration beforehand to make the South a little more conducive for integration. I think at many points the forces of goodwill went to sleep and they failed to take a stand when they should have and the negative forces of evil took over. And if the pres-

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1958 maybe the Little Rock situation would have been prevented all together.

[*Interviewer 3:*] Doctor, I have just a few questions. Now you talk about forgiveness and that you must forgive. Do you find that really in your heart you can forgive the men who, say, killed Emmett Till or castrated this innocent man?³ And don't you find it really hard [. . .]

[*King:*] [*interrupting*] Well, if you really love on the basis of Christian concepts, forgiveness is very difficult. It isn't easy. And when it becomes so easy it really isn't forgiveness. There is pain and agony. A husband who loves his wife or vice versa, when one makes a tragic mistake, they can't forgive easy. But it's possible. And when I say forgiving I don't mean that this is something weak or this is something, just a sentimental sort of thing. I think ultimately it is the only [*normal?*] method of reconciliation. Whether it's in social life, or whether it's in individual relations. It's very difficult and it's very hard not to become bitter toward such persons. But forgiveness has great psychological value. Not only does it have healing social power but it has psychological power. If I'm bitter toward a man it hurts me as much as it hurts him. And I think psychologists are telling us today that hate not only hurts the hated but it hurts the hater as much. So for me not to forgive the people who killed Emmett Till or the people who mutilated the man in Birmingham, I am setting in my very personality a structure of evil which can cause a disintegration in my personality, and so that it has both power of psychological individual integration as well as social integration.

[*Interviewer 3:*] Were the Negroes in Alabama surprised at the conviction of these men?

[*King:*] I was not too surprised and yet some people were. I felt that that had come to the point of such tragic inhumanity and barbarity that even a jury would've convicted them, I mean of segregationists.

[*Interviewer 3:*] Well.

[*King:*] I felt that that was, that had gone so far that the very horror of the situation. And I said that in midst of the fact of knowing that a few weeks earlier they had dismissed all, dropped all of the bombing cases in Montgomery.⁴ But this was something here, something different. Here you had a human being that you could point to who had been the victim of something that's just uncivilized.

3. After being acquitted of the August 1955 racially motivated murder of Emmett Till, Roy Bryant and J. W. Milam confessed their guilt to a reporter (William Bradford Huie, "The Shocking Story of Approved Killing in Mississippi," *Look* 20 [24 January 1956]: 46-48, 50). The interviewer also refers to the four Ku Klux Klan members who had been recently convicted of the September 1957 kidnapping and castration of Edward Judge Aaron, a thirty-three-year-old black man from Birmingham. According to newspaper reports, the attackers asked Aaron if he was involved in the NAACP or with Fred Shuttlesworth before emasculating him ("Man Was Beaten And Slashed In Ku Klux Klan Hut," *Alabama Tribune*, 1 November 1957).

4. On 26 November Montgomery officials dropped charges against the five remaining defendants accused in the January 1957 Montgomery church bombings. The action was part of a deal in which King agreed to pay a \$500 fine for charges stemming back to the bus boycott in exchange for the dismissal of charges against his eighty-nine codefendants.

[*Interviewer 3:*] Just one other question. What has been your greatest moment of fear? I think it would be unfair to ask you if you've ever been afraid.

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[*King:*] Oh [*laughter*] sure. I don't know what I would say has been my greatest moment of fear.

[*Interviewer 3:*] Or would it have been a continuing process?

[*King:*] I would say that during the early, in the month of January 1956, when the threats had risen to almost astronomical proportions—that is, thirty and forty threats a day.

[*Interviewer 3:*] Fan mail.

[*King:*] Well not only the mail, but telephone calls, and I came to a point in that period that I actually got afraid. After that I believe there were very few moments that I actually got afraid because I had girded myself for the things ahead which I hadn't done at that time. I had the illusion in the beginning that, number one, Montgomery is a pretty good size town and it had not been known as a violent community. So I just didn't think that there would be any violence. I said that from the beginning, that we would have no violence in Montgomery. I didn't think we'd get many threats. So I started out with an illusion and that's why I think I was a little more fearful in the beginning than I was later. Because I had gone through the process of adjusting to the inevitable later and I had certain religious experiences that gave me something within to confront all of these threats that later came.

[*Interviewer 4:*] Are you a native of Alabama?

[*King:*] No, I'm a native of Atlanta, Atlanta, Georgia. [*Crowd:*] (*I see, I'm with you Doctor*) Yes. Very glad. (*And I'll be with you tonight*) Good, good. (*Thank you so much*)