

Speech at the Great March on Detroit by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

June 23, 1963

Two months before the March on Washington, King stood before a throng of 25,000 people at Cobo Hall in Detroit to expound upon making “the American Dream a reality”. King repeatedly exclaimed, “I have a dream this afternoon”. He articulated the words of the prophets Amos and Isaiah, declaring that “justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream,” for “every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low”. As he had done numerous times in the previous two years, King concluded his message imagining the day “when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing with the Negroes in the spiritual of old: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”.

My good friend, the Reverend C. L. Franklin, all of the officers and members of the Detroit Council of Human Rights, distinguished platform guests, ladies and gentlemen, I cannot begin to say to you this afternoon how thrilled I am, and I cannot begin to tell you the deep joy that comes to my heart as I participate with you in what I consider the largest and greatest demonstration for freedom ever held in the United States. [Applause] And I can assure you that what has been done here today will serve as a source of inspiration for all of the freedom-loving people of this nation. [Applause] [Audience:] (All right)

I think there is something else that must be said because it is a magnificent demonstration of discipline. With all of the thousands and hundreds of thousands of people engaged in this demonstration today, there has not been one reported incident of violence. [Applause] I think this is a magnificent demonstration of our commitment to nonviolence in this struggle for freedom all over the United States, and I want to commend the leadership of this community for making this great event possible and making such a great event possible through such disciplined channels. [Applause]

Almost one hundred and one years ago, on September the 22nd, 1862, to be exact, a great and noble American, Abraham Lincoln, signed an executive order, which was to take effect on January the first, 1863. This executive order was called the Emancipation Proclamation and it served to free the Negro from the bondage of physical slavery. But one hundred years later, the Negro in the United States of America still isn't free. [Applause]

But now more than ever before, America is forced to grapple with this problem, for the shape of the world today does not afford us the luxury of an anemic democracy. The price that this nation must pay for the continued oppression and exploitation of the Negro or any other minority group is the price of its own destruction. For the hour is late. The clock of destiny is ticking out, and we must act now before it is too late. (Yeah) [Applause]

The events of Birmingham, Alabama, and the more than sixty communities that have started protest movements since Birmingham, are indicative of the fact that the Negro is now determined to be free. (Yeah) [Applause] For Birmingham tells us something in glaring terms. It says first that the Negro is no longer willing to accept racial segregation in any of its dimensions.

[*Applause*] For we have come to see that segregation is not only sociologically untenable, it is not only politically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful. Segregation is a cancer in the body politic, which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized. [*Applause*] (*Yeah*) Segregation is wrong because it is nothing but a new form of slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity. [*Applause*] Segregation is wrong because it is a system of adultery perpetuated by an illicit intercourse between injustice and immorality. [*Applause*] And in Birmingham, Alabama, and all over the South and all over the nation, we are simply saying that we will no longer sell our birthright of freedom for a mess of segregated pottage. [*Applause*] (*All right*) In a real sense, we are through with segregation now, henceforth, and forevermore. [*Sustained applause*]

Now Birmingham and the freedom struggle tell us something else. They reveal to us that the Negro has a new sense of dignity and a new sense of self-respect. (*Yes*) For years— (*That's right. Come a long way*) [*Applause*] I think we all will agree that probably the most damaging effect of segregation has been what it has done to the soul of the segregated as well as the segregator. [*Applause*] It has given the segregator a false sense of superiority and it has left the segregated with a false sense of inferiority. (*All right*) [*Applause*] And so because of the legacy of slavery and segregation, many Negroes lost faith in themselves and many felt that they were inferior.

But then something happened to the Negro. Circumstances made it possible and necessary for him to travel more: the coming of the automobile, the upheavals of two world wars, the Great Depression. And so his rural, plantation background gradually gave way to urban, industrial life. And even his economic life was rising through the growth of industry, the influence of organized labor, expanded educational opportunities. And even his cultural life was rising through the steady decline of crippling illiteracy. And all of these forces conjoined to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself. Negro masses, [*Applause*] Negro masses all over began to re-evaluate themselves, and the Negro came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him, [*Laughter. Applause*] his religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children, and that all men are made in His image, and that figuratively speaking, every man from a bass-black to a treble-white is significant on God's keyboard. [*Applause*]

So, the Negro can now unconsciously cry out with the eloquent poet,

Fleecy locks and black complexion

Cannot forfeit nature's claim.

Skin may differ, but affection

Dwells in black and white the same.

Were I so tall as to reach the pole

Or to grasp at the ocean at a span,

I must be measured by my soul

The mind is the standard of the man. [Applause]

But these events that are taking place in our nation tell us something else. They tell us that the Negro and his allies in the white community now recognize the urgency of the moment. I know we have heard a lot of cries saying, "Slow up and cool off." [Laughter] We still hear these cries. They are telling us over and over again that you're pushing things too fast, and so they're saying, "Cool off." Well, the only answer that we can give to that is that we've cooled off all too long, and that is the danger. [Applause] There's always the danger if you cool off too much that you will end up in a deep freeze. [Applause] "Well," they're saying, "you need to put on brakes." The only answer that we can give to that is that the motor's now cranked up and we're moving up the highway of freedom toward the city of equality, [Applause] and we can't afford to stop now because our nation has a date with destiny. We must keep moving.

Then there is another cry. They say, "Why don't you do it in a gradual manner?" Well, gradualism is little more than escapism and do-nothingism, which ends up in stand-stillism. [Applause] We know that our brothers and sisters in Africa and Asia are moving with jet-like speed toward the goal of political independence. And in some communities we are still moving at horse-and-buggy pace toward the gaining of a hamburger and a cup of coffee at a lunch counter. [Applause]

And so we must say, now is the time to make real the promises of democracy. Now is the time to transform this pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our nation. [Applause] Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of racial justice. Now is the time to get rid of segregation and discrimination. Now is the time. [Applause] (*Now. Now*)

And so this social revolution taking place can be summarized in three little words. They are not big words. One does not need an extensive vocabulary to understand them. They are the words "all," "here," and "now." We want *all* of our rights, we want them *here*, and we want them *now*. [Applause] [*Recording interrupted*]

Now the other thing that we must see about this struggle is that by and large it has been a nonviolent struggle. Let nobody make you feel that those who are engaged or who are engaging in the demonstrations in communities all across the South are resorting to violence; these are few in number. For we've come to see the power of nonviolence. We've come to see that this method is not a weak method, for it's the strong man who can stand up amid opposition, who can stand up amid violence being inflicted upon him and not retaliate with violence. (*Yeah*) [Applause]

You see, this method has a way of disarming the opponent. It exposes his moral defenses. It weakens his morale, and at the same time it works on his conscience, and he just doesn't know what to do. If he doesn't beat you, wonderful. If he beats you, you develop the quiet courage of accepting blows without retaliating. If he doesn't put you in jail, wonderful. Nobody with any sense likes to go to jail. But if he puts you in jail, you go in that jail and transform it from a dungeon of shame to a haven of freedom and human dignity. [Applause] And even if he tries to

kill you, (*He can't kill you*) you'll develop the inner conviction that there are some things so dear, some things so precious, some things so eternally true, that they are worth dying for. (*Yes*) [*Applause*] And I submit to you that if a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live. [*Applause*]

This method has wrought wonders. As a result of the nonviolent Freedom Ride movement, segregation in public transportation has almost passed away absolutely in the South. As a result of the sit-in movement at lunch counters, more than 285 cities have now integrated their lunch counters in the South. I say to you, there is power in this method. [*Applause*]

And I think by following this approach it will also help us to go into the new age that is emerging with the right attitude. For nonviolence not only calls upon its adherents to avoid external physical violence, but it calls upon them to avoid internal violence of spirit. It calls on them to engage in that something called love. And I know it is difficult sometimes. When I say "love" at this point, I'm not talking about an affectionate emotion. (*All right*) It's nonsense to urge people, oppressed people, to love their oppressors in an affectionate sense. I'm talking about something much deeper. I'm talking about a sort of understanding, creative, redemptive goodwill for all men. [*Applause*]

We are coming to see now, the psychiatrists are saying to us, that many of the strange things that happen in the subconscious, many of the inner conflicts, are rooted in hate. And so they are saying, "Love or perish." But Jesus told us this a long time ago. And I can still hear that voice crying through the vista of time, saying, "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that spitefully use you." And there is still a voice saying to every potential Peter, "Put up your sword." History is replete with the bleached bones of nations, history is cluttered with the wreckage of communities that failed to follow this command. And isn't it marvelous to have a method of struggle where it is possible to stand up against an unjust system, fight it with all of your might, never accept it, and yet not stoop to violence and hatred in the process? This is what we have. [*Applause*]

Now there is a magnificent new militancy within the Negro community all across this nation. And I welcome this as a marvelous development. The Negro of America is saying he's determined to be free and he is militant enough to stand up. But this new militancy must not lead us to the position of distrusting every white person who lives in the United States. There are some white people in this country who are as determined to see the Negro free as we are to be free. [*Applause*] This new militancy must be kept within understanding boundaries.

And then another thing I can understand. We've been pushed around so long; we've been the victims of lynching mobs so long; we've been the victims of economic injustice so long—still the last hired and the first fired all over this nation. And I know the temptation. I can understand from a psychological point of view why some caught up in the clutches of the injustices surrounding them almost respond with bitterness and come to the conclusion that the problem can't be solved within, and they talk about getting away from it in terms of racial separation. But even though I can understand it psychologically, I must say to you this afternoon that this isn't the way. Black supremacy is as dangerous as white supremacy. [*Applause*] No, I hope you will allow me to say to you this afternoon that God is not interested merely in the freedom of black

men and brown men and yellow men. God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race. [Applause] And I believe that with this philosophy and this determined struggle we will be able to go on in the days ahead and transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

As I move toward my conclusion, you're asking, I'm sure, "What can we do here in Detroit to help in the struggle in the South?" Well, there are several things that you can do. One of them you've done already, and I hope you will do it in even greater dimensions before we leave this meeting. [Recording interrupted]

Now the second thing that you can do to help us down in Alabama and Mississippi and all over the South is to work with determination to get rid of any segregation and discrimination in Detroit, [Applause] realizing that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. And we've got to come to see that the problem of racial injustice is a national problem. No community in this country can boast of clean hands in the area of brotherhood. Now in the North it's different in that it doesn't have the legal sanction that it has in the South. But it has its subtle and hidden forms and it exists in three areas: in the area of employment discrimination, in the area of housing discrimination, and in the area of *de facto* segregation in the public schools. And we must come to see that *de facto* segregation in the North is just as injurious as the actual segregation in the South. [Applause] And so if you want to help us in Alabama and Mississippi and over the South, do all that you can to get rid of the problem here.

And then we also need your support in order to get the civil rights bill that the President is offering passed. And there's a reality, let's not fool ourselves: this bill isn't going to get through if we don't put some work in it and some determined pressure. And this is why I've said that in order to get this bill through, we've got to arouse the conscience of the nation, and we ought to march to Washington more than 100,000 in order to say, [Applause] in order to say that we are determined, and in order to engage in a nonviolent protest to keep this issue before the conscience of the nation.

And if we will do this we will be able to bring that new day of freedom into being. If we will do this we will be able to make the American dream a reality. And I do not want to give you the impression that it's going to be easy. There can be no great social gain without individual pain. And before the victory for brotherhood is won, some will have to get scarred up a bit. Before the victory is won, some more will be thrown into jail. Before the victory is won, some, like Medgar Evers, may have to face physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children and their white brothers from an eternal psychological death, then nothing can be more redemptive. Before the victory is won, some will be misunderstood and called bad names, but we must go on with a determination and with a faith that this problem can be solved. (Yeah) [Applause]

And so I go back to the South not in despair. I go back to the South not with a feeling that we are caught in a dark dungeon that will never lead to a way out. I go back believing that the new day is coming. And so this afternoon, I have a dream. (*Go ahead*) It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day, right down in Georgia and Mississippi and Alabama, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to live together as brothers.

I have a dream this afternoon (*I have a dream*) that one day, [Applause] one day little white children and little Negro children will be able to join hands as brothers and sisters.

I have a dream this afternoon that one day, [Applause] that one day men will no longer burn down houses and the church of God simply because people want to be free.

I have a dream this afternoon (*I have a dream*) that there will be a day that we will no longer face the atrocities that Emmett Till had to face or Medgar Evers had to face, that all men can live with dignity.

I have a dream this afternoon (*Yeah*) that my four little children, that my four little children will not come up in the same young days that I came up within, but they will be judged on the basis of the content of their character, not the color of their skin. [Applause]

I have a dream this afternoon that one day right here in Detroit, Negroes will be able to buy a house or rent a house anywhere that their money will carry them and they will be able to get a job. [Applause] (*That's right*)

Yes, I have a dream this afternoon that one day in this land the words of Amos will become real and "justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream."

I have a dream this evening that one day we will recognize the words of Jefferson that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." I have a dream this afternoon. [Applause]

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and "every valley shall be exalted, and every hill shall be made low; the crooked places shall be made straight, and the rough places plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." [Applause]

I have a dream this afternoon that the brotherhood of man will become a reality in this day.

And with this faith I will go out and carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of despair. With this faith, I will go out with you and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. With this faith, we will be able to achieve this new day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing with the Negroes in the spiritual of old:

Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last! [Applause]

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