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Address Delivered at the National Biennial Convention of the American Jewish Congress

[14 May 1958]
[Miami Beach, Fla.]

After King canceled a February speaking engagement with the American Jewish Congress (AJC), Levison urged him to speak at the organization's conference in Miami Beach that spring, pointing out in a 28 February letter that the AJC was "one of the few organizations which is holding a convention in the South and wants to bring the issue of integration forward there."¹ Levison helped formulate these remarks, which King delivers during the opening session at the Hotel Carillon.²

In his speech, King compares Jewish and African-American experiences with racism and observes that the denial of equal access to jobs, education, and the ballot imperils the nation's progress, adding: "What a bit of irony it is that we have in the past decade created machines that think and with them people who fear to think." King also departed from his prepared text below to denounce as "potentially dangerous" Eisenhower's plea to black leaders to remain patient, insisting that the president's remarks would "only encourage those who have defied the Supreme Court decisions and who have created the climate of tension and crisis culminating in violence across the South."³ Newly elected AJC president Joachim Prinz thanked King for his "inspirational address" in a 26 May letter.⁴

It is a great pleasure to address an audience whose sympathetic and understanding of a deep social problem of our age have boldly been expressed, and resolutely supported by deeds and action. It is equally a pleasure to share the platform with Walter Reuther and Dr. Nahum Goldman who have both given wise

1. King replied on 7 March that he would "be happy to attempt to crowd it in." In a 10 March letter, AJC executive director Isaac Toubin asked King to give an address on the topic, "Perspective for Human Relations." An excerpt of King's speech was later reprinted as "In Peace and In Dignity," *Congress Bi-Weekly* 35 (6 May 1968): 16-17.

2. Levison to King, 7 April 1958; see also King, Draft, Address to the National Biennial Convention of the AJC, 14 May 1958.

3. King continued: "Does this mean abandoning the decision of the Supreme Court, turning back to the days in which inequality was practiced in education throughout the South? Does this mean condemning one generation after another of Negro children to an inadequate, impoverished education? It is illogical to argue that because recalcitrant elements stubbornly resist the law, the degree and extent of their resistance should be the measure of our patience and forbearance. The logic of such a viewpoint is that the greater the resistance, the greater should be our patience and voluntary suspension of the law. If there is no time limit and no mutuality of responsibility toward the law, appeals for forbearance become suggestions for surrender and retreat" (AJC, Press release, 14 May 1958).

4. Following the conference, Levison informed King that his speech had made "a profound impression. . . . speakers, ranging from the new AJC President, Dr. Prinz, to the outgoing President, Dr. Goldstein, commented impressively on the inspiring quality of your address. . . . Equally enthusiastic were observations among the delegates. I mention this because you and I were somewhat critical of part of the delivery. Obviously, our standards are on a most elevated plane" (Levison to King, 3 June 1958).

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and sincere leadership at home and abroad in the spirit of noble ideals implemented by dynamic and creative actions.⁵

My people were brought to America in chains. Your people were driven here to escape the chains fashioned for them in Europe. Our unity is born of our common struggle for centuries, not only to rid ourselves of bondage, but to make oppression of any people by others an impossibility.

The story of freedom's struggle to emerge and root itself in our nation began not in one place, but in several. I would like to mention one of these early incidents quite familiar to you, but not known to many Americans.

In the first week of September 1654, 23 Jewish refugees from the Portugese inquisition arrived in New Amsterdam on board the sailing ship, the St. Charles. This was the first ship of Jess to reach the new world as a community, though Jews were members of the crew of Christopher Columbus. Peter Stuyvesant, in a document which he described as "friendly" asked that these "hateful enemies and blasphemers" get out of the new world.⁶ The history of America might have been different had these 23 Jews retreated with a beaten spirit. Instead, they peacefully and in dignity asserted their moral and political right to remain to settle as equals and to contribute to the building of a new society. As the history of all ages teaches us, no autocrat can dismember or distroy an unfolding truth; and Peter Stuyvesant, with his powerful athority, was ultimately defeated by these 23 determined Jews, who remained and became a responsible part of New Amsterdam. The governor of Arkansas in this day faced nine Negroes school children with the same bigotry and distrust as the hate-filled Peter Stuyvesant.⁷ They, too, will resist and win against all odds and thereby enlarge the democratic vistas of our nation in the same glowing traditions as the Jews of the St. Charles. Thus three hundred years apart two struggles for democracy were waged as America still strives to "proclaim liberty throughout the world".

One of history's most despicable tyrants, Adolph Hitler, sought to redefine morality as a good exclusively for the ayrian race. He bathed mankind in oceans of blood, murdering millions of Jews, old and young, and even the unborn. Negroes saw that such hideous racism, though not immediately applied to them, must sooner or later encompass them, and willingly they supported the struggle to achieve his defeat.

There are Hitlers loose in America today, both in high and low places. As the tensions and bewilderment of economic broblems become more severe, history scapegoats, the Jews, will be joined by new scapegoats, the Negroes. The Hitlers will seek to divert people's minds and turn their frustrations and anger to the helpless, to the outnumbered. Then whether the Negro and Jew shall live in peace

5. United Auto Workers president Reuther and Goldmann, president of the World Jewish Congress, also addressed the conference that evening.

6. Peter Stuyvesant was the Dutch colonial governor of New Amsterdam (later New York) from 1647 to 1664.

7. King refers to Governor Orval Faubus and his efforts to block school desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas.

14 May 1958 will depend upon how firmly they resist, how effectively they reach the minds of the decent Americans to halt this deadly diversion.

Every Negro leader is keenly aware, from direct and personal experience, that the segregationists make no fine distinctions between the Negro and the Jew. The irrational hatred motivating his actions is as readily turned against Catholic, Jew, Quaker, Liberal and One-Worlder, as it is against the Negro. Some have jeered at Jews with Negroes; some have bombed the homes and churches of Negroes; and in recent acts of inhuman barbarity, some have bombed your synagogues—indeed right here in Florida. Have the Nazis murdered Catholic Poles and Jews, Protestant Norwegian and Jews, the races of America fly blindly at both of us caring not at all which of us falls. Their aim is to maintain through cruel segregation groups whose uses as scapegoats can facilitate their political and social rule over all people. Our common fight is against these deadly enemies of democracy, and our glory is that we are chosen to prove that courage is a characteristic of oppressed people, however cynically and brutally they are denied full equality and freedom.

I do not believe the American people, including the decent minded people of the south really want two social classes in a grotesque democracy. They have been misled, their fears aroused and their negative attitudes encouraged. But, as we together move forward in non-violent pursuit of reasonable goals, the realization that injustice is being done must reveal itself.

Standing here in a southern city before an audience of southerners, northerners, westerners, Christians and Jews, I say, as I have said to hundreds of thousands of Negroes, that if the southern white were freed of artificially contrived restraints, his instinctive will to fairness would bring him to oppose the racists. The forces of evil are a minority in this nation.

We, the Negroes, need some simple things in order to realize the huge potential. We need equal education which the Supreme Court declared can only be realized if it is unsegregated. We need representative government so that the laws we legislate and obey are our own. We need economic opportunities so that we can bring up our families in security, encouraging our children to higher levels of education with the assurance that it can be available. The wealthiest nation on earth can certainly afford this. The nation whose founders believed in democracy and equality can afford to give these without violating its principles or corrupting its culture. But these things are deliberately and forcibly withheld. Like the 23 Jews on the St. Charles, Negroes do not propose to re-embark and sail away because a few misguided bigots order us to do so. We say, as they did, that the vast majority of people are truly ready to open the doors of opportunity and will do so if permitted to express their will.

With this confidence, we are peacefully, but insistently organizing ourselves to vote, to educate our children side by side with white children, and to seek fair employment practices. These are described by some as extremists' demands. They are distorted as concealing a real purpose—to inter-marry, to establish black supremacy, to introduce lawlessness. But all people of goodwill realize that these

things are not our program. If employment, the franchise, education and brotherhood are extremists' demands, then the Old and the New Testaments are wildly extremist documents. If these are extremist demands, then democracy, itself, is extremist and the world needs to reverse its course and move backwards to the age of monarchs and tyranny. A job, to vote and education, a socially and friendly and relaxed community are not a wild dream of centuries in the future. Indeed, if our technologically brilliant age cannot provide these things, it stands on the brink of disaster, for they are the bare minimum of existence in an advancing world. What a bit of irony it is that we have in the past decade created machines that think and with them people who fear to think.

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Specifically to you I ask that you give an example to liberals by speaking out boldly. Today we are finding, too often, a quasi liberalism which is committed to the principle of looking sympathetically at all sides. It is a liberalism so objectively analytical that it fails to become subjectively committed. It is a liberalism which has developed a high blood pressure of words and an anemia of deeds. You can, with your community organization experience, assist in the development of platforms from which white moderates, liberals and others may speak and act toward effective ends. Let us both realize that history has thrust upon us an indescribably important destiny—to complete a process of democratization which our nation has developed too slowly, but which is our most powerful weapon for world respect and immolation.

The shape of the world today does not permit us the luxury of an anemic democracy. Consider the monumental impact of this truth. The so-called backward nations of India, the jungle fringed islands of Indonesia, in Burma and in nations of Africa, there is a freer franchise than in the southland of the United States. In Mississippi, a Negro college professor is turned away from the poles, a minister is shot and killed for attempting to vote, but in India, an illiterate, penniless peasant is provided with a special ballot so his vote may fairly be recorded. The contrast in this practice of democracy may escape many Americans. It does not escape Indians. This may explain why our dazzling wealth and profuse rhetoric of democratic principles leaves them unimpressed.⁸

The new south which is emerging is not something that will come into being devoid of human effort. Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable. Even

8. In the draft of this address he had prepared for King, Levison included the following reflections on Israel: "In the Middle East your sympathies are understandably with the developing nation of Israel. My sympathies reach Israel and struggling people in African nations striving to be free. I know of an[d] warmly appreciate Dr. [Goldmann's] broad view that a future of stability and peace and ultimate prosperity in the Middle East requires [an] understanding between these two forces. I believe our joint struggle in the U.S. for full democracy and equality for both our peoples will in its effective implementation and unshakeable solidarity bring a constructive approach to leaders in the Middle East. Then all of us, the descendants of slaves, can together find peaceful understanding which in an age of violence will produce a brotherhood of non-violence and cooperation ushering mankind into a golden age of the future" (Draft, Address to the National Biennial Convention of the AJC, 14 May 1958).

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America, the first nation to electrify the world with a new concept of man's capability of self-rule without monarchs or regents, must fulfill the promises of its constitution and Declaration of Independence. Failing this, no power of nuclear weapon or limitless wealth can prevent the steady [*remainder missing*]⁹

TDF. CSKC.

9. The published version of the speech includes King's concluding sentence: "Failing this, no power of nuclear weapon or limitless wealth can prevent the steady erosion and diminishing of its grandeur in a century of climactic changes."