

Martin Luther King, Jr.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation. Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the emancipation proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity. But 100 years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. 100 years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.

One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a 'vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition. In a -sense we have come to our nation's Capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and- the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was. to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have come to cash this check a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. Now is the time to make" real the promises of Democracy. Now is the time to' rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment and to underestimate the determination of the Negro. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. 1963 is not an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the Nation returns to business as usual. There will be neither rest nor tranquillity in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our Nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the war threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our

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I Have A Dream



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rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to 'realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our modern cities, knowing that somehow, this situation can and will be changed. Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. The dream is deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self evident; that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state withering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

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I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plains, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of the I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious Hill tops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain Georgia!

Let freedom ring from lookout mountain of Tennessee!

Let freedom ring from every hill and mole hill of Mississippi.

From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, what we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state in every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentile, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last."

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I Have A Dream

Martin Luther King, Jr.

1929 -1968

Martin Luther King, Jr., is recognized as the leader of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960's. A minister, author, Nobel Peace Prize winner, and president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Dr. King devoted his life to organizing nonviolent actions. His goal was to end segregation and discrimination of Black Americans.

King was born in Atlanta, Georgia on January 15, 1929, to a middle class family. His father was the son of a sharecropper, and worked odd jobs to complete his high school education and study for the ministry. Martin Luther King, Sr., became a Baptist minister and leader in the Black community. The Church was the center of religious, social, and political activity for Blacks in the South. King's mother was a teacher, and education, like religion, was very important to their family. Although he attended segregated schools, King, a gifted student, entered Moorehouse College at age 15. He was valedictorian of his class at Crozer Theological Seminary and received a scholarship to attend Boston University. His study of philosophers, particularly Mahatma Ghandi, taught King to believe that people must work to end unfair treatment and participate in direct, nonviolent civil disobedience.

Martin Luther King, Jr., became the minister at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. During his first year there, he organized a boycott of the buses in Montgomery. The boycott began when police enforced the "Jim Crow" laws. They arrested Rosa Parks, a Black woman, for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white -person. Jim Crow laws stated that segregation of public places-such as restaurants, public transportation, restrooms, and hospitals-was not against the law. "Separate but equal" places did not deny equal rights to Blacks. The Montgomery bus boycott, which lasted one year, was successful -and launched. King as a national speaker and leader on civil rights. He organized voter-registration campaigns throughout -the South and was arrested many times for leading demonstrations. King helped organize the Civil Rights March on Washington (August, 1963) where he gave his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. In 1964 he became the first Black American named Time magazine's "Man of the Year" and the youngest man to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

King was committed to ending discrimination of Black Americans, registering Blacks to vote, and ending poverty for Blacks and poor people of all races. King was organizing a poor people's march on Washington when he was killed by James Earl Ray on April 4, 1968. His assassination by a white man led to rioting and violent deaths in Black ghettos throughout the United States. Americans remember Martin Luther King, Jr., however, as a brilliant and eloquent man, who supported peaceful demonstrations for civil rights and believed deeply in freedom for all people. His birthday is recognized as a national holiday.



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King wanted to end discrimination of Black Americans, register Blacks to vote, and end poverty for all people. He Was killed by James Earl Ray, a white man, on April 4, 1968. After King was killed, there were riots and deaths in Black ghettos throughout the United States. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., is remembered as a brilliant man and a great public speaker. He supported peaceful demonstrations for civil rights and believed deeply in freedom for all people. His birthday is a national holiday.

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The Civil Rights March on Washington, held on August 28, 1963, was the largest demonstration in American history. The year-long planning by civil rights leaders and more than 100 organizations brought over 200,000 people to Washington, DC. Their purpose was to demonstrate the importance of -civil rights legislation and expedite its passage in Congress. As president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and leader of the civil rights movement, King was the principal speaker at the demonstration. He stood at the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to deliver his "I Have a Dream" speech. As he spoke, King looked out at Black and white Americans standing together surrounding the reflecting pool and reaching to the Washington Monument. The exhausted crowd had listened all day in the heat to folk singers and speakers. However, their response to King's historic speech was tumultuous. The speech has been called "the most electrifying rhetorical moment in recent history."

"I Have a Dream" encompasses the political and social realities of Black Americans with the hope and faith that Blacks -Will now receive their rightful place in America. Recalling the memory of Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, King describes the hope that Negro slaves had one hundred years ago. He then describes the realities of conditions today: "... the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity."

The history of the hundred years since the Emancipation Proclamation explains the anger and urgency felt by Black Americans. Blacks were treated as second-class citizens. The equality imposed on all states by federal law in the 1866 Civil Rights Act did not give Blacks economic security. Blacks worked for former slave owners, who could dismiss them for using their civil rights. Unions did not accept Black members. The Depression of the 1930's left fewer jobs for Blacks, who were already economically depressed. Education in the South was separate for Black children and far from equal. Literature reinforced the concept of racial superiority. Every state in the South passed "Jim Crow" laws, named after a Black character in a musical. These laws allowed segregation of Black and white people in all public places. Restaurants, trains, -drinking fountains, restrooms, hospitals, jails and every other public place had separate facilities. Signs "whites only" and "coloreds" were posted virtually everywhere. The federal government had determined that "separate but equal" facilities did not deny Blacks their civil rights. Difficult literacy tests were given to Blacks to prevent them from registering to vote. The Ku Klux Klan, a racist organization of "white Christian men", terrorized Blacks with the mission to "preserve the supremacy of the white race." Prejudice, bigotry, and social segregation were the norm for Blacks in America.

For Blacks in America, God and the Church were a major source of comfort, as well as social and political activity. The Church assured them of God's love and that their suffering would be rewarded in heaven. Ministers were respected leaders of the community. In his speech, King reminds the audience of his background as a minister by quoting passages from the Bible, and calling upon faith, prayer, and the Lord.

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During King's seminary training, he became interested in the teachings of the great Indian philosopher and leader, Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi believed people must disobey evil laws and participate in nonviolent protests of social injustice. Gandhi had been influenced himself by the American philosopher, Henry David Thoreau, who believed that people must disobey evil laws. Thoreau's *Essay on Civil Disobedience* described the importance of nonviolent protests of social injustice. This philosophy became the foundation for King's work. In his speech he reminds the demonstrators that "we must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence."

The civil rights movement, however, often resulted in violence. Police and white racist brutality, bombing of Black leaders' homes and churches, numerous deaths and thousands of arrests occurred during boycotts, demonstrations, and sit-ins organized by civil rights leaders and students protesting the treatment of Blacks. Major boycotts and demonstrations in Birmingham, and Selma, Alabama, resulted in violence necessitating the intervention of the federal government. "We Shall Overcome" became the anthem of the movement.

However, many Black people felt that the nonviolent movement had failed. Race riots were occurring throughout the country. Black Muslims advocated "Black Power" and violence to overthrow the system. King supported the Muslims advocacy of racial pride, but strongly disagreed with their violent tactics. "I Have a Dream" emphasized the "urgency of now" for change but reminded Black people not to distrust all white people. King believed "many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny."

In September 1963, the Supreme Court ordered all schools to desegregate. Most Southern states peacefully followed the Supreme Court order, with the exception of Alabama. The National Guard was called, and violence and senseless deaths occurred before the Governor of Alabama would allow the schools to open with Blacks and whites learning together. The first civil rights bill was signed into law on July 2, 1964.

King's assassination on April 4, 1968 by James Earl Ray, a white man, led to rioting in major cities throughout the country. In the years since King's death, Blacks have become more urban and politically influential. The Black community has developed a sense of cultural pride and the important contributions of Black Americans to society are being recognized. However, the median income of Blacks remains low, and health care, education, and full equality still remain issues.

"I Have a Dream" has been recognized as a brilliant and classic American document. The March on Washington and the tireless work of Martin Luther King, Jr., inspired and awakened the conscience of the nation.

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Glossary

discrimination - to treat one group of people differently than another group; to give unfair treatment

boycott - to refuse to deal with a business, use a service, or buy a product to show disapproval or to force change

Jim Crow laws - laws that allowed Blacks to be treated differently from white people; laws allowing public facilities to be "separate but equal."

nonviolent civil disobedience - refusing peacefully to obey unfair laws or government demands; tactic used to force change without violence

civil rights legislation - laws protecting the rights of citizens that were guaranteed by the Constitution; laws ending racial discrimination in voting, employment, and public facilities.

Comprehension Questions

1. What is Martin Luther King best known for? What was the Civil Rights March on Washington? Who was Rosa Parks? What is the Nobel Peace Prize? (recall)
2. What is nonviolent civil disobedience? What is segregation? (main ideas)
3. Why did some Black leaders become more militant in the 1960's? Why was there rioting after King's death? (inference)
4. Do you think that civil rights legislation would have passed without the March on Washington? Do you think there would have been rioting if King had been assassinated by a Black person? (prediction)
5. Summarize the work of Martin Luther King, Jr. What was his message to all American? (summary)
6. Do you think, King changed the lives of Black American? How? (evaluation)

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Quotes

... seared in the flames of withering injustice

...joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity

...the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination

...a dream deeply rooted in the American dream

...let freedom ring

Group Discussion Questions

1. Compare growing up as a Black American in the 1950's with growing up in the 1980's.
2. Describe King's philosophy for changes in society. How does his philosophy compare with the philosophy of Black militants?
3. When did civil rights legislation pass Congress? How many years were between the Emancipation Proclamation and civil rights for Black Americans? Why did it take so long for this legislation to pass?
4. What was the role of the church for Black Americans in the South? How is the importance of religion evident in King's speech?
5. Who are oppressed people? Who are the Ku Klux Klan? Why did King tell Black Americans to "not distrust all white people"?
6. Compare the civil rights movement with Gallaudet's "Deaf President Now" protest.

Additional Readings

Baker, Patricia. 1990. *Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York, NY: Franklin Watts. (easy reading)

Haskins, Jim. 1992. *"I Have a Dream" The Life and Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Brookfield, CT: The Millbrook Press.

Oates, Stephen B. 1982. *Let the Trumpet Sound: The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York, NY: Harper & Row.