

15 June
1959

To G. W. Sanders

15 June 1959
[Montgomery, Ala.]

During a 14 May address in Tallahassee, King voiced his opposition to the death penalty for four white men accused of raping a black teenager in Florida.¹ Two weeks later Sanders chastised King for his remarks, reminding him that "just before you came to Tallahassee to talk clemency for four white men, two colored men sat in the death chair about forty-five minutes behind each other." Sanders also questioned King's right to "speak out in terms for clemency for guilty white men for raping a colored college girl?"² In the letter below, King defends himself against the charge of being one of those "highbrow intellectuals" and explains his reasoning: "I have always felt that the purpose of punishment is to improve the character and life of the person punished, rather than pay him back for something that he has done to society."

Mr. G. W. Sanders
1080 West Adams Street
Jacksonville, Florida

Dear Mr. Sanders:

I am in receipt of your letter of May 29, some misgivings about a statement that I made incident to my visit to Tallahassee, Florida for a meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

I fear that you might have misunderstood my statement or that it may have been misquoted. I never suggested that the men who committed this tragic crime should not be punished. I made it emphatically clear that they should be punished on the basis of the crime they had committed, and that failure of the jury to do this would bring shame to the whole state of Florida and the United States. I went on to say that this was a time and opportunity for the white South to prove that it did not adhere to a double standard of justice. After that I went on to say that some of us were not necessarily calling for capital punishment. Even though we ourselves have been the victims of capital punishment for much less crimes and even in cases where it hasn't been proved that we were guilty. I am certainly as aware as you are of the fact that many Negroes have been the victims of capital punishment in most of the southern states for the sheer accusation of rape, rather than the actual proving of it.

I made the statement about capital punishment for two reasons. First, I am absolutely convinced that no jury in the state of Florida will render a verdict calling

1. "Eyes of the World Waiting to See if Justice Will Be Done in Tallahassee—King," *Atlanta Daily World*, 16 May 1959; see also Statement Adopted at Spring Session of SCLC, 15 May 1959, pp. 205–208 in this volume. For more on King's reaction to this rape case, see King to Clifford C. Taylor, 5 May 1959, p. 196 in this volume. A few months after this letter, King responded to another rape incident of a black girl by a white man (King to Lottie Lett, 8 October 1959).

2. Sanders to King, 29 May 1959.

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for capital punishment for four white men on a rape case on a Negro, so that by not calling for capital punishment I felt that it might be possible to reach the hearts and souls of some of the white people who would see that our aim was not to retaliate and pay back for all of the injustices that have been heaped upon us. The second reason that I made this statement was that I sincerely believe that capital punishment is wrong. Let me assure you that I say this in all humility because I am still humbly groping for truth. It is certainly possible that I am wrong in my position. But I have always felt that the purpose of punishment is to improve the character and life of the person punished, rather than pay him back for something that he has done to society. Now if the ultimate aim is to improve the character of the person, how can their character be improved when the person is inflicted with death? So on the basis of this I don't believe in capital punishment for white people or Negro people. It was as a result of this general principle that I made my assertion.

I can understand how you feel at this time because so many Negroes have been the victims of capital punishment. I realize that the first thing that comes to your mind as well as many other people is that the same thing that has been done to the Negro should be done to these white men. But I still feel the need of bringing the Christian ethic of love in all of my dealings in the area of race relations. And when I follow Christ to the end I find myself willing to forgive, to refuse to retaliate, and to refuse to hate. I know this is difficult and sometimes it sounds unrealistic, but I am still convinced that love is the most durable power in all the world. Consequently I would rather be the recipient of violence than the inflictor of it. I would rather be hated than to hate. I would rather be the victim of injustice than the inflictor of injustice upon another. And I am foolish enough to believe that in the long run it is through this approach that we will be able to create a society of brotherhood based on the principle of mutual respect, and man's humanity to man.

Again, I say although the white man has done us wrong it is our Christian obligation not to do them wrong. We must work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship. We must stand up positively, courageously, with bold and grim determination to be free. But I think it is possible to do this with love in our hearts and the willingness to forgive. If we seek to do the same thing to the white man that he has done to us over the years, the new order which is emerging will be nothing but a duplicate of the old order. Someone must have religion enough and morality enough to meet hate with love, to meet physical force with soul force. This has been my contention all along, and I am willing to tread the road alone feeling that ultimately my faith will be vindicated.

Let me close by saying that I regret very deeply that you feel that I am one of those highbrow intellectuals who knows nothing about history and what the white man has done to the Negro. And even more I was shocked to read your statement that I had given aid to the white man, thereby exalting white supremacy.³ If my

3. In his letter, Sanders stated that "some of our high, educated men and women do not take time to re-read their text books. They go along telling the southern white man, by action, that he is your white supremacy."

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life, with the accompanying trials, tribulations, and difficulties that I have faced for my people have not proven my courage, then there is no way that I can convince anyone. I have lived amid threats, intimidation, physical violence, and even death, and yet I have never run from the situation. I have urged my people at all times to stand up against segregation, and even disobey the segregation laws in order to arouse and awaken the conscience of our nation. I will continue to do this, but I will do it in the right spirit. I will never allow any man to drag me so low as to make me hate him; and above all I will never become bitter.

Let us pray and hope that the light of God will shine in our situation, so that in the not too distant future we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man into the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.

Very sincerely yours,
Martin L. King, Jr.

MLK:mlb

TLc. MLKP-MBU: Box 68.