

“The Montgomery Story,”
Address Delivered at the
Forty-seventh Annual NAACP Convention

[27 June 1956]
[San Francisco, Calif.]

King and A. Philip Randolph were the featured speakers at the forty-seventh annual NAACP convention, addressing a public session at the San Francisco Civic Auditorium that attracted more than a thousand delegates from thirty-five states. King discusses the historical background of the black freedom struggle and the emergence of “a brand new Negro in the South, with a new sense of dignity and destiny.” Despite violence and intimidation, King declares, the “[new] Negro in the South has been freed from the paralysis of crippling fear.” He concludes with an appeal for passive resistance to segregation and injustice. Significant variations between this audio transcript and typed or handwritten versions of King’s prepared text are noted.¹

Mr. Chairman, distinguished platform associates, officers and delegates to this great convention, ladies and gentlemen. I need not pause to say how happy I am to be here this evening, and to be a part of this auspicious occasion. It is indeed a privilege and a distinct honor to have the opportunity of sharing the speaking responsibility this evening with that great American, A. Philip Randolph. [*applause*] I am sure we all consider him one of the great men of our generation. It is also great to share the platform with Mrs. Rosa Parks. [*applause*] She too is a great symbol in our struggle. It was suggested to me that I talk this evening about the Montgomery story. I might say that the Montgomery story is only one story and I am sure that some of you, many of you, have already heard the Montgomery story by representatives from Montgomery who have been willing to go all over

1. The handwritten version is from King, “The Montgomery Story, Address at 47th Annual NAACP Convention,” 27 June 1956. King’s typed version appeared as “Alabama’s Bus Boycott: What It’s All About,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 3 August 1956, pp. 82, 87–89.

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the nation. Some of you have probably heard it from me. So that those who have already heard it will have the unfortunate burden to bear this evening of being bored with me for a few minutes time to tell the story [*words inaudible*]. It is the story, a dramatic story, of a handsome little city that for years has been known as the cradle of the Confederacy. It is the story of a little town grappling with a new and creative approach to the crisis in race relations. It is impossible, however, to tell the Montgomery story without understanding the larger story of the radical change in the Negro's evaluation of himself. A brief survey of the history of the Negro in America reveals this change in terms that are crystal clear.

It was in the year of 1619 that the Negro [*word inaudible*] slaves first landed on the shores of this nation. They were brought here from the soils of Africa, and unlike the Pilgrim fathers who landed at Plymouth a year later, they were brought here against their wills. For more than two hundred years Africa was raped and plundered, her native kingdoms disorganized, her people and rulers demoralized, and the whole continent inflicted with pains and burdens hardly paralleled by any race of people in the whole history of the civilized world.

Throughout slavery the Negro slave was treated in a very inhuman fashion. They were things to be used, not persons to be respected. They were merely de-personalized cogs in a vast plantation machine. The famous Dred Scott decision of 1857 well illustrates the status of the Negro during slavery. In this decision the Supreme Court of this nation affirmed that the Negro was not a citizen of the United States; he was merely property subject to the dictates of his owner. That was the attitude that prevailed throughout.

With the rise of slavery, it became necessary to justify it. It seems to be a fact of life that human nature cannot continue to do wrong without eventually reaching out for some rationalization with which an obvious evil is covered up in the garments of righteousness. The psychologist William James used to talk a great deal about the stream of consciousness. James says one of the uniquenesses of human nature is that man has the unique capacity of blocking the stream of consciousness temporarily and injecting anything in it that he wants to. That capacity of man temporarily makes him justify the rightness of the wrong.² This is what happened to the slave owners. They fell victim to the danger that forever confronts religion and a too literalistic interpretation of the Bible. There is always the danger that religion and the Bible not properly interpreted can be used as instruments to crystallize the status quo. This is exactly what happened. So from pulpits all over the nation it was argued that the Negro was inferior by nature because of Noah's curse upon the children of Ham. Paul's command became a watchword, "Servant, be obedient to your master."³ Then there was one person who had probably read something of the logic of Aristotle and he could put his argument in a framework that was somewhat similar to an Aristotelian syllogism. He could say all men are made in the image of God. Then the [*word inaudible*] comes out: God, as we know, is not a Negro; then the conclusion: therefore, the Negro is not a man. [*applause*] That was the type of reasoning that prevailed.

2. These two sentences do not appear in the prepared text.

3. Ephesians 6:5.

In time the Negro lost faith in himself and then he came to fear that perhaps they were less than human. The tragedy of physical slavery was that it finally led to the paralysis of mental slavery. So long as the Negro accepted this place, this place assigned to him, a sort of peace, a racial peace was maintained. But it was an uneasy peace in which the Negro was forced patiently to accept injustice, insult and exploitation.

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But then something happened to the Negro. Negro masses all over began to reevaluate themselves. The Negro came to feel that he was somebody. His religion revealed to him that God loves all of his children, and that every man, from a bass black to a treble white, is significant on God's keyboard. [*applause*] So he could now 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. [*applause*]
If I were so tall as to reach the pole
Or to grasp the ocean at a span,
I must be measured by *my* soul,
The mind is the standard of the man. [*applause*]⁴

With this new self-respect, this new sense of dignity on the part of the Negro, the South's negative peace was gradually undermined. The tension which we witness in the southland today can be explained by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of his nature and destiny, by his determination to stand up and struggle until the walls of injustice have crumbled. [*applause*] The Negro [*figures it's?*] clear insanity, that feeling that he is inferior, everything would be alright down in Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi, but the Negro rightly feels that he is somebody now.⁵ [*applause*] [*words inaudible*]

That is at bottom the meaning of what is happening in Montgomery. You can never understand the Montgomery story without understanding that there is a brand new Negro in the South, with a new sense of dignity and destiny. [*applause*] Over the years the bus situation has been one of the sore spots of Montgomery. If a visitor had come to Montgomery prior to last December, he would have heard bus operators referring to Negro passengers as "niggers," "black apes," and "black cows." He would have frequently noticed Negro passengers getting on the front door and paying their fares, and then being forced to get off and go to the back doors to board the bus, and often after paying that fare he would have noticed that before the Negro passenger could get to the back door, the bus rode off with his fare in the box. But even more, that visitor would have noticed Negro passengers standing over empty seats. I am sure that visitor would have wondered what was happening, but soon he would discover that the reserved section, the

4. These lines are a composite of passages from William Cowper's "The Negro's Complaint" (1788) and Isaac Watts's "False Greatness" (1706). See note 5 to "The 'New Negro' of the South: Behind the Montgomery Story," June 1956, p. 283 in this volume.

5. The two preceding sentences do not appear in the prepared text.

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unoccupied seats, were for “whites only.” No matter if a white person never got on the bus, the bus was filled up with Negro passengers, these Negro passengers were prohibited from sitting in the first four seats—which hold about ten persons—because they were only for white passengers. But it even went beyond this. If the reserved section for whites was filled up with white persons, additional white persons boarded the bus, then Negro passengers sitting in the unreserved section were often asked to stand up and give their seats to white persons. If they refused to do this, they were arrested.

On December the first, 1955, Mrs. Rosa Parks refused to move when she was asked to get up and move back by the bus operator. [applause] And interestingly enough, Mrs. Parks was not seated in the reserved section for whites as the press has often mistakenly reported; she was sitting in the first seat in the unreserved section. The other interesting thing is that all of the seats were taken, and if Mrs. Parks had followed the command of the bus operator she would have stood up and given up her seat for a *male* white passenger, who had just boarded the bus, would take the seat. In a quiet, calm, dignified manner, so characteristic of the radiant personality of Mrs. Parks, she refused to move.⁶ [applause]

The trial was set for Monday, December fifth, and almost out of nowhere, leaflets were circulating, saying: “This must be stopped. We must, we should stay off the buses on Monday in protest of this situation. We must stand together and let it be known that we don’t like it.” The word got around. [applause] The word got around the Montgomery community amazingly well that Sunday, December the fourth. All of the ministers went to their pulpits and endorsed it heartily, and so the word was out.

Then came Monday. [applause] Then came Monday, December the fifth. The buses were empty. [applause] The Negro passengers, who constituted about seventy-five percent of the bus riders, were now united. The bus protest on that day, and even now, has been more than ninety-nine and nine-tenths percent effective. [applause]

Feeling the need to give some guidance to the protest, the ministers came together⁷—forgetting about denominations, forgetting about Baptists and Methodists [applause] [words inaudible], realizing that we strode on in the great struggle—and we came together with civic leaders throughout the community on Monday afternoon, December fifth, and organized what is now known as the Montgomery Improvement Association. [applause] This association started out with about twenty-five or [word inaudible] persons on the executive board. Now it has a membership that goes way up in the thousands, almost as large as the Negro community.⁸ [applause] And it has been this organization, under the leadership of some of the finest ministers and laymen of the Montgomery community, that has guided the protest throughout.

On Monday afternoon or Monday evening a mass meeting had been called by the ministers at the Holt Street Baptist Church. That afternoon by three o’clock

6. King omits the sentence “The result was her arrest,” which is included in the prepared text.

7. In the prepared texts this phrase reads, “ministers of all Protestant faiths.”

8. This sentence does not appear in the prepared text.

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hundreds of people started assembling in the church. About seven o'clock it was reported that more than five thousand persons were jammed and packed in this church and were overflowing in the street. [*applause*] At this meeting these persons, this vast audience, went on record adopting this resolution: that the Negro passengers would refuse to ride the buses until more courtesy was extended by the bus operators; until the seating arrangement had been changed to a first-come, first-serve basis with no reserved seats for anybody;⁹ and until bus, Negro bus operators had been employed on predominantly Negro lines. [*applause*]

Now I might say that in the beginning we were not out to compromise or to sanction segregation. Some people have wondered why we didn't ask for integration in the beginning. We realized that the first-come, first-serve seating arrangement was only a temporary alleviation of the problem. We felt that the ultimate solution to the problem would be integration on the buses, but we knew that we had a case that would come up in court on that so that we were willing to accept this as a temporary alleviation of the problem, knowing full well that the ultimate solution was total integration. As time went on we discovered that the City Commission didn't even want to work within the framework of the present segregation law. So it was necessary for our brilliant young attorney, who is here tonight, attorney Fred Gray, to go into the federal court with the case, and it went into the courts, and as you know the federal court ruled the other day that segregation in public transportation in Alabama is unconstitutional.¹⁰ [*applause*] I talked with Montgomery this morning and I understand that the city, the state is planning to appeal this to the Supreme Court of the United States, which as you know is just a tactic to delay the situation, and that means that we will probably have to be off the buses several months more because we don't intend to go back until segregation is driven back.¹¹ [*applause*]

But you can now see that the one-day protest moved out into an indefinite protest which has lasted now for more than six months. So it is becoming clear now. The history of injustices on the buses has been a long one. Almost everybody in the community, almost every Negro citizen of the community, can point to an unfortunate incident that he had experienced or that he had seen. But you know there comes a time in this life that people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. There comes a time when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of exploitation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. The story of Montgomery is the story of fifty thousand Negroes who are tired of oppression and injustice and who are willing [*applause*], and who are willing to substitute tired feet for tired souls, and walk and walk and walk until the sagging walls of injustice have been crushed by the battering rams of historical necessity. [*applause*]

One of the first practical problems that the ex-bus riders [*word inaudible*] is

9. In the prepared text this second demand reads, "passengers were seated on a first-come, first-served basis—Negroes seated from back of the bus toward the front and whites seated from the front toward the back."

10. The *Browder v. Gayle* decision was rendered on 5 June 1956.

11. This paragraph does not appear in the prepared text.

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that in finding some way to get around the city. The first thing that we decided to do was to use a taxi, and they had agreed to transport the people for just ten cents, the same as the buses. Then the police commission stopped this by warning the taxis that they must charge a minimum of forty-five cents a person. Then we immediately got on the job and organized a volunteer car pool, and almost overnight over three hundred cars were out on the streets of Montgomery. [*applause*] They were out on the streets of Montgomery carrying the people to and from work from the various pick-up and dispatch stations. It worked amazingly well. Even Commissioner Sellers had to admit in a White Citizens Council meeting that the system worked with “military precision.” [*applause*] It has continued to grow and it is still growing. Since that time we have added more than twenty station wagons to the car pool and they’re working every day, all day, transporting the people. It has been an expensive project. Started out about two thousand dollars or more a week, but now it runs more than five thousand dollars a week. We have been able to carry on because of the contributions coming from the local community and nationally, from the great contributions that have come from friends of goodwill all over the nation and all over the world. [*applause*]

From the beginning the city commission, where there’s the reactionary element of the white community, attempted to block the protest. And I say reactionary elements of the white community because I never want to give the impression that all of the white people in the South are downright and low in terms of civil rights. [*applause*] I assure you that there are white persons even in Montgomery, Alabama, who are deeply sympathetic with the movement and who have given us great words of encouragement and even contributions.¹² [*applause*] And from the beginning the reactionary element of the community, the white community, sought to block it. They used many methods. First they tried to negotiate us into a compromise. After that didn’t work, they tried to conquer by dividing and they spread false rumors throughout the community about the leaders. They had it out that I had purchased a Cadillac car with the money and bought my wife a station wagon.¹³ [*laughter*] Everybody in the community, in the Negro community, knew that I was driving around in a humble Pontiac and I’ll still be driving it five or six years from now. [*applause*] They tried to divide the leadership. They went to the ministers and, the Negro ministers, and said to them, “Now, it’s a pity that you gonna have, you oughta be in the leadership. These young men coming here and running over you like this. It just looks bad on you.”¹⁴ That was an attempt to establish petty jealousy, but it didn’t work. For after the method of conquering by dividing didn’t work, they moved out to what the Commissioner Gayle, Mayor Gayle, called a “get tough” policy. A “get tough” policy was, turned out to be the arrest of persons in the car pool and other persons for minor or imaginary traffic violations. It was in this period when I was arrested, carried down, and put into jail for supposedly going thirty miles an hour in a twenty-five

12. The two preceding sentences do not appear in the prepared text.

13. King refuted the charges at an MIA executive board meeting (see Ferron, Notes on MIA Executive Board Meeting, 23 January 1956, pp. 101–104 in this volume).

14. The six preceding sentences do not appear in the prepared text.

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mile zone.¹⁵ This was the “get tough” policy. After that didn’t stop the movement, then came actual physical violence. It was during this period that my home was bombed, along with the home of a Mr. E. D. Nixon, one of the most outstanding and most progressive leaders in our community. Even physical violence didn’t stop us. Then after that didn’t work came the method of mass indictment. This time more than a hundred persons were indicted, including all of the members of the executive board of the Montgomery Improvement Association, were indicted on the basis of an old antilabor law of doubtful constitutionality. That law was brought into being in [*word inaudible*]. It was on the basis of this law that I was convicted, and whether you know it or not, a convicted criminal is speaking to you tonight.¹⁶ [*applause*]

But none of this stopped the protest. [*applause*] Instead of blocking it, all of these things merely served to give us greater momentum and to give the people greater determination. It revealed to me at least one thing: that the Negro in the South has been freed from the paralysis of crippling fear. He is no longer afraid. He is willing to stand up now without any fear in his heart.¹⁷ This is a characteristic also of the new Negro. [*applause*]

From the beginning there has been a basic philosophy undergirding our movement. It is a philosophy of nonviolent resistance. It is a philosophy which simply says we will refuse on a nonviolent basis, to cooperate with the evil of segregation. In our struggle in America we cannot fret with the idea of retaliatory violence.¹⁸ To use the method of violence would be both impractical and immoral. We have neither the instruments nor the techniques of violence, and even if we had it, it would be morally wrong.¹⁹ There is the voice crying [*applause*], there is a voice crying through the vista of time, saying: “He who lives by the sword will perish by the sword.”²⁰ [*applause*] History is replete with the bleached bones of nations who failed to hear these words of truth, and so we decided to use the method of nonviolence, feeling that violence would not do the job.

Along with this emphasis on nonviolence goes the emphasis on love as the regulating ideal. We have refused in our struggle to succumb to the temptation of becoming bitter and indulging in a hate campaign. We are not out to defeat or to humiliate the white man. We are out to help him as well as ourselves. [*applause*] [*recording interrupted*]²¹ The festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro [*applause*], and so we are not out to win a victory over the white man. And I assure you that the basic struggle in Montgomery after all is not between Negroes and white people. The struggle is at bottom a tension

15. This sentence does not appear in the prepared text.

16. The phrase “and whether you know it or not, a convicted criminal is speaking to you tonight” does not appear in the prepared text.

17. The two preceding sentences do not appear in the prepared text.

18. King omits the phrase “we, as a race,” which is included in the prepared text.

19. The two preceding sentences do not appear in the prepared text.

20. Matthew 26:52.

21. It is unclear whether this gap means that a portion of King’s speech is missing; however, the sequence of the sentences immediately before and after the gap matches that of the sentences in the prepared text.

27 June 1956 between justice and injustice. [*applause*] It is a tension between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And if there is a victory in Montgomery, it will not be a victory merely for fifty thousand Negroes, but it will be a victory for justice [*applause*], a victory for democracy [*applause*], and a victory for good will. This is at bottom the meaning of Christian love, and we are trying to follow that. It is that high type of love that I have talked about so often. The Greeks talked of so many types of love. But we are not talking about *eros* in Montgomery, we are talking about *agape*.²² We are talking about understanding good will. We are talking about a love which seeks nothing in return. We are talking about a love that loves the person who does the evil deed, while hating the deed that the person does. That is a higher type of love. [*applause*]

Also basic in our philosophy is a deep faith in the future. This is why our movement is often referred to as a spiritual movement. We have the strange feeling down in Montgomery that in our struggle we have cosmic companionship. We feel that the universe is on the side of right and righteousness. This is what keeps us going. Oh, I would admit that, yes, it comes down to us from the long tradition of our Christian faith. We look back to that date, and look down through history, and we see the meaning of it. Good Friday may occupy the throne for a day, but ultimately it must give way to the triumphant beat of the Drums of Easter. Evil may so shape events that Caesar will occupy the palace and Christ the cross. But one day that same Christ will rise up and split history into A.D. and B.C. so that even the life of Caesar must be dated by his name.²³ There is something [*applause*], there is something in this universe that justifies Carlyle in saying: "No lie can live forever." There is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying: "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." [*applause*] There is something in this universe which justifies James Russell Lowell in saying:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong forever on the throne
Yet that scaffold sways the future
And behind the dim unknown stands God
Within the shadow keeping watch above His own.²⁴

We believe that, and that is what keeps us going. That is why we can walk and never get weary because we know that there is a great camp meeting in the promised land of freedom and equality.²⁵ [*applause*]

This in brief is just an introduction to a story that would take many, many speeches to tell, and even many books. It is the expression of a method. It might well be added to the several methods that we must use to achieve integration in

22. The three preceding sentences do not appear in the prepared text. King examined the concept of *agape* in his dissertation (see "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman," 15 April 1955, in *Papers* 2: 440-442). He presents a more extended discussion in "Non-Aggression Procedures to Interracial Harmony," 23 July 1956; and "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 3 December 1956, pp. 327 and 458-459 in this volume, respectively.

23. The six preceding sentences do not appear in the prepared text.

24. For a discussion of the above passage see notes 6 and 8 to "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore," 17 May 1956, pp. 259 and 260 in this volume.

25. This line is from the spiritual "There Is a Great Meeting in the Promised Land."

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America. Secondly, we must continue the struggle through legislation. No one can underestimate the power of this method. It is an important, valuable method, and we must continue to use it. [Audience:] (*Right on*) We must continue to gain the ballot, to urge the executive and the legislative branches of our government to follow the example so courageously set by the judicial branch. We must admit that these other branches have been all too slow in this area; yet we must also depend on the growing group of white liberals, both North and South, who are willing to take a stand together. But in the final analysis, the problem of obtaining full citizenship is a problem for which the Negro himself must assume the primary responsibility. [applause] Integration will not be some lavish dish that will be passed out by the white man on a silver platter, while the Negro merely furnishes the appetite. [laughter] If we are to achieve integration, we must work for it. We must be willing to sacrifice for it, yes, and even to die for it if necessary. [applause]

I have no doubt that by 1963 we will have won the legal battle. On May the four—seventeenth, 1954, the Supreme Court of this nation gave the legal death blow to segregation. Then after the legal battle is won, we must confront the problem of lifting the noble precepts of our Constitution from the dusty files of unimplemented court decisions. This problem of implementation will be carried out mainly by the Negro's refusal to cooperate with segregation.²⁶ [applause]

Wherever segregation exists we must be willing to stand up in mass and courageously and non-violently protest against it. (*That's right*) And I might say that I must admit that this means sacrifice and suffering. Yes, it might even mean going to jail. But if it means going to jail, we must be willing to fill up the jail houses of the South. (*Yes*) [applause] Yes, it might even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free our children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing could be more honorable.²⁷ [applause] This is really the meaning of passive resistance. It confronts physical force with an even greater force, namely, soul force.

This method is not at all new. It was tried by a little brown man in India. He looked out at the British empire, with all of the vastness of her empire. He noticed all [*words inaudible*] military machinery. But in the midst of that physical force, he confronted that empire with soul force.²⁸ Through this method he was able to free his people from the political domination, the economic exploitation, and the humiliation that had been inflicted upon them by Britain. This a powerful force [applause] and we must be willing to use it.²⁹

26. At a press conference the day before, King remarked that strategies of passive resistance such as Montgomery's bus boycott "might become the pattern in many areas of the South." Suggesting that African Americans boycott segregated schools to force local school boards to comply with the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown* decision, King added that such direct action would lead to legal action against the protesters and that "it i[s] interesting to have legal action from the other side." Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP special counsel, commented on King's suggestion: "I don't approve of using children to do men's work" ("King Proposal Would Boycott Dixie Schools," *Montgomery Advertiser*, 27 June 1956).

27. King later attributed this sentence to Kenneth Clark. See "Desegregation and the Future," 15 December 1956, p. 478 in this volume.

28. The three preceding sentences do not appear in the prepared text.

29. This sentence does not appear in the prepared text.

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As I come to a close let me say to you this evening, continue to move on in the struggle for integration. Let's not fool ourselves, we haven't reached the promised land, North or South. [*applause*] We still confront segregation in the South in its glaring and conspicuous forms. We still confront it in the North in its subtle and hidden forms. [*applause*] Segregation is still a fact. Now it might be true that Old Man Segregation is on its deathbed, but history has proven that social systems have a great last-minute breathing power. [*laughter*] And the guardians of the status quo are always on hand with their oxygen tents to keep the old order alive. [*applause*] But if democracy is to live, segregation must die. [*applause*] The underlying philosophy of democracy is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of segregation, and all of the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together. [*applause*] Segregation is an evil, segregation is a cancer in the body politic which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized. [*applause*]

Now I realize that there are those all over who are telling us that we must slow up. They're telling us to adopt a policy of moderation. Well, if moderation means pressing on for freedom with wise restraint and calm reasonableness, then moderation is a great virtue that all must seek to achieve in this tense period of transition. But if moderation means slowing up in the move for freedom and capitulating to the whims and caprices of the guardians of a deadening status quo, then moderation is a tragic vice which all people of good will must condemn.³⁰ [*applause*]

We cannot afford to slow up. We have a moral obligation to press on. We have our self-respect to maintain. But even more we can't afford to slow up because of our love for America and our love for the democratic way of life.

Out of the two billion, four hundred million people in this the world, one billion, six hundred million are colored. Most of these colored people of the world have lived under the yoke of colonialism and imperialism. Gradually most and all of these people are gaining their freedom, and they are determined not to follow any nation that will subject [*word inaudible*] citizens to second-class citizenship. [*applause*] And if America doesn't wake up, she will discover that the uncommitted peoples of the world are in the hands of a communist ideology.³¹ So because of our love for *America*, we cannot afford to slow up.³² But even more [*applause*], but we can't stop there. The motive for America giving freedom and justice to the Negro cannot be merely to compete with godless communism. We must do it because it's part of the ethical demands of the universe. We do it not merely because it is diplomatically expedient, but because it is morally compelling. We must do it [*applause*]; it must be done because it is right to do it. We cannot afford to slow up. The motor is now cranked up, we are moving up the highway of freedom toward the city of equality, and we can't afford to slow up

30. In this sentence King says "people," though the prepared text employs the word "men."

31. In the prepared text this sentence reads: "If America doesn't press for justice and freedom we will wake up and find the uncommitted peoples of the world in the hands of a communistic ideology."

32. This sentence does not appear in the prepared text.

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because we have a date with destiny. We must keep moving. We must keep going. [applause]

May, in closing, I refer to and extend an analogy that was once mentioned by Walter White, the late Walter White.³³ Since the turn of the century we have brought the football of civil rights to about the fifty-yard line. And now we are getting ready to move in the opposition's territory. And the great problem which confronts us, the great path to cross now, is to carry that ball across the goal line. [applause] Now let's not fool ourselves, this will not be easy; it will be difficult. The opposition will use all the power, all the force possible to prevent our advance. They will strengthen the line on every hand. My friends, if we would put the proper leaders in the backfield to call the signals and run the ball, leaders who love the cause, leaders who are not in love with publicity but in love with humanity [applause], leaders not in love with money but in love with justice [applause], leaders who are willing to subject their personal and particular egos to the greatness of the cause. If we would put the proper leaders in the backfield—and we need them all over the nation—and the proper followers on the line to make the way clear, we will be able to make moves which will both stagger and astound the imagination of the opposition.³⁴ [applause] We will make some mistakes, yes, we might even fumble the ball, but for God's sake, recover it! [laughter, applause] Teamwork and unity are necessary for the winning of any game. In this area it means that every segment of the Negro race is significant. It means that the backfield must realize that they need the people on the line to make the way clear.³⁵ So away with our class systems.³⁶ We have come to see that in this struggle, Aunt Jane who knows not the difference between “you is” and “you are” is just as significant as the Ph.D. in English³⁷ [applause]; that we will come together and work together. I assure you that in the next few years we will be able to carry this ball of civil rights successfully across the goal line.

We [applause], we will stand before [word inaudible] all the members of [words inaudible]. It would be a great team. Let us unite. Let us keep moving on towards the city of freedom and equality. Let nothing stop us, let us keep moving, let no obstacle stand in our way. If we will do that, when the history books are written in future years historians will have to say, there lived a great people, a black people, who injected a new meaning into the veins of our civilization, because they had the courage to stand up and press on for the pressing values of freedom. And when we do that [applause], whenever we as a race, whenever men of goodwill

33. As national secretary of the NAACP from 1930 until his death, Walter White (1893–1955) directed its campaigns for federal civil rights legislation, including laws banning lynching, poll taxes, and discrimination in the U.S. armed forces and laws guaranteeing voting rights and promoting integration.

34. In the prepared text this sentence reads: “But if we place good leaders in the backfield to call the signals and run the ball, and good followers on the line to make the way clear, we will be able to make moves that will stagger and astound the imagination of the opposition.”

35. In this sentence King says “people” instead of “men” as in the prepared text.

36. In the prepared text King adds: “. . . that so easily separate us. Remember the highest will not rise without the lowest.”

37. This sentence does not appear in the prepared text.

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3 July 1956 strive to do that, the immortal God will sing together and the sons of God will shout for joy.³⁸ [*lengthy applause*]

At. MLKJrP-GAMK.

38. Job 38:7. In his prepared text, King closes not with this paragraph, but with a variant of the Langston Hughes poem “Mother to Son”: “This is our profound challenge and lasting responsibility. We must continue to move on in the face of every obstacle. ‘Mother to Son’: ‘Well, Son, I’ll tell you / Life for me ain’t been no crystal stair / It’s had tacks in it, / and splinters / And boards torn up / And places with no carpet on the floor—/ Bare / But all the time / I’ve been a climbin’ on / And reachin’ landings / And turnin’ corners / And sometimes going in the dark / Where there ain’t been no light / So, boy, don’t you stop now, / Don’t you sit down on the steps / ’Cause you finds it’s kinder hard / Don’t you fall back / For I’ve still goin’ boy / I’m still climbin’ / And life for me ain’t been no crystal stair.’

Well, life for none of us has been a crystal stair. But we must keep moving. If you can’t fly, run; if you can’t run, walk; if you can’t walk, crawl, but by all means keep moving!”