

Statement on Presidential Endorsement

1 Nov
19601 November 1960
Atlanta, Ga.

One week before the presidential election, King announces that he has no plans to endorse a candidate but expresses gratitude for the Democratic nominee's concern about his imprisonment: "I hope that this example of Senator Kennedy's courage will be a lesson deeply learned."¹

I have been asked from many quarters whether it is my intention to endorse one of the presidential candidates. The organization of which I am president, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, from its inception and in its constitution has been non-partisan.² Accordingly, as its titular head, I am unable to endorse a political party or its candidate.³ Moreover, the role that is mine in the emerging social order of the South and America demands that I remain non-partisan. This, devoid of partisan political attachments, I am free to be critical of both parties when necessary.⁴

But for fear of being considered an ingrate, I want to make it palpably clear that I am deeply grateful to Senator Kennedy for the genuine concern he expressed in my arrest. When reactionary forces sought to crush our movement for desegregation by methods so unjust and unwise that millions were inflamed with indignation, Senator Kennedy exhibited moral courage of a high order. He voluntarily expresses his position effectively and took an active and articulate stand for a just resolution. I hope that this example of Senator Kennedy's courage will be

1. This statement was distributed at an afternoon press conference (John Britton, "King Not Backing Either Candidate," *Atlanta Daily World*, 2 November 1960). Just prior to the election, Kennedy supporters in Philadelphia produced a pamphlet aimed at black voters that featured positive statements on Kennedy from King, King Sr., Coretta King, Ralph Abernathy, and Gardner Taylor. The pamphlet quoted Abernathy: "It is time for all of us to take off our Nixon buttons." King, Sr. acknowledged that he had been planning to vote against Kennedy "because of his religion" but had decided that "now he can be my President, Catholic or whatever he is" (Freedom Crusade Committee, Pamphlet, "The Case of Martin Luther King," 27 October–7 November 1960). For more on King, Sr.'s support of Kennedy, see King to Ray A. Burchfield, 5 November 1960, pp. 542–544 in this volume.

2. SCLC's constitution does not refer to the organization's nonpartisan status but states that SCLC is a charitable organization with an orientation toward "improving the Civic, Religious, Economic, and Cultural Conditions in the South and in the Nation" (SCLC, "Constitution and by-laws," November 1958).

3. Three days before the election, King's secretary Dora McDonald responded to Luvenia Springfield's 18 October request for advice on the "best" way to vote. McDonald acknowledged that as SCLC's president King "does not publicly endorse any candidates for political office" but privately "Dr. King intends to support Senator Kennedy—feeling that he has the best program for the hour" (McDonald to Springfield, 5 November 1960).

4. In response to a 1 November letter from Emory University theology professor Claude Thompson, King reiterated his nonpartisanship: "While I felt compelled to thank Senator Kennedy for his call to my wife and other expressions of concern, I wanted to make it clear that this should not be construed in any way as an endorsement" (King to Thompson, 5 November 1960). For King's political positions during the 1956 presidential campaign, see King to Viva O. Sloan, 1 October 1956, and King to Earl Kennedy, 30 October 1956, in *Papers* 3:383–384 and 408–409, respectively.

not only has he a great mind—but now I am convinced that he also has a great heart. This is the kind of man we need at this hour."

DR. GARDNER TAYLOR

President of The Protestant Council of New York

"All Americans can rejoice that Dr. Martin Luther King and all the sit-in students are now out of jail. We can also be proud that during these days of moral crisis one of the candidates for the Presidency showed that he had the heart and the American sense of fair play to take the initiative in expressing his concern and contributing to a just solution.

"This is the kind of moral leadership and direct personal concern which this problem has lacked in these last critical years. I was pleased to learn from Mrs. Coretta King herself that it was the candidate of my choice, Senator Kennedy, who personally telephoned Mrs. King and who took direct action to bring about the release of Dr. King and the students.

"I am disappointed that when this time for plain speaking and action was at hand, there was nothing but silence from Mr. Nixon. I find it incredible that any candidate for the Presidency would be so insensitive to a case which has world-wide implications as to say that he has no comment about it. I hope that Mr. Nixon will correct this report in The New York Times.

"My disappointment is doubled by the fact that Mr. Nixon did not respond to the request for a message of support to the Atlanta convention of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee two weeks ago. Senator Kennedy sent a stirring message saying that 'The human rights for which you strive are the definite goal of all America.'"

FROM N.Y. POST EDITORIAL

It was Senator Kennedy who responded . . . He did so presumably with full awareness that his words and deeds would inflame the Southern racists and multiply his difficulties in Dixie.

Throughout this interval Mr. Nixon remained passive and silent, ignoring a plea from the sit-in group for a comparable declaration of support and articulating no sentiment about the harassment of Rev. King.

Mr. Nixon may have some pious afterthoughts to offer now that Rev. King has been released. But in this dramatic human episode Senator Kennedy has looked a lot larger and warmer—and bolder—than his opponent.

**"No Comment" Nixon
versus
A Candidate With a
Heart, Senator Kennedy**

**THE
CASE OF
MARTIN LUTHER
KING**



The following statements have been issued to or appeared in the press on a case of international significance testing American justice.

Sponsored by:

THE FREEDOM CRUSADE COMMITTEE
5536 Poplar Street, Philadelphia, Pa.

Rev. Marshall L. Shepard and Dr. William A. Gray, Co-Chairmen



Pamphlet endorsing John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, sponsored by the Freedom Crusade Committee (7 November 1960)

American Justice on Trial

MRS. MARTIN LUTHER KING:

"It certainly made me feel good that he called me personally and let me know how he felt. Senator Kennedy said he was very much concerned about both of us. He said this must be hard on me. He wanted me to know he was thinking about us and he would do all he could to help.

"I told him I appreciated it and hoped he would help. I had the feeling that if he was that much concerned he would do what he could so that Mr. King would be let out of jail.

"I have heard nothing from the Vice President or anyone on his staff. Mr. Nixon has been very quiet."

REV. MARTIN LUTHER KING, SR.:

"I had expected to vote against Senator Kennedy because of his religion. But now he can be my President, Catholic or whatever he is.

"It took courage to call my daughter-in-law at a time like this. He has the moral courage to stand up for what he knows is right. He has shown his sympathy and concern and his respect for the Constitutional rights of all Americans.

"I've got all my votes and I've got a suitcase and I'm going to take them up there and dump them in his lap."

REV. RALPH ABERNATHY

President, Montgomery Improvement Association; Secretary-Treasurer, Southern Christian Leadership Conference

"I earnestly and sincerely feel that it is time for all of us to take off our Nixon buttons. I wish to make it crystal clear that I am not hog-tied to any party. My first concern is for the 350-year long struggle of our people.

"Now I have made up my mind to vote for Senator Kennedy because I am convinced he is concerned about our struggle.

"Senator Kennedy did something great and wonderful when he personally called Mrs. Coretta King and helped free Dr. Martin Luther King. This was the kind of act I was waiting for. It was not just Dr. King on trial—America was on trial.

"Mr. Nixon could have helped, but he took no step in this direction. It is my understanding that he refused even to comment on the case.

"I learned a long time ago that one kindness deserves another. Since Mr. Nixon has been silent through all this, I am going to return his silence when I go into the voting booth.

"Senator Kennedy showed his great concern for humanity when he acted first without counting the cost. He risked his political welfare in the South. We must offset whatever loss he may sustain.

"He has my wholehearted support because

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"I am deeply indebted to Senator Kennedy who served as a great force in making my release possible. It took a lot of courage for Senator Kennedy to do this, especially in Georgia. For him to be that courageous shows that he is really acting upon principle and not expediency. He did it because of his great concern and his humanitarian bent.

"I hold Senator Kennedy in very high esteem. I am convinced he will seek to exercise the power of his office to fully implement the civil rights plank of his party's platform.

"I never intend to be a religious bigot. I never intend to reject a man running for President of the United States just because he is a Catholic. Religious bigotry is as immoral, un-democratic, un-American and un-Christian as racial bigotry."

2 Nov 1960 a lesson deeply learned and consistently applied by all as we move forward in a non violent but resolute spirit to achieve rapidly proper standards of humanity and justice in our swiftly evolving world.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Mayor Hartsfield for his constrictive leadership throughout this whole struggle. I have always argued that the silent multitude of the South, who sincerely want fair play to be the hallmark of our society, needed support and encouragement available only from its major leadership to enable them to give open expression to their belief. I consider that Mayor Hartsfield's action illustrates the soundness of this course.⁵ The best antidote to degeneration of conflict of opinion into maliciousness and violence is statesman-like, firm, expressions of the moral issues giving active support to proper resolution.

This is not the time to look back, but to look forward. I am full of hope for the future because of the goodwill and concern shown by so many people in Georgia and all over the country.

Now let us use this period for genuine negotiations so that Atlanta can take a step forward toward the society of "wisdom, justice and moderation" which the Seal of the State of Georgia and the Constitution of the United States promised.

TD. MLKP-MBU: Box 2.

5. King refers to the thirty-day "sit-in truce" arranged by William B. Hartsfield to secure the release of the student protesters arrested in late October. On 22 November, Hartsfield reported that the merchants were still unwilling to desegregate their lunch counters. The students granted the merchants an extension, but talks fell apart on 24 November and the protests resumed ("Hartsfield Wins New Sit-In Truce," *Atlanta Constitution*, 23 November 1960, and "Truce Talk on Sit-Ins Canceled," *Atlanta Constitution*, 29 November 1960).