

Address at the Fiftieth Annual  
NAACP Convention

17 July 1959  
New York, N.Y.

*In June, NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins suspended Union County, North Carolina, branch president Robert F. Williams for public remarks he made following the acquittal of a white man accused of raping a black woman. Williams had asserted that the failure of the courts demanded that African Americans "meet violence with violence," and added: "We are going to have to try and convict these people on the spot."<sup>1</sup>*

*On 17 July, delegates at the association's convention overwhelmingly affirmed Wilkins's decision after a heated floor debate. Speaking that evening at a Youth Night program honoring young NAACP activists, King condemns Williams's comments and warns that resorting to retaliatory violence "would be the gravest tragedy that could befall" African Americans. He argues that "many of our oppressors would be more than happy for us to turn to violence" because "it would give them an opportunity to wipe out many innocent Negroes."<sup>2</sup>*

Mr. Chairman, my good friend Mr. Wilkins, delegates to this Golden Anniversary celebration of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, ladies and gentlemen:

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1. "N.A.A.C.P. Leader Urges 'Violence,'" *New York Times*, 7 May 1959; see also Wilkins, Telephone conversation with Robert F. Williams, 6 May 1959.

2. In a 3 August letter, Wilkins thanked King for his remarks to the NAACP: "No one in the country could have exposed the folly of violence as a weapon as crushingly and as convincingly as you did." For further discussion of King's views on the Williams case, see King, "The Social Organization of Non-violence," October 1959, pp. 299-304 in this volume.

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I am indeed honored to have the opportunity of sharing in the 50th anniversary observance of this great organization. I bring sincere and hearty greeting to you from the Montgomery Improvement Association and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

We salute you not merely because you have existed fifty years, but because your fifty years have been filled with creative purpose, calm dignity, determined courage, and meaningful fulfillment. The work of the NAACP is one of the glowing epics of our time. Your aims have been noble and your ideals have been sublime; your dedication has been inspiring and your achievements have been amazing. Your work has served as a great beacon light of hope to all men who have been caught in the stormy seas of oppression. Some day all of America will take pride in your achievements.

I have been asked to present to this convention a group of young people whose achievements have been outstanding examples of NAACP youth in action.<sup>3</sup> I am delighted beyond the power of expression to have this responsibility. These young people have given Negroes everywhere a new sense of dignity and destiny. They have manifested a maturity beyond their years. Their noble activities have already been stenciled on millions of mental sheets, and their names have been etched in innumerable hearts.

With this general background, let me state the specific reasons why we pause to recognize these youth.

First, we honor these young people because of their quiet, yet intrepid, courage. There is nothing more admirable in all the world than true courage. Without it, nations are pushed into the valley of social stagnation and individuals are plunged into the abyss of moral cowardice; without it, social change would be a floating dream and progress a glorified illusion. Without courage, noble yesterdays can never unfold into glorious tomorrows. So, in a real sense, the courage of these young people has contributed to the survival of the ideals and values of our nation. They have walked with fortitude through hostile and jeering mobs, and they have stood firm when the clouds of physical danger were hovering mightily low. I know that the bravery, the dignity, and the suffering of these Negro youth will be an inspiration to generations yet unborn.

Second, through their powerful positive action these young people have made it palpably clear that segregation is a moral and social evil that they will never passively accept. They have made it clear that they will not take no for an answer, they will not take a do-nothing gradualism for an answer, they will not take evasive schemes for an answer. They are saying in no uncertain terms, "We want integration now."

No well thinking person can deny the essential rightness of this position. If democracy is to live, segregation must die. Segregation is a cancer in the body politic which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized. It is a festering sore that debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. Therefore, we can

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3. On a copy of an NAACP memorandum forwarded to King outlining the achievements of the young people, King wrote that their "activity during 1958-59 made them outstanding examples of NAACP youth in action" (Herbert L. Wright, Memo to John A. Morsell, 8 July 1959).

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never be content with an outmoded doctrine of separate-but-equal. In the area of race relations the separate is inherently unequal. And above all segregation is morally wrong. It relegates persons to the status of things and leaves their personalities distorted and their souls damaged. The underlying philosophy of segregation is diametrically opposed to the underlying philosophy of Christianity and all the dialectics of the logicians cannot make them lie down together.

Third, we honor these young people because they conducted their courageous struggle against segregation on the highest level of dignity and discipline. They avoided both external physical violence and internal violence of the spirit. By their very action they recognized that there is a necessary correlation between means and ends, and that a moral end does not justify immoral means, because the end is pre-existent in the means.

There is something basic that we must all learn from this. There has been considerable talk recently on the question of whether the Negro should meet violence with violence. It has been suggested that maybe the doctrine of love and non-violence are weak and cowardly positions which have no place in the present struggle for racial justice. I would like to take a few minutes to seriously discuss this matter with you.

First, it must be clearly stated that the method of non-violence does not mean doing nothing; it does resist. If non-violence meant passive do-nothingism and complacent adjustment to evil, I would be the first to condemn it. No righteous man can fail to resist evil. Non-cooperation with evil is as much a moral obligation as is cooperation with good. It is at this point that non-violence comes in as a powerful method. It makes it possible for individuals to stand up against evil and yet not resist it with physical weapons or inner feelings of bitterness. Certainly, no one fully understanding this approach would call it a method of weakness. Would you say that these young people from Oklahoma, Kansas and Virginia followed a weak course of action simply because they did not use violence and bitterness as their approach?<sup>4</sup> Would you call the powerfully organized protest of the 50,000 Negroes of Montgomery, Alabama, weak simply because they walked and sacrificed 381 days without retaliating with a single act of violence? Of course not. These were dramatic acts of strength. It is the strong man who can resist evil without violence.

Yes, non-violence calls for love, but it is not a weak and sentimental love; it is a strong love that organizes itself into positive social action.

It is my prayerful hope that our natural resentment over the injustices that are constantly heaped upon us will not cause us to stoop to the low and primitive methods of some of our opponents. I know how we feel as we face the viciousness of lynch mobs and the tragic midnight of unjust southern courts. I know how patient we have been, and how the cup of endurance can eventually run over. But in spite of all, we must not allow ourselves to become bitter.

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4. Among those honored during the program were members of NAACP Youth Councils from Oklahoma City and Wichita who had led sit-in protests at local restaurants and department stores and fifty-five students attending newly integrated schools in Virginia. The Laurel, Mississippi, Youth Council was also honored for attending NAACP meetings in defiance of their principal's orders. According to a press report, King requested that the Oklahoma City group stand up for recognition during his address ("'Hallelujahs' Greet King's NAACP Speech," *New York Amsterdam News*, 25 July 1959).

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We all realize that there will probably be some sporadic violence during this period of transition, and people will naturally seek to protect their property and person, but for the Negro to privately or publicly call for retaliatory violence as a strategy during this period would be the gravest tragedy that could befall us. It would be most impractical. Many of our oppressors would be more than happy for us to turn to violence. It would give them an opportunity to wipe out many innocent Negroes under the pretence that they were inciting a riot. I am convinced that if we had resorted to violence in Montgomery, Alabama, our protest would have ended in utter defeat. Our opponents were always disappointed when we refused to retaliate with violence. The power of non-violence is that it presents the opponent with a method that he does not know how to handle. The opponent always knows how to deal with violence because oppressors always control the instruments and techniques of violence.

Violence is also impractical as a method because it would only serve to increase the fears of the white South, and thereby increase the resistance. It must also be stressed that there are more and more white persons of goodwill who are willing to be our allies in this struggle, and certainly we need them if we are to win. But the minute we call for violence as a method, that support would almost completely disappear. So even if we cannot go to the point of accepting non-violence as a philosophy of life, we must admit that it is the best strategy for the present situation.

But beyond this there are some of us who still believe that violence is immoral. It is immoral because it seeks to humiliate the opponent rather than win his friendship and understanding; it seeks to annihilate rather than convert. It is immoral because it thrives on hatred rather than love. It destroys the community and makes brotherhood impossible.

Fourth, the young people that we pause to honor tonight have demonstrated a willingness to pay whatever price is necessary for freedom. They have recognized that freedom is a priceless possession which every man must possess if he is to be truly human.

Tolstoy, the Russian writer, said in *War and Peace*: "I cannot conceive of a man not being free unless he is dead."<sup>5</sup> While this statement sounds a bit exaggerated, it gets at a basic truth. What Tolstoy is saying in substance is that the absence of freedom is the presence of death. Any nation or government that deprives an individual of freedom is in that moment committing an act of moral and spiritual murder. Any individual who is not concerned about his freedom commits an act of moral and spiritual suicide. He, at that moment, forfeits his right to be. The struggle for freedom is not a struggle to attain some ephemeral desire; it is a struggle to maintain one's very selfhood. It is a struggle to avoid a tragic death of the spirit. It is no wonder that there have been those discerning individuals throughout history who have been willing to suffer sacrifice and even face the possibility of physical death in order to gain freedom. They have had the vision to realize that physical death may be more desirable than a permanent death of the spirit.

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5. Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (New York: Heritage Press, 1938), p. 826: "A man having no freedom cannot be conceived of except as deprived of life."

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It was under the spell of this conviction that our forefathers would cry out: Oh, freedom, Oh, freedom, and before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Father and be saved.<sup>6</sup>

Ans so our most urgent message to this nation can be summarized in these simple words: "We just want to be free." We are not seeking to dominate the nation politically or to hamper its social growth; we just want to be free. Our motives are not impure and our intentions are not malicious; we simply want to be free. We are not seeking to be professional agitators or dangerous rabblers; we just want to be free. As we struggle for our freedom, America, we are struggling to prevent you from committing a continuous act of murder. Moreover, we are struggling for the very survival of our selfhood. To paraphrase the words of Shakespeare's *Othello*: "Who steals my purse steals trash; tis something, nothing; twas mine, tis his, and has been slave to thousands. But he who filches from me my freedom robs me of that which not enriches him and makes me poor indeed."<sup>7</sup> We simply want to be free.

America, in calling for our freedom we are not unmindful of the fact that we have been loyal to you. We have loved you even in the moments of your greatest denial of our freedom. In spite of all of our oppression, we have never turned to a foreign ideology to solve our problem. Communism has never invaded our ranks. And now we are simply saying we want our freedom. We have stood with you in every major crisis. For you, America, our sons sailed the bloody seas of two world wars. For your security, America, our sons died in the trenches of France, in the foxholes of Germany, on the beachheads of Italy and on the islands of Japan. And now, America, we are simply asking you to guarantee our freedom.

I must come to a close now. In conclusion I would like to say to these young, valiant freedom fighters and to everybody assembled here that we must struggle with the faith that our cause is destined to be vindicated in the future of mankind. Sometimes I know that it is difficult to believe this. When we notice the prodigious hilltops of opposition and stand before gigantic mountains of opposition, we are moved to give up in despair. But my advice to you is to fight on. Yes, we will face temporary setbacks and moments of frustration. Before the victory is won some of us may have to be bruised and scarred. Some will probably have to face the howl of evening winds of adversity.

But let us realize that this is only temporary. It is probably true that there can be no social gain without some individual pain. Growth and progress come through struggle. And it is still true that often the darkest moments of life are just before dawn. Fight on, my friends. We will win. We will win because our cause is right. Since justice is God's will, the stars in their courses support what we stand for. The arch of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, I can see something marvelous unfolding and a future filled with vast possibilities.

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6. These lines are from the spiritual "Oh Freedom."

7. Cf. William Shakespeare, *Othello*, act 3, scene 3.

8. King may have adopted this phrase from an article by John Haynes Holmes (see note 5 to Statement on Ending the Bus Boycott, 20 December 1956, in *Papers* 3:486).

# The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

21 July  
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Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord  
He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored  
He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword  
His truth is marching on.  
He has sounded forth trumpet that shall never call retreat  
He is sifting out the hearts of men before His Judgment seat,  
Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer him! Be jubilant, my feet!  
Our God is marching on!<sup>9</sup>

PD. NAACPP-DLC: Group III-A177.

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9. King recites the first and fourth verses of Julia Ward Howe's "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" (1862).