

To Richard M. Nixon

30 August 1957
Montgomery, Ala.

On 30 August following a record-breaking filibuster by South Carolina senator Strom Thurmond, the Senate approved the country's first major civil rights legislation since 1875.¹ King advises Nixon that the Civil Rights Bill of 1957, which had been

1. In what was largely a solo effort to derail the bill, Thurmond spoke for twenty-four hours and eighteen minutes against the "federal encroachment" on states' rights ("Carolinian Sets Talking Record," *New York Times*, 30 August 1957).

weakened by the Senate, "is far better than no bill at all," and conveys his hope that the president would not veto it.² Nixon replied on 17 September.³

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Mr. Richard Nixon, Vice-President
The United States of America
Washington, D.C.

Dear Mr. Nixon:

For several weeks I have been intending to write you, but an extremely busy schedule has stood in my way. First I want to express my sincere appreciation to you for so graciously receiving me and my colleague Rev. Abernathy in your office during the month of June. I will long remember the rich fellowship which we shared together and the fruitful discussion that we had.

Since our meeting together many significant things have happened in the life of our nation, particularly in the realm of civil rights. Just this morning our local paper revealed that the compromised Civil Rights Bill was finally passed by the Senate. After considering all angles I have come to the conclusion that the present bill is far better than no bill at all. This limited bill still provides district judges with power to maintain order and to insist upon compliance with their orders. This could be a powerful incentive in changes in behaviour and attitude. I realize that many sincere leaders, both Negro and white, feel that no bill is better than the present bill, and that since we have waited this long for civil rights legislation we can afford to wait an additional year to get stronger legislation in this area. While I sympathize with this point of view, I feel that civil rights legislation is urgent now, and the present limited bill will go a long way to insure it. So it is my hope that the President will not veto the bill.⁴

It is also my firm conviction that the full effect of the Civil Rights Bill will depend in large degree upon the program of a sustained mass movement on the part of Negroes. History has demonstrated that inadequate legislation supported by mass action can accomplish more than adequate legislation which remains unenforced for the lack of a determined mass movement. This is why I am initiating in the south a crusade for citizenship in which we will seek to get at least two mil-

2. During deliberations southern senators successfully amended the bill to include a provision that ensured a trial by a local jury for those accused of impeding voting rights. SCLC members, meeting in Montgomery the day after the amendment was passed, issued a statement charging that the Senate had "abdicated its sworn duty," and made "a tragic error which will not create a more peaceful or united South or nation." The bill then moved to a joint committee, which reconciled the House and Senate versions (SCLC, Press release, 8 August 1957; see also "Senate Approves Rights Bill, 72-18, With Jury Clause," *New York Times*, 8 August 1957).

3. See p. 277 in this volume.

4. The *Chicago Defender* denounced King's and Roy Wilkins's support of the bill as "the gravest tactical blunder that has ever been made" ("Denounce Wilkins, King On Rights Stand," 31 August 1957). Many African-American leaders opposed the amended bill, including A. Philip Randolph, Ralph Bunche, and Jackie Robinson, who wired the administration urging Eisenhower to veto the legislation: "Disagree that half loaf better than none have waited this long for bill with meaning can wait a little longer" (Robinson to E. Frederic Morrow, 12 August 1957).

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1957 lion Negroes registered in the south for the 1960 elections. With the enthusiasm that we hope to kindle and the aid of the Civil Rights Bill this should not be difficult.

Let me say before closing how deeply grateful all people of goodwill are to you for your assiduous labor and dauntless courage in seeking to make the Civil Rights Bill a reality. This has impressed people all across the country, both Negro and white. This is certainly an expression of your devotion to the highest mandates of the moral law. It is also an expression of your political wisdom. More and more the Negro vote is becoming a decisive factor in national politics. The Negro vote is the balance of power in so many important big states that one almost has to have the Negro vote to win a presidential election.

Again, let me thank you for your hospitality and generosity. You have my prayers and best wishes for the great work that you are doing in making our democracy a living reality. With persons like you occupying such important positions in our nation I am sure that we will soon emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice for all men.

Please extend my best regards to Mrs. [Pat] Nixon and our other friends around the White House.

Very sincerely yours,
[signed]
Martin Luther King, Jr.,
Minister

MLK:mlb

P.S. At your earliest convenience I hope you will see your way clear to speak to the President concerning the conference that we discussed. It was a real pleasure talking with you by telephone the other day.

THLS. PPRN-CYINL.