Address at the Thirty-fourth Annual Convention of the National Bar Association

20 August 1959
Milwaukee, Wis.

In this typescript of an address to the oldest and largest federation of African American lawyers, King reemphasizes the importance of nonviolence and denounces the “hate groups arising in our midst” that advocate “a doctrine of black supremacy.” He reminds his audience that “we must not try to leap from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice.” King’s remarks may have been prompted by the July 1959 television broadcast of “The Hate That Hate Produced,” which drew public attention to the Nation of Islam, a black separatist religious group.

Mr. Chairman, delegates to this session of the National Bar Association, ladies and gentlemen:

I am indeed happy to have the opportunity of being with you on this significant occasion. To speak before such a distinguished group of legal minds is a rare privilege and a great pleasure.

Words are inadequate for me to express the great debt of gratitude that we owe the lawyers of our race for bringing us to this significant point in our struggle. It goes without saying that some of the most momentous achievements in the civil rights struggle have come through the courts. These victories would never have been achieved without the assiduous labors, courageous stands, and brilliant arguments of our dedicated lawyers. Many of you have never received adequate recognition or proper financial returns for your work, but you have continued to give yourselves unstintingly to a cause that you know is right. One day all of America will take pride in your achievements. Long after the names of Governor Faubus and Senator Eastland will be forgotten in shame, the names of Charles Houston, Thurgood Marshall and a host of others will be creatively stenciled on the mental sheets of succeeding generations.

1. King’s appearance was initiated by his friend Miami lawyer Henry Arrington (Arrington to King, 3 April 1959, and King to Arrington, 11 April 1959). A few months after accepting the invitation, King expressed concern to National Bar Association president William S. Thompson that the event might interfere with SCLC’s planned fund-raising efforts in Milwaukee: “I was under the impression that the meeting . . . would be a banquet meeting limited to the lawyers and their guests.” Thompson assured King that they would do their “utmost to raise a substantial sum of money for your organization” (King to Thompson, 1 July 1959, and Thompson to King, 13 July 1959).

2. Reporter Mike Wallace’s documentary was followed by a Time magazine article on the Nation of Islam. Earlier in the month King told a Montgomery reporter he doubted the “Moslems” had much of a presence outside larger northern cities (Dick Hines, “Black Supremacy Cult Grows but Any Activity Here Doubtful,” Montgomery Advertiser, 6 August 1959; see also “The Black Supremacists,” Time, 10 August 1959, pp. 24-25).

I bring warm and sincere greetings to you from two organizations. The first is the Montgomery Improvement Association—the organization which guided and directed the bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama. The second is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This organization came into being in order to serve as a channel through which local protest organizations in the South could coordinate their activities. Our basic aim is to implement the Supreme Court’s desegregation decisions on the local level through mass, direct non-violent action. One of our most specific undertakings at the present time is that of increasing the number of Negro registered voters in the South. This is a big job, and one that cannot be tackled without hard work and great financial resources. Whatever support you can give in this difficult, yet challenging task ahead will give us renewed courage and vigor to carry on.

We have come to a very decisive moment in our struggle for racial justice. As we look over the long sweep of race relations in our nation, we notice, broadly speaking, three distinct periods, each representing growth over a former period. It is interesting to note that in each period the Supreme Court of the nation rendered a decision that gave legal and constitutional validity to the dominant thought patterns of that particular period.

The first period in the area of race relations extended from 1619 to 1863. This was the era of slavery. During this period the Negro was considered a thing to be used rather than a person to be respected. He was a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine. In 1857 there finally came a decision from the Supreme Court to give constitutional validity to the whole system of slavery. This decision, known as the Dred Scott decision, stated in substance that the Negro was not a citizen of this nation; he was merely property subject to the dictates of his owner.

The second period in the development of race relations in America extended, broadly speaking, from 1863 to 1954. This was the period of restricted emancipation. We must admit that this stage was something of an improvement over the first stage of race relations, because it at least freed the Negro from the bondage of physical slavery, and accepted him as a legal fact. But it was not the best stage, because it failed to accept the Negro as a person. It was, therefore, very easy for the ethos of segregation to emerge as the basic principle and practice of this period. In 1896, through the famous Plessy versus Ferguson decision, the Supreme Court established the doctrine of separate but equal as the law of the land. Through this decision the dominant thought patterns of the second stage of race relations were given legal and constitutional validity. But because segregation is at bottom a form of slavery covered up with certain niceties of complexity, the end results of the period of restricted emancipation was that of plunging the Negro into the abyss of oppression where he experienced the bleakness of nagging injustice.

The third period in the development of race relations in America had its beginning on May 17, 1954. This is the period of constructive integration. It is the period in which men seek to rise to the level of genuine intergroup and interpersonal living. The Supreme Court’s decision which came to give legal and constitutional validity to the dominant thought patterns of this period stated that the

4. King refers to Brown v. Board of Education.
old Plessy doctrine must go, that separate facilities were inherently unequal, and that to segregate a child on the basis of his race is to deny that child equal protection of the law. As a result of this decision we find ourselves standing on the threshold of the most creative period in the development of race relations in the history of our nation. To state it figuratively in biblical language: We have broken loose from the Egypt of slavery; We have moved through the wilderness of "separate but equal;" and now we stand on the border of the promised land of integration.

The great challenge facing America at this hour is to bring into full realization the ideals and principles of this third period. The shape of the world today does not permit us the luxury of an anemic democracy. In a world where three-fourths of the people are colored, it is not only practically inexpedient, but rationally illogical, to defend a doctrine of segregation.

But we must face the painful fact that there are still those enemies of democracy in our nation who are seeking to defend segregation. These persons have joined in a campaign of defiance. The legislative halls of the South ring loud with such words as interposition and nullification. The dark and agonizing story of the White Citizens Councils and the Ku Klux Klan is a familiar one. Their methods range from intimidation and economic reprisals to outright physical violence. The recent mob demonstration in Little Rock is a clear manifestation of the tragic ends to which some will go to preserve a dying order.

But in spite of this defiance, there are some hopeful signs. Even in Little Rock we must commend the police force for its forthright and determined action in handling the mob that assembled around Central High School last week. Their actions made it palpably clear that they were determined to keep the episode of 1957 from becoming a repeat performance. We must also commend the majority of white citizens of Little Rock for finally repudiating the irresponsible leadership of Governor Faubus. Actually, what we now see in both Little Rock and Virginia is something very revealing. Two powerful institutions have collided in the South—the institution of segregation and the institution of public schools. And the people have made it clear that when the final moment of choice comes they will choose public schools rather than segregation.

So maybe we pro-integrationist shouldn’t be so hard on Governor Faubus after all, for, however ironical it may sound, he has done more to promote the cause of integration than almost any personality of this decade. His irresponsible actions brought the issue to the forefront of the conscience of the nation, and allowed people to see the futility of attempting to close the public school.

Now what of the future? First, let me answer this question by attempting to give the lie to an attitude that is too often prevalent in society—the feeling that social

5. On 12 August, while two black students entered the building for classes, Little Rock police restrained several hundred white protesters at Central High School. On the same day, Little Rock's Hall High School was uneventfully integrated by three black students (Roy Reed, "Police Rout March on Central, Arrest 24; Hall Opening Quiet," *Arkansas Gazette*, 13 August 1959).

progress is an automatic phenomenon that can emerge without human effort. To believe this is to be victimized with an illusion wrapped in superficiality. Human progress in neither automatic nor inevitable. Even a casual look at history reveals that no social advance rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals. Without this persistent effort, time itself becomes an ally of the insurgent and primitive forces of irrational emotionalism and social stagnation.

In the final analysis integration will become a reality in America only when enough people come to believe that is is morally right and are willing to work passionately for its fulfillment.

Many agencies and groups must work constructively together in order to achieve the ideals and principles of an integrated society—the Christian Church, organized labor, liberal whites, North and South, the federal government and the Negro himself. While time will not permit me to discuss the role of all of these groups, I would like to elaborate on the last two.

There is the need for strong and aggressive leadership from the federal government. So far, only the judicial branch of the government has given this type of leadership. The executive branch of our government has been all too silent and apathetic during this period of transition; the legislative branch has been all too stagnant and hypocritical. I fear that future historians will have to record that when America came to its most progressive moment of creative fulfillment in the area of human relations, it was temporarily held back by a chief executive who refused to make a strong positive statement morally condemning segregation. Much of the terror and confusion that we are now facing in the South might have been avoided if the office of the president had just given an occasional word counseling the nation on the moral aspects of integration and the need for complying with the law. I submit to you that the president is as obligated to go to the television and plead for strong civil rights legislation as he is to plead for the passage of his labor bill.7 Indeed the civil rights issue is not some evanescent political issue that can be conveniently ignored by our highest officials; it is an eternal moral issue that may well determine the destiny of our nation.

I must hasten to say that the dearth of positive leadership from Washington is not confined to one political party. The cause of justice has been betrayed by both political parties. Many Democrats have betrayed it by capitulating to the undemocratic practices of the southern Dixiecrats. Many Republicans have betrayed it by capitulating to the hypocrisy of right-wing northerners. Sometimes I am prone to feel that this hypocrisy in the Republican Party is more dangerous than the undemocratic practices of the southern Dixiecrats. At least you know where the Dixiecrats stand. One can deal better with an Eastland because he airs his vicious prejudice all the time, and makes it clear that he stands against the more enlightened conscience of our time. But the individual who dresses his words up in the garments of enlightenment in order to get votes when at bottom he is actu—

7. King refers to the Landrum-Griffin Act (1959), which provided for increased regulation of internal union affairs and finances.
ally reactionary is a dangerous menace, not only to his party, but to democracy itself. It is difficult to understand how many of the Republican politicians are as reactionary as they are on the question of Civil Rights when they do not confront the sectional pressures and prejudices that the southern politicians face. Hypocrisy, whether in politics or ordinary human relations, is a tragic vice that can lead only to moral degeneration.

We see obvious signs of this Republican laxity in the present civil rights debate in Congress. The failure of the House Judiciary Committee to go along with the language of the Civil Rights Bill authorizing “the attorney general to act in all types of denial of civil rights” revealed the same old coalition of southern Democrats and ultra conservative Republicans that has defeated every progressive move in the area of civil rights. The southern Democrats could not have removed the language by themselves. They had to receive help from the Republicans.

All of this prompts me to say that the Negro must make it palpably clear that he is not inextricably bound to either political party. In 1960 we must affirm that we are aware of the fact that we hold the balance of power in several key states, and that we will not blindly support any party that refuses to take a forthright stand on the question of civil rights.

Government action is not the whole answer to the present crisis, but it is an important partial answer. Morals cannot be legislated, but behaviour can be regulated. The law cannot make an employer love, but it can keep him from refusing to hire me because of the color of my skin. We must depend on religion and education to alter the errors of the heart and mind; but meanwhile it is an immoral act to compel a man to accept injustice until another man’s heart is straight. As the experience of several northern states has shown, anti-discrimination laws can provide powerful sanctions against this kind of immorality. The habits if not the hearts of people have been and are being altered every day by federal action.

The Negro himself has a decisive role to play if integration is to become a reality. Realism impels me to admit that if first-class citizenship is to become a reality for the Negro he must assume the primary responsibility for making it so. One of the most damaging effects of past segregation on the personality of the Negro may well be that he has been victimized with the delusion that others should be more concerned than himself about his citizenship rights.

There are several specific things that we must do. (1) We must put forth a determined effort to gain the ballot. One of the most important steps that the Negro can take at this hour is that short walk to the voting booth. (2) We must give strong financial support to civil rights organizations. We have done far too little in this area. (3) We must maintain a sense of “somebodiness” and self respect. (4) We must continue to produce courageous, dedicated and intelligent leaders who avoid the extremes of hotheadedness and Uncle Tomism. (5) We must make it clear that the system of segregation is a social and moral evil that we will no longer passively accept. (6) We must conduct our struggle against segregation on the highest level of dignity and discipline. We must avoid both external physical violence

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8. On 5 August, the House Judiciary Committee approved a civil rights bill after dropping the provision allowing the attorney general to initiate civil rights suits (Richard L. Lyons, “House Unit Votes 5-Point Rights Bill; ‘Unholy Alliance’ Kills School Aid,” *Washington Post*, 6 August 1959).
and internal violence of spirit. I must stress this point a bit because of a dangerous philosophy that is being taught by some elements of the Negro community. There are hate groups arising in our midst which would preach a doctrine of black supremacy. 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 law and primitive methods of some of our opponents. I know how we feel as we face the brutality of lynch mobs, the viciousness of economic exploitations, and the constant oppression 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. We must become strong enough to meet hate with love, physical force with soul force. Our aim must not be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. In an effort to achieve freedom in America, we must not try to leap from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice. We must seek democracy and not the substitution of one tyranny for another. Black supremacy is as bad as white supremacy. God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown and yellow men, God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race.

So I would recommend to you a way of love. I still believe that love is the most durable power in all the world. Hate is a cancerous disease which distorts the personality and scars the soul. To return hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate in the universe. Hate seeks to annihilate rather than convert. It destroys community and makes brotherhood impossible. We must learn that it is possible to stand up courageously and positively against an evil system and yet not resist it with physical weapons and inner feelings of hatred. (7) Finally, we must be willing to suffer and sacrifice in order to achieve our freedom. We must recognize 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." 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. 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.10

And so our most urgent message to this nation can be summarized in these sim-

9. Leo Tolstoy, War and Peace, p. 8a6: “A man having no freedom cannot be conceived of except as deprived of life.”

10. King invokes the traditional spiritual “Oh Freedom.”
ple 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 rabblerousers; we just want to be free. As we struggle for our freedom, America, we are struggling to save your soul. 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."\(^{11}\) 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.

If this is done 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. This will be a great day, not only for America, but for the whole human family.

TD. MLKP-MBU: Box 2.

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To the Montgomery County Board of Education

28 August 1959
Montgomery, Ala.

King and other members of the MIA's executive committee request that the Montgomery Board of Education begin good-faith efforts to desegregate local schools.\(^1\)

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1. In a typewritten draft of this statement King wrote: "Therefore be it resolved that: 1. the Board of Education announce it plans not later than January 1, 1960 for conforming with the mandate of the Supreme Court of the United States" (King, Draft, Proposed statement to the board of education, 28 August 1959). King later complained to a northern supporter that "there is no integrated school in the whole state of Alabama" and that state officials "say in no uncertain terms that they will never comply" with federal desegregation laws (King to Linda Carver, 16 November 1959).