

Address at the Youth March  
for Integrated Schools on 18 April 1959

Washington, D.C.

*Almost six months after the first Youth March for Integrated Schools, King addresses some twenty-six thousand people at the Sylvan Theater on the grounds of the Washington Monument.<sup>1</sup> This effort, spearheaded by A. Philip Randolph and coordinated by*

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1. King's stabbing had prevented him from addressing the 1958 Youth March in person (see King, Address at Youth March, Delivered by Coretta Scott King, 25 October 1958, in *Papers* 4:514-515).

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*Bayard Rustin, drew support from a wide array of religious, civil rights, peace, and labor leaders.<sup>2</sup> The program at the Washington Monument followed the presentation of petitions to the president and Congress calling for the “orderly and speedy” integration of schools.<sup>3</sup> In his remarks at the event’s conclusion, King urges the young people to “make a career of humanity. . . . you will make a greater person of yourself, a greater Nation of your country and a finer world to live in.”<sup>4</sup> This speech was published in the Congressional Record.<sup>5</sup>*

As I stand here and look out upon the thousands of Negro faces, and the thousands of white faces, intermingled like the waters of a river, I see only one face—the face of the future.

Yes, as I gaze upon this great historic assembly, this unprecedented gathering of young people, I cannot help thinking—that a hundred years from now the historians will be calling this not the “beat” generation, but the generation of integration.<sup>6</sup>

The fact that thousands of you came here to Washington and that thousands more signed your petition proves that this generation will not take “No” for an answer—will not take double talk for an answer—will not take gradualism for an answer.<sup>7</sup> It proves that the only answer you will settle for is—total desegregation and total equality—now.

I know of no words eloquent enough to express the deep meaning, the great

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2. Two days before this event, FBI director J. Edgar Hoover forwarded a confidential report to an Eisenhower aide alleging Communist connections to the Youth March (Hoover to Gordon Gray, 16 April 1959, and FBI, “Youth March on Washington,” 16 April 1959). On the eve of the march, chairmen King, Wilkins, and Randolph issued a statement stressing that “the sponsors of the March have not invited Communists or communist organizations” (Youth March for Integrated Schools, “Anti-American groups not invited to Youth March for Integrated Schools,” 17 April 1959).

3. The students at the first march were turned away by a guard at the White House gate, but the interracial delegation bearing the 1959 petitions met with deputy presidential assistant Gerald D. Morgan (Associated Negro Press, Press release, 20 April 1959; see also Youth March for Integrated Schools, “A petition for integrated schools to the President and the Congress of the U.S.,” January 1959). Eisenhower was vacationing in Georgia the day of the 1959 demonstration.

4. Also addressing the crowd were AFL-CIO civil rights chair Charles Zimmerman, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins, and Kenyan nationalist leader Tom Mboya (Youth March for Integrated Schools, “Program at the Sylvan Theater,” 18 April 1959).

5. Michigan congressman Charles Diggs submitted King’s address and several other Youth March documents for publication in the *Congressional Record*; Georgia congressman E. L. Forrester had earlier inserted material into the *Record*, implying a link between the Youth March and the Communist Party (*Congressional Record* 105 [20 April 1959]: 6352–6353).

6. The term “Beat,” coined by writer Jack Kerouac and popularized by John Clellon Holmes’s 16 November 1952 article “This Is the Beat Generation” in the *New York Times Magazine*, labeled a social and literary movement that rejected the conventional values of postwar America in favor of a defiant and celebratory individualism. Coretta Scott King referred to the Beats when she delivered remarks on King’s behalf at the 1958 Youth March (see *Papers* 4:514–515).

7. In a form letter that was circulated with the petition, the Youth March was hailed as “the only major social action project that is contributing to the development of a youth movement that may yet embrace many other areas of social concern” (King, Ruth H. Bunche, and Bayard Rustin, Form letter to Friend, March 1959).

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power, and the unconquerable spirit back of this inspiringly original, uniquely American march of young people. Nothing like it has ever happened in the history of our Nation. Nothing, that is, except the last youth march. What this march demonstrates to me, above all else, is that you young people, through your own experience, have somehow discovered the central fact of American life—that the extension of democracy for all Americans depends upon complete integration of Negro Americans.

By coming here you have shown yourselves to be highly alert, highly responsible young citizens. And very soon the area of your responsibility will increase, for you will begin to exercise your greatest privilege as an American—the right to vote. Of course, you will have no difficulty exercising this privilege—if you are white.

But I wonder if you can understand what it feels like to be a Negro, living in the South, where, by attempting to exercise this right, you may be taking your life in your hands.

The denial of the vote not only deprives the Negro of his constitutional rights—but what is even worse—it degrades him as a human being. And yet, even this degradation, which is only one of many humiliations of everyday life, is losing its ability to degrade. For the southern Negro is learning to transform his degradation into resistance. Nonviolent resistance. And by so doing he is not only achieving his dignity as a human being, he is helping to advance democracy in the South. This is why my colleagues and I in the Southern Leadership Conference are giving our major attention to the campaign to increase the registration of Negro voters in the South to 3 million. Do you realize what would happen in this country if we were to gain 3 million southern Negro votes? We could change the composition of Congress. We could have a Congress far more responsive to the voters' will. We could have all schools integrated—north and south. A new era would open to all Americans. Thus, the Negro, in his struggle to secure his own rights is destined to enlarge democracy for all people, in both a political and a social sense.

Indeed in your great movement to organize a march for integrated schools you have actually accomplished much more. You have awakened on hundreds of campuses throughout the land a new spirit of social inquiry to the benefit of all Americans.

This is really a noble cause. As June approaches, with its graduation ceremonies and speeches, a thought suggests itself. You will hear much about careers, security, and prosperity. I will leave the discussion of such matters to your deans, your principals, and your valedictorians. But I do have a graduation thought to pass along to you. Whatever career you may choose for yourself—doctor, lawyer, teacher—let me propose an avocation to be pursued along with it. Become a dedicated fighter for civil rights. Make it a central part of your life.

It will make you a better doctor, a better lawyer, a better teacher. It will enrich your spirit as nothing else possibly can. It will give you that rare sense of nobility that can only spring from love and selflessly helping your fellow man. Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater Nation of your country, and a finer world to live in.