

“Address at Public Meeting  
of the Southern Christian  
Ministers Conference of Mississippi”

23 September 1959  
[Jackson, Miss.]

*Closing a two-day session on nonviolent resistance at Pearl Street AME Church, King praises Mississippi's civil rights leaders who “have stood in this state like courageous Davids amid the giants of resistance and the Goliaths of injustice.”<sup>1</sup> After reflecting on the current state of race relations, King outlines the responsibilities*

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1. W. H. Hall, chairman of the Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi, confirmed the speaking engagement in a 21 May 1959 letter. Earlier in the conference, James Lawson addressed “The Biblical-Theological Basis to Nonviolence” and Ella Baker spoke on “Allies and Opponents of the Negro’s Drive for Equality” (Hall to Fellow minister, 17 August 1959). At a press conference preceding his address, King warned that “it is likely that Communist Russia would take over as the world leader” should the United States not solve its racial problems (“Rev. King Sees Resistance to Integration Nearing End,” *Montgomery Advertiser*, 24 September 1959).

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*of African Americans interested in social change. He predicts "a season of suffering" and warns that "as victories for civil rights mount in the federal courts, angry passions and deep prejudices are further aroused." In the face of continuing attacks, King asserts that "the Negro needs the vision to see the ordeals of the generation as the opportunity to transfigure himself and American society." A handwritten draft included corrections that King incorporated into this typescript.<sup>2</sup>*

Mr. Chairman, members of the Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi, fellow workers for freedom:

I am delighted to have the opportunity of being with you in this significant meeting. It is through conferences of this nature that we gain new insights, new inspiration, and, indeed, new courage to carry on in the mighty struggle in which we are engaged.

I come to Mississippi with nothing but praise for the fearless and dedicated leaders that have stood in this state like courageous Davids amid the giants of resistance and the Goliaths of injustice. As we all know, it is not easy to take a stand in Mississippi, for the possibilities of economic reprisals and bodily harm are much greater here than in any other section. In a real sense there is nothing more majestic and sublime than the determined courage of individuals willing to suffer and sacrifice for their freedom. This is what your leaders exemplify. God grant that new dedicated leaders will rise up and join the ranks of the few who have already given so much of their time and energy to a cause that we know is right.

I bring warm and sincere greetings to you from the Montgomery Improvement Association and the people of Montgomery. I bring special greetings from the 50,000 Negro people of Montgomery who, through their words and deeds, revealed that it is ultimately more honorable to walk in dignity than ride in humiliation. I also bring greetings from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This organization came into being in order to serve as a channel through which local protest organizations in the South could coordinate their activities. Our basic aim is to implement the Supreme Court's desegregation decisions on the local level through mass, direct, non-violent action. One of our most specific undertakings, at the present time, is that of joining with other organizations to increase the number of Negro registered voters in the South. This is a big job, and one that cannot be tackled without hard work and great financial resources.

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court of this nation rendered in simple, eloquent and unequivocal language a decision that was destined to change the future course of American history.<sup>3</sup> It declared segregation unconstitutional in the public schools, and made it palpable clear that to segregate a child on the basis of his race meant denying that child equal protection of the law. This decision came as a joyous daybreak to the long night of enforced segregation. It came as a

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2. King, Draft, Address at public meeting of the Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi, 23 September 1959. In composing his remarks, King drew upon several earlier addresses, including "Give Us the Ballot," his speech delivered at the 17 May 1957 Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington, D.C. (see *Papers* 4:208-215).

3. King refers to *Brown v. Board of Education*.

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legal and sociological death-blow to the old Plessy doctrine of “separate-but-equal”.<sup>4</sup> The rendering of this decision did far more to advance the prestige of the United States than all of her astounding achievements in the scientific and technological realm.

Since the 1954 decision was rendered, many notable advances have taken place. Out of the seventeen states and the District of Columbia that practiced segregation when the Supreme Court handed down its edict, all but five have made some move toward compliance. Integration is definitely gaining ground in the Deep South, and with less violence than at any time since the momentous 1954 decision outlawing “separate-but-equal” schools.

One of the most hopeful signs of our time is the breakdown of massive resistance in Virginia and Arkansas. Interestingly enough, this massive resistance has crumbled as a result of the massive insistence of white southerners to keep the public schools open. What we now see in both Little Rock and Virginia is something very revealing. Two powerful institutions have collided in the South—the institution of segregation and the institution of public schools. And the people have made it clear that when the final moment of choice comes, they will choose public schools rather than segregation.

So maybe we pro-integrationists shouldn't be so hard on Governor [Orval] Faubus after all, for, however ironical it may sound, he has done more to promote the cause of integration than almost any personality of this decade. His irresponsible actions brought the issue to the forefront of the conscience of the nation, and allowed people to see the futility of attempting to close the public schools. The price to be paid by school closing, it has been found, is much too high. Business suffers. Children receive an inferior education. Many responsible persons move away. The cultural life of the community lags.

All of this has made it possible for the cooler heads to gain ground. The moderates in the white South are being heard. They are no longer voices crying in the wilderness.

Despite these definite signs of progress, the forces of resistance are still active. The South is not letting down the barriers willingly. Except in the District of Columbia and the border states, such as Delaware, Maryland, Missouri, Kentucky, Oklahoma and West Virginia, full-scale integration is still a long way off. Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Arkansas and now Florida have accepted integration on a token basis only. Five states—South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi and Louisiana—are still fighting to keep even token mixing of classes out of their schools.

All of this reveals that we have a great deal of positive work to do before the ideals and principles of an integrated society are brought into full realization. Let me hasten to say that this problem will not just work itself out. It is a fallacy to say that time will cure all problems. If time is not aided by human effort, it becomes a powerful ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social stagnation. Even a casual look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goal of justice requires

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4. King refers to the U.S. Supreme Court's 1896 decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson* (163 U.S. 537).

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We must also realize that privileged groups never give up their privileges voluntarily. If we are victimized with the feeling that we can sit down comfortably by the wayside and wait for the white man to voluntarily give us our justly deserved freedom, we will be the victims of a dangerous illusion, which can only end up in tragic disillusion. If we are waiting for our rights to be given to us without any determined effort to gain them, I fear that we will still be waiting when our great grand children make their entrance on the stage of history. All of the gains that we have made thus far, in the area of civil rights, have come through legal and moral pressure.

In the final analysis, integration will become a reality in America only when enough people come to believe that it is morally right and are willing to work passionately for its fulfillment.

Many agencies and groups must work constructively together in order to achieve the ideals and principles of an integrated society—the Christian church, organized labor, liberal whites, North and South, the federal government and the Negro himself. Since time will not permit me to discuss the role of all of these groups, I would like to take the moments left in discussing the role of the Negro.

Certainly, if first class citizenship is to become a reality for the Negro, he must assume the primary responsibility for making it so. One of the most damaging effects of past segregation on the personality of the Negro may well be that he has been victimized with the delusion that others should be more concerned than himself about his citizenship rights. There are several specific things that we must do:

1. We must maintain a sense of somebodiness and self-respect. One of the great tragedies of the system of segregation is that it so often robs its victims of a sense of dignity and worth. It tends to develop a false sense of inferiority in the segregated. But despite the existence of a system that denies our essential worth, we must have the spiritual audacity to assert our somebodiness. We must no longer allow our physical bondage to enslave our minds. He who feels that he is nobody eventually becomes nobody. But he who feels that he is somebody, even though humiliated by external servitude, achieves a sense of selfhood and dignity that nothing in all the world can take away.

2. We must make a vigorous effort to improve our standards wherever they lag behind. We must not be afraid to admit our own shortcomings. One of the sure signs of maturity is the ability to rise to the point of self-criticism. Whenever we are objects of criticism from white men, even though the criticisms are maliciously directed and mixed with half-truths, we must pick out the elements of truth and make them the basis of creative reconstruction. We must not let the fact that we are the victims of injustice lull us into abrogating responsibility for our own lives.

We must make full and constructive use of the freedom we already possess. We must not allow our oppression and lack of full freedom to drive us into a state of contentment with the mediocre and satisfaction with the non-productive. History has proven that inner determination can often break through the outer shackles of circumstance. Take the Jews for an example. For years they have been forced to walk through the dark night of oppression. They have been carried through

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the fires of affliction, and put to the cruel sword of persecution. But this did not keep them from rising up with creative genius to plunge against cloud-filled nights of affliction, new and blazing stars of inspiration. Being a Jew did not keep [*Baruch*] Spinoza from rising from a poverty stricken ghetto to a place of eminence in philosophy. Being a Jew did not keep [*George Frideric*] Handel from lifting his vision to high heaven and emerging with creative and melodious music that still shakes the very fiber of men's souls. Being a Jew did not keep [*Albert*] Einstein from using his profound and genius-packed mind to challenge an axiom and add to the lofty insights of science a theory of relativity. Being a Jew did not prevent Karl Marx from adding to the accumulated knowledge of political science, making it necessary for men to study his theories whether they agree with him or not. Being a Jew did not keep Sigmund Freud from delving into the inner chambers of the subconscious, making it easier for man to discover the source of his inner conflicts and the roots of his personality disintegration. Being Jews did not prevent Amos and Hosea, Ezekial, Isaiah and Jeremiah from standing up amid forces of religious idolatry and unjust power structures and declaring with prophetic urgency the eternal word of God, and the never ceasing necessity of being obedient to his will.

So we too can make creative contributions, even though the door of freedom is not fully opened. We need not wait until oppression ceases before we seek to make creative contribution to our nation's life. We must seek to rise above the crippling restrictions of circumstance. Already we have a host of Negroes whose inspiring achievements have proven that human nature cannot be catalogued, and that we need not postpone the moment of our creativity until the day of full emancipation. From an old slave cabin in Virginia's hills, Booker T. Washington rose to the statue of one of America's greatest leaders; he lit a torch and darkness fled. From the red hills of Gordon County, Georgia, Roland Hayes rose to the palace of King George the Fifth and the mansion of Queen Mother of Spain. From a poverty stricken area in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Marion Anderson rose up to be the world's greatest contralto, so that Toscaninni could say, "A voice like this comes only once in a century," and Sibelius of Finland could say, "My roof is too low for such a voice." From oppressive and crippling surroundings, George Washington Carver lifted his searching, creative mind to the ordinary peanut, and found therein extraordinary possibilities for goods and products unthinkable by minds of the past. There was a star in the sky of female leadership, and Mary McLeod Bethune grabbed it and used it. There was a star in the diplomatic sky; Ralph Bunche caught it and allowed it to shine in his life, in spite of the fact that he was the grandson of a slave preacher. There was a star in the athletic sky; then came Joe Louis with his educated fist, Jessie Owens with his fleet and dashing feet, and Jackie Robinson with his calm spirit and powerful bat.<sup>5</sup> There are many others.

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5. Booker T. Washington (1856-1915) founded Tuskegee Institute. Roland Hayes (1887-1977) was a well-known lyric tenor. Marian Anderson (1897-1993) was an internationally acclaimed opera singer. Arturo Toscanini (1867-1957) was an Italian conductor who led the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Orchestra (1928-1936), and Jean Sibelius (1865-1957) was a Finnish composer. George Washington Carver (1864?-1943) was a scientist particularly famed for his agricultural research. Mary McLeod Bethune (1875-1955) was a pioneering educator who founded the National Council of Negro Women. Ralph Bunche (1904-1971) was a United Nations diplomat who became the first African

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The names are too numerous to list. But these are sufficient to demonstrate the fact that we need not wait until the day of complete freedom before we seek to achieve excellence in our various fields of endeavor.

3. We must make a determined effort to achieve the ballot. One of the most important steps that the Negro can take at this hour is that short walk to the voting booth. As you know, there are two problems that we must deal with in this area. One is the problem internal apathy. This is where people out of sheer laziness and a lack of interest fail to register in areas where there are no real barriers. We all know that there are some cities in the Deep South where the Negro faces only the obstacle of his own laxity. The other problem that we confront in seeking to obtain the ballot is that of external resistance. This resistance includes threats and intimidation from white extremists, conniving methods set up by boards of registrars, such as, literacy tests, written and oral, and occasional physical violence against Negroes seeking to vote. The story of Gus Courts and the Rev. George Lee here in Mississippi is a familiar one, and the violence inflicted upon these men constitutes one of the most shameful stories of American history.<sup>6</sup> It is a shame before this nation and the world that less than twenty thousand Negroes are registered in Mississippi because of the forces of resistance.

If this problem of injustice at the ballot box is to be solved, we must press for stronger civil rights legislation. In passing, I would like to commend the members of the Civil Rights Commission who recommended such powerful and constructive proposals in the area of civil rights. I am certain that if these recommendations are enacted into law we will see a new birth of freedom and a new day of justice in the South.<sup>7</sup>

Our most urgent plea to the federal government is to guarantee our voting rights. We must cry out to the federal government in firm and positive terms, give us the ballot. Give us the ballot and we will creatively join in the freeing of the soul of America. Give us the ballot and we will transform the silent misdeeds of blood-thirsty mobs into the blessed good deeds of orderly citizens. Give us the ballot and we will no longer worry you about a federal anti-lynching law; we will, by the power of vote, write such a law on the statue books of the South, and bring an end to the dastardly acts of hooded perpetrators of violence who have left wounded justice lying prostrate in the streets of our cities. Give us the ballot and we will keep the sublime name of shame in the newspapers of Europe, in the market places of Asia, and in the discussion groups of Africa. We will bring before

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American to win the Nobel Peace Prize in 1950. Joe Louis (1914–1981) held the world heavyweight championship from 1937 to 1949. Jesse Owens (1913–1980) was a track and field star who won four gold medals in the 1936 Berlin Summer Olympics. Jackie Robinson (1919–1972) was the first African American to play modern major league baseball.

6. In separate incidents in 1955, Courts and Lee were shot after registering black voters in Belzoni, Mississippi. Lee was killed and Courts relocated to Chicago.

7. Among the commission's recommendations were that all registration and voting records be made public, that the commission be bestowed with the authority to investigate and dismiss allegations of disenfranchisement, and that the president be allowed to designate temporary registrars in localities with more than nine complaints (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1959* [Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1959], pp. 134–142).

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the bar of justice the brutal murderers of little Emmitt Till and the vicious lynchers of Mack C. Parker.<sup>8</sup> Give us the ballot and we will house our courts with judges who will do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God, and we will send to the sacred halls of Congress men who will not sign a Southern Manifesto because they are committed to a higher manifesto of justice and love. Give us the ballot and we will quietly and non-violently implement the Supreme Court's decision of May 17, 1954.<sup>9</sup>

4. We must give generous financial contributions to civil rights organizations. Massive resistance must be met by massive financial assistance. It is appalling to discover how little money we are willing to invest in the struggle for our own freedom and dignity. The excuse that we don't have the money is no longer valid or acceptable. The annual income of the Negro is now about 17 billion dollars a year, which is more than the national income of Canada and all the exports of the United States. We have money for almost everything else that we want, including insignificant things. I submit to you that we spend far too much on frivolities and far too little on worthwhile causes. It will be tragic indeed if future historians are able to record that the Negro spent more on transitory pleasure than he spent on the eternal values of freedom and justice.

5. We must continue to produce intelligent, dedicated and courageous leaders. We need leaders who avoid the extremes of hotheadedness and "uncle-tomism", leaders who, on the one hand, embrace wise restraint and calm reasonableness and, on the other hand, reveal a courageous determination to press on until the victory for justice is won. We need leaders not in love with money, but in love with justice; leaders not in love with publicity, but in love with humanity to paraphrase the great words of Holland: God give us leaders; a time like this demands great leaders; leaders whom the spoils of office cannot buy; leaders who have honor; leaders who will not lie; leaders who possess opinions and a will; leaders who can stand before a demagogue and damn his treacherous flatteries without winking; tall leaders, sun-crowned in public duty and in private thinking.<sup>10</sup>

6. We must possess the firm conviction that segregation is an evil that we cannot passively accept. Segregation is evil because it seeks to repudiate the principle that all men are created equal. Segregation is wrong because it relegates men to the status of things, and makes them objects to be used, rather than persons to be respected. Segregation is wrong because it gives the segregated a false sense of inferiority, while leaving the segregator confirmed in a false sense of superiority.

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8. Fourteen-year-old Emmett Till was murdered in Mississippi in August 1955 for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Two white men were acquitted of Till's murder the following month. For more details on the murder of Mack Charles Parker, see King to James P. Coleman, 25 April 1959, pp. 190-191 in this volume.

9. In March 1956 ninety Southern congressmen and all but three Southern senators signed the "Declaration of Constitutional Principles," popularly known as the "Southern Manifesto," in which they pledged to resist desegregation, asserting that it was a subversion of the Constitution.

10. King paraphrases Josiah Gilbert Holland's poem "Wanted" (1872).

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Segregation is wrong because it assumes that God made a mistake and stamped upon certain men an eternal stigma of shame because of the color of their skin.<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, we must not rest until segregation is removed from every area of our nation's life. Segregation is a cancer in the body politic, which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized. We must not be deluded into complacent acceptance of an outmoded doctrine of separate-but-equal because of the present erection of beautiful school buildings. The fact remains that separate facilities are inherently unequal, and so long as segregated schools exist the South can never reach its full economic, political and moral maturity.

7. We must be willing to suffer and sacrifice in order to achieve our freedom. It is trite but true that freedom is never handed out on a silver platter, and that the road to progress is never a smooth and easy road. The flight from the Egypt of slavery to the glorious promised land is always temporarily interrupted by a bleak and desolate wilderness, with its prodigious mountains of opposition and gigantic hilltops of evil. The triumphant drums of Easter are never allowed to beat until the desolate moments of life's Good Friday have plucked the radiant star of hope from the sky of human experience. This is the story of life. Too many of us want the fruits of integration but we are not willing to courageously challenge the roots of segregation. But let me assure you that it does not come this way.

We must gird our courage and stand firm for an integrated society. We must tell our white brothers that the few Uncle Toms who will sell their souls for a mess of economic pottage do not speak for the Negro. We must let them know that we are determined to be free, and that we are willing to pay the price in terms of suffering and sacrifice. We must never adjust to segregation, because it deprives us of our selfhood, and robs us of our dignity and self respect. Once more we must have the courage to cry out with our forefathers: "Oh freedom, oh freedom, before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Father and be saved".<sup>12</sup>

8. Finally, we must conduct our struggle on the highest level of dignity and discipline. We must rise to the creative level of being able to resist the evil system, and yet not hate the persons who are responsible for the system. We must not allow ourselves to become bitter. Hate is a cancerous disease that debilitates the hater as well as the hated. I am still convinced that love is the most durable power in all the world, and that Jesus was right when he said to the men and women of his generation, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you".<sup>13</sup>

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11. King may have drawn the preceding two sentences from Benjamin E. Mays's 1955 speech, "The Moral Aspects of Segregation": "If the strong handicaps the weak on the grounds of race or color, it is all the more immoral because we penalize the group for conditions over which it has no control, for being what nature or nature's God made it. And that is tantamount to saying to God, 'You made a mistake, God, when you didn't make all races white'. . . . It gives the segregated a feeling of inherent inferiority which is not based on facts, and it gives the segregator a feeling of superiority which is not based on facts" (Mays's speech was published in *The Three Views of the Segregation Decisions* [Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1956], pp. 13 and 15).

12. King quotes a verse from the spiritual "Oh Freedom."

13. Cf. Matthew 5:44.

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I know that some of you are asking me, what is the Negro's best defense against acts of violence inflicted upon him? His only defense is to meet every act of cruelty and injustice toward an individual Negro with the fact that 100 more Negroes will present themselves in his place as potential victims. Every time one Negro school teacher is fired for believing in integration, a thousand others should be ready to take the same stand. If the oppressors bomb the home of one Negro for his protest, they must be made to realize that to press back the rising tide of the Negro's courage they will have to bomb hundreds more, and even then they will fail.

Faced with this dynamic unity, this amazing self respect, this willingness to suffer, and this refusal to hit back, the oppressor will find that he is glutted with his own barbarity. Forced to stand before the world and his God splattered with the blood and reeking with the stench of his Negro brother, he will call an end to his self-defeating massacre.

It is becoming clear to me that the Negro is in for a season of suffering. As victories for civil rights mount in the federal courts, angry passions and deep prejudices are further aroused. The mountain of state and local segregation laws still stands. Negro leaders continue to be arrested and harassed under city ordinances, and their homes continue to be bombed. I pray that, recognizing the necessity of suffering, the Negro will make of it a virtue. To suffer in a righteous cause is to grow to our humanity's full stature. If only to save himself from bitterness, the Negro needs the vision to see the ordeals of this generation as the opportunity to transfigure himself and American society.

And now let us go out looking to a future filled with vast possibilities. I know you are asking, when will that future fulfilled itself? When will our suffering in this righteous struggle come to an end? ~~When will evening winds of adversity be transformed into soothing breezes of peace?~~ When will the dark and desolate valleys of oppression be transformed into sun lit paths of justice? When will the radiant star of hope be plunged against the nocturnal bosom of this lonely night, and plucked from weary souls the chains of fear and the manacles of death? I must confess that I cannot give you the exact date. But I have no doubt that the midnight of injustice will give way to the daybreak of freedom. My faith in the future does not grow out of a weak and uncertain thought. My faith grows out of a deep and patient ~~faith~~ (trust) in God who leaves us not alone in the struggle for righteousness, and whose matchless power is a fit contrast to the sordid weakness of man. I am certain of the future because:

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord;  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;  
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword:  
His truth is marching on.

I have seen Him in the watch-fires of a hundred circling camps;  
They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps;  
I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps;  
His day is marching on.

He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never call retreat;  
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat:  
O be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet!  
Our God is marching on.

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Refrain:

Glory! Glory, Hallelujah! Glory! Glory, Hallelujah!  
Glory! Glory, Hallelujah! His truth is marchin on.<sup>14</sup>

TAD. SAVFC-WHi.

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14. Julia Ward Howe, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1862).