Statement on Meeting with Richard M. Nixon

13 June 1957

[Washington, D.C.]

Prior to their 13 June conference with Nixon and Labor Secretary James P. Mitchell, King and Abernathy received a memorandum from Bayard Rustin suggesting nine points he felt the two men should convey to the vice president. Rustin advised the ministers to stress the "unshakeable and united determination" of southern blacks "to achieve first class citizenship" and to urge Nixon to "come South, to speak out in moral terms for civil rights . . . and the right to vote."

During the two-hour meeting in the Formal Room of the Capitol, King and Abernathy closely followed Rustin's suggestions. King described the violent conditions that African Americans endured in the South and told of the disappointment black people felt because of Eisenhower's failure to more aggressively support civil rights. Abernathy warned Nixon that the peaceful character of the protests could not be guaranteed without strong federal action.2 Sidestepping King's plea to deliver a speech in the South, the vice president agreed only to hold an upcoming meeting of the President's Committee on Government Contracts, which monitored employment discrimination, in a southern city.3 After the meeting, King and Abernathy issued this statement to the press about the conference with Nixon, and they announced a campaign to register African-American voters in the South.4

1. Rustin, Memo to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Ralph Abernathy on conference with Richard M. Nixon and James P. Mitchell, 13 June 1957. Rustin also suggested that King and Abernathy remind Nixon that "neither political party has done enough . . . to help achieve civil rights in America" and that they ask him to convey to Republican congressional leaders the importance of passing the pending civil rights bill.
2. Nixon, Notes on meeting with Martin Luther King, Jr., 13 June 1957.
3. Maxwell Rabb to Sherman Adams, 24 June 1957. Though Mitchell announced on 14 June that the next President's Committee on Government Contracts meeting would probably be held in Atlanta, the meeting was held on 15 January 1958 in Washington, D.C. King later accepted Nixon's 23 December 1957 invitation to sit at the head table and deliver the lunchtime invocation at the meeting ("Nixon's Anti-Bias Contracts Committee May Meet in Atlanta; Commitment to Rev. King Calls For Area Confab," Atlanta Daily World, 16 June 1957; King to C. E. Ryan, 9 January 1958).
4. Rustin and Levison had outlined responses for King's press conference following the meeting: "Every word expressed to Nixon and the press, every concept, requires careful weighing. If there is one concept of dominating importance it is that of the non-partisan approach. Inadequate handling of this problem leads to grave and far-reaching dangers" (Rustin and Levison to King, 13 June 1957). Despite the careful preparations, one newspaper account of the Nixon meeting and press conference suggested King "has more home work to do if he is to become a political as well as a spiritual leader" (Louis Lautier, "Was King Ready?" Baltimore Afro-American, 22 June 1957).

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I shall soon lay plans before the Southern Leaders Conference for launching a campaign to prepare three million Negroes to participate in the 1958 election. Across the South we now intend to extend the voting clinics to help Negroes overcome the contrived and artificial obstacles to their registering and voting. We hope the campaign will culminate in simultaneous mass attendance at the registration offices in ten cities across the South. In order to help this crusade for the extension of democracy and alleviate the possibilities of violence, I have today appealed to Vice President Nixon to do three things which I feel will immeasurably aid the cause of justice and freedom in our great nation.

1. To come South on a number of occasions to speak to the people of the South and to explain to them in moral terms that civil rights is the great crisis and issue of our time, thus to give strength to the Southern liberals who fear to speak out or act with understanding and equality.

2. To urge all Southerners, Negro and white, to uphold the United States Constitution by supporting the Negroes’ right to vote, and refraining from manipulation of devices to disenfranchise Negro citizens, many of whom have never voted in their lives.

3. To call together all Republican Representatives and Senators to impress upon them the importance of passing the civil rights bill now before Congress, not only because failing to do so will create social disunity at home and confusion about American democracy abroad, but primarily because the achievement of civil rights is a moral imperative. Our nation cannot exist as a democracy half slave and half free.

We hope that the Vice President will see his way clear to do these things, not only in the interest of Negroes but to aid all Americans, Negro and white, who are victims of the civil rights crisis.

Because the question of civil rights is one of such paramount importance to our nation at home and abroad, and (is) [thus] of necessity beyond partisan politics, I have therefore suggested to Vice President Nixon that he be accompanied by the Chairman of the Senate Sub-Committee on Constitutional Rights, Senator Thomas J. Hennings, Jr.

In this campaign we shall urge Negroes to hold unswervingly to non-violence in word, thought and deed. Under these conditions we cannot fail, for as we move peacefully towards our goal without rancor and without bitterness, the spirit of good-will that a campaign of this nature will generate will be a boon to the spiritual growth and the democratization of our nation.

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