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Interview on "Meet the Press"

[17 April 1960]
[Washington, D.C.]

Three years after he initially agreed to be a guest on the show, King makes his first appearance on the National Broadcasting Company television program "Meet the Press."¹ King addresses the legal and moral justifications for the student sit-ins and the federal government's "responsibility of protecting our citizens of this nation." This transcription was drawn from NBC film footage.

[Announcer]: Now "Meet the Press," produced by Lawrence E. Spivak. Remember that the questions asked by the members of the panel do not necessarily reflect their point of view. It is their way of getting the story for you. Now, here is the moderator of "Meet the Press," Mr. Ned Brooks.²

[Ned Brooks]: Welcome once again to "Meet the Press." For the past several months, a new strategy to end racial segregation has been spreading through the South. It takes the form of sit-in demonstrations by Negro students against segregation in public eating places. It is part of a broader campaign of nonviolent resistance led by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who is our guest today. Dr. King is a Baptist minister and head of the Southern Christian Leadership Congress, Conference rather, which is spearheading the passive resistance movement. Dr. King first attracted nationwide attention in 1956 when he led the boycott against segregation in public buses in Montgomery, Alabama. His activities have resulted five times in his arrest, and his home and his church were bombed. Early this year, Dr. King moved his base of operations from Montgomery to Alabama, to Atlanta, Georgia. He is thirty-one-years old. He was born in the South, educated for the ministry in the North.

And now seated around the press table ready to interview Dr. King are Frank Van Der Linden of the *Nashville Banner*, May Craig of the *Portland (Maine) Press Herald*, Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*, and Lawrence E. Spivak, a regular member of the "Meet the Press" panel.³ Now, Dr. King, if you're ready, we'll start the questions with Mr. Spivak.

1. On 4 March 1957, the show's producer Lawrence Spivak approached King about appearing on the show "some Sunday in the future." King agreed in a 29 March 1957 letter, but scheduling conflicts delayed his appearance. He appeared on the show four other times: 25 August 1963, 28 March 1965, 21 August 1966, and 13 August 1967. Spivak described "Meet the Press" as being "conducted exactly like a press conference with four newsmen to do the questioning. The questions, of course, are in the area of the guest's interest and knowledge" (Spivak to King, 15 April 1957).

2. Ned Brooks (1901-1969) served as moderator for "Meet the Press" from 1953 to 1965.

3. Frank Van Der Linden (1919-) was a White House correspondent for major newspapers, a columnist, and author of several books on U.S. presidents. Elisabeth May Adams Craig (1889-1975) served as the Washington correspondent for the Gannett newspaper syndicate and wrote the column "Inside in Washington" that ran for nearly fifty years. Anthony Lewis (1927-) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter who covered the Supreme Court for the *New York Times* from 1955 to 1964, including *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* (1964). Lawrence Edmund Spivak (1900-1994) created the radio program "Meet the Press" in 1945; the television program followed two years later. He served as the moderator or a panelist until he retired in 1975. For more on King's involvement in the *Sullivan* case, see John Malcolm Patterson to King, 9 May 1960, pp. 456-458 in this volume.

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[*Lawrence Spivak*]: Dr. King, the former president, Harry Truman, recently said this, and I quote, "If anyone came to my store and sat down, I would throw him out. Private business has its own rights and can do what it wants."⁴ Now, President, former President Truman is an old friend of the Negro, I believe. Isn't this an indication that the sit-in strikes are doing the race, the Negro race, more harm than good?

[*King*]: No, I don't think so, Mr. Spivak. First, I should say that this was an unfortunate statement, and we were very disappointed to hear the president, the former president of the United States, make such a statement.⁵ In a sense a statement like this serves to aid and abet the violent forces in the South, and even if Mr. Truman disagreed with the sit-ins he should certainly disagree with them on a higher level. Following his past record, it seems to me that Mr. Truman wouldn't have faced such a situation because there wouldn't have been a segregated store in the beginning if he were running it, according to his statements in the past. Now, I do not think this movement is setting us back or making enemies; it's causing numerous people all over the nation, and in the South in particular, to reevaluate the stereotypes that they have developed concerning Negroes, so that it has an educational value, and I think in the long run it will transform the whole of American society.

[*Spivak*]: Well now you have yourself have said that the aim of your method of nonviolent resistance is not to defeat or to humiliate the white man but to win his friendship and understanding. How successful do you think you have been, or are being, in winning the friendship and understanding of the white men of the South?

[*King*]: Well, I should say that this doesn't come overnight. The nonviolent way does not bring about miracles, in a few hours, or in a few days, or in a few years, for that matter. I think at first, the first reaction of the oppressor, when oppressed people rise up against the system of injustice, is an attitude of bitterness. But I do believe that if the nonviolent resisters continue to follow the way of non-violence they eventually get over to the hearts and souls of the former oppressors, and I think it eventually brings about that redemption that we dream of. Of course, I can't estimate how many people we've touched so far; this is impossible because it's an inner process. But I'm sure something is stirring in the minds and the souls of people, and I'm sure that many people are thinking anew on this basic problem of human relations.

[*Spivak*]: Well now, Dr. King, you speak of your movement as a nonviolent movement, and yet the end product of it has been violence. You've also called upon the white people, of the South particularly, to live up to the law as the Supreme Court has interpreted. Don't you think you would have more standing in your fight if you, yourself, if you called upon your people to live up to the law rather than to break the law and to risk jail in this sit-in?

[*King*]: Well, I would say two things to that, Mr. Spivak. First, the end result has not been a violent result. I would say that there has been some violence here and there, but the nonviolent resister does not go on with the idea that there will not be any violence inflicted upon him. In other words, he is always willing to be

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4. Perry Mullen, "Reactions Have No Pattern," *Atlanta Journal*, 28 April 1960.

5. See King to Truman, 19 April 1960, pp. 437-439 in this volume.

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the recipient of violence but never to inflict it upon another. He goes on the idea that he must act now against injustice with moral means, and he feels that in acting against this injustice that he must never inflict injury upon the opponent. But he is always prepared to absorb the violence which emerges, if such violence emerges in the process.

[*Spivak*]: But aren't you urging him to break the local laws when you're asking the white people to live up to the laws? And is this a good method of procedure?

[*King*]: I think we will find that the law of the land is a law which calls for integration. This has been affirmed by the Supreme Court of the nation, mainly in the 1954 decision outlawing segregation in the public schools. It made it palpably clear that separate facilities are inherently unequal. So that in breaking local laws we are really seeking to dignify the law and to affirm the real and positive meaning of the law of the land.

[*Brooks*]: Mr. Lewis.

[*Anthony Lewis*]: Dr. King, in connection with the sit-in movement and other aspects of the racial question, there has certainly been an increase in tension in various parts of the South, what Mr. Spivak was speaking of, regardless of the motivation. During the last week, the *New York Times* has run some stories about Birmingham, Alabama, suggesting that a kind of reign of terror is taking place there with the officials on the side of those terrorizing those who believe in racial equality.⁶ Now, my question is what role you see for the federal government in this situation? Do you think the federal government has a place to play in, say, Birmingham, or in connection with your sit-in demonstrations?

[*King*]: Yes, I do. I think the federal government has the responsibility of protecting our citizens of this nation as they protest against unjust, the injustices which they face. I also feel that the executive branch of the government should do more in terms of moral persuasion. The legislative branch should certainly do more in giving the proper legislation, so that the transition will be made in a much smoother manner than we are facing now.

[*Lewis*]: We've just had a civil rights bill passed. You speak of the legislative branch. I wonder what you think of that and what more you would have had Congress do.

[*King*]: Well, I must confess that I was disappointed with the final bill because so many things that I felt were basic happened to have been deleted or omitted. And the whole question of school integration I'm convinced that the nation, the federal government, will have to face it in a much more forthright and courageous manner than it has in the past. And by omitting this section of the bill, I think we face something very disappointing.⁷ Or, even in the area of voter registration, I

6. In a 12 April 1960 *New York Times* article, "Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham," Harrison E. Salisbury reported that "every channel of communication, every medium of mutual interest, every reasoned approach, every inch of middle ground has been fragmented by the emotional dynamite of racism, reinforced by the whip, the razor . . . the mob, the police and many branches of the state's apparatus." Three Birmingham city commissioners later demanded a retraction from the newspaper ("3 in Birmingham Ask a Retraction," *New York Times*, 27 April 1960).

7. For further discussion of the civil rights bill, see Jacob K. Javits to King, 21 April 1960, pp. 439-440 in this volume.

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think there is much more that can be done. Now, the bill that we have, which is mainly in the area of voter registration, will help, particularly in some communities, but it is not at all a panacea. It has certain red tape, complex qualities about it which will still make the process a long one, and I think ultimately the federal government should set forth a uniform pattern of registration and voting, so that no citizen will have a problem at this point.

[*Lewis*]: You spoke of the executive branch, also, and moral leadership being needed. What precisely would you have the president do? President Eisenhower or his successor?

[*King*]: Well, Mr. Lewis, I think there are several things. Certainly, the president can do a great deal in the area of executive orders. He has certain executive powers where orders can be made and the country must follow [*them?*] and comply with these orders. On the other hand, there is a great deal that a man as powerful as the president of the United States can do in the area of moral persuasion, by constantly speaking to the people on the moral values involved in integration, and urging the people to comply with the law of the land.

[*Brooks*]: Mrs. Craig.

[*May Craig*]: Well, Dr. King, there have been court decisions saying that a storekeeper can select his customers. Are you saying that the end justifies the means and you're apparently breaking local laws, hoping for a better conclusion?⁸

[*King*]: Well, I would say, first, that the Supreme Court has not rendered a decision at this point. It is true that there have been other decisions. But I think on the basis of the 1954 decision if the Supreme Court follows what it set forth in 1954, it would have to uphold the law in this area, that segregation is wrong even in lunch counters and public places because that decision said in substance that segregation generates a feeling of inferiority within the segregated and, thereby, it breaches the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. Now, I'm sure that if we follow this through in this area the same thing will follow. On the other hand, if you're saying are we breaking laws because we feel that the end justifies the means, we feel that there are moral laws in the universe just as valid and as basic as man-made laws, and whenever a man-made law is in conflict with what we consider the law of God, or the moral law of the universe, then we feel that we have a moral obligation to protest.⁹ And this is in our American tradition all the way from the Boston Tea Party on down. We have praised individuals in America who stood up with creative initiative to revolt against an unjust system. So that this is all we're doing. In our institutions we give the Boston Tea Party as an example of the initiative of Americans, and I think this is an ex-

8. See for example, *Hodges v. United States*, 203 U.S. 1 (1906).

9. *Baltimore Afro-American* columnist Louis Lautier criticized King for making these comments. Arguing that the sit-downs were legal, Lautier wrote that "any of the 62 lawyers who met with Thurgood Marshall, director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Inc., which is undertaking the legal defense of the approximately 1,500 students who have been arrested, could have informed Dr. King that there is nothing illegal in a student's peaceably and orderly taking a seat at a lunch counter in a variety store and ordering a hamburger." In the same article Lautier said that King possessed "the uncanny knack of muffing his big opportunities to show qualities of leadership on a national scale" ("Says King 'Muffed' Leadership Chance," *Baltimore Afro-American*, 7 May 1960).

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ample of the initiative and the great creative move of the young people of our nation.

[*Craig*]: But Dr. King, this is a nation that lives under law. Above the Supreme Court is graven "Equal Justice Under Law." Are each of us to decide when it's all right to break a law?

[*King*]: I would say that when, as I said a few minutes ago, Mrs. Craig, when the law of our nation stands in conflict with the higher moral law and when a local law stands in conflict with the federal law, then we must resist that law in order to dignify and give meaning in the full outpour of the federal law and the moral law.

[*Craig*]: But sir, we have Congress to change a law. We have the courts to interpret the law. Are you going beyond them?

[*King*]: Well, we have discovered that in any nonviolent movement you have a way of direct action. In many instances the courts have made for slow movement, so to speak. As one attorney general says, "We are prepared for a century of litigation." We have observed the sometimes hypocritical attitudes in Congress and the slow movements there, the apathy. So that this is a direct-action approach, and the whole aim, the end result will be to arouse the conscience of those who are using these stalling and delaying methods to block our advance.

[*Brooks*]: Mr. Van Der Linden.

[*Frank Van Der Linden*]: Dr. King, in your own book, *Stride Toward Freedom*, you say you thoroughly studied the writings of Karl Marx and the teachings of communism and you don't agree with everything that the father of communism said. But you do say this, and I quote from page 95 of your book, "In so far as Marx pointed to the weaknesses of traditional capitalism and challenged the social conscience of the Christian churches," you responded with a definite "yes."¹⁰ Now, I'd like to know just where does communism or collectivism fit into your program of resistance here?

[*King*]: Well, it doesn't fit in this particular program of resistance at all. I have made it crystal clear on many occasions that I feel that communism is based on an ethical relativism and a metaphysical materialism that no Christian can accept. I do not feel that the end justifies the means because the end is preexistent in the means, and I believe firmly that we must follow moral means to secure moral ends. So that, that particular quotation does not apply to this particular struggle. I was referring to something else altogether.

[*Van Der Linden*]: But sir, you said also in your book on page 220: "Our ultimate goal is integration which is genuine intergroup and interpersonal living." You also soft pedal as so-called irrational fears, that this program might lead to racial intermarriage. You say that marriage is an individual matter. Now, is it correct to say that you don't oppose racial intermarriage?

10. *Stride Toward Freedom*, p. 95: "In so far as Marx posited a metaphysical materialism, an ethical relativism, and a strangulating totalitarianism, I responded with an unambiguous 'no'; but in so far as he pointed to weaknesses of traditional capitalism, contributed to the growth of a definite self-consciousness in the masses, and challenged the social conscience of the Christian churches, I responded with a definite 'yes.'"

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[*King*]: Well, I would certainly say, properly speaking, individuals marry and not races. And therefore, I cannot, I would not at all say that the laws prohibiting individuals of different races to marry, because this is an individual matter. It is not a matter of a group marrying another group but an individual marrying an individual.

[*Van Der Linden*]: Would you, then, attack next the state laws against such intermarriage?

[*King*]: Well, I haven't planned a particular attack on that, but I don't think America will ever come to its full maturity until every state does away with laws prohibiting individuals to marry on the basis of race. But I think basically this is an irrational fear because it is an individual matter. And I think the question here, at bottom, is a question of illicit miscegenation, and if you will follow the record there I think you will discover that illicit miscegenation has existed more in the South, where you have had rigid segregation laws, than it has existed in the North, where you don't have such barriers. It hadn't been the Negro who is the aggressor at this point. We just need to look around, and we can see that.

[*Brooks*]: Mr. Spivak.

[*Spivak*]: Dr. King, you say that the Negroes have a moral right to occupy the restaurant seats. Now, you've had a Supreme Court edict on the school integration. Would you say that your children, the Negro children, have a right to occupy the seats in classrooms, too, and would you consider that form of nonviolence?

[*King*]: Well, I'm sure that Negroes have this right on the basis of the Supreme Court, to go into schools. I haven't gone into, I haven't thought through the strategy at this point, how nonviolence, how nonviolent resistance can apply in the school integration struggle. I do think it can apply, and I think we need to think through some of these methods. The main thing is that the methods must always be nonviolent, and they must always be based on the principle of love. But the specific application I'm not prepared to say at this time. I do know that we have that right on the basis of the decision from the Supreme Court.

[*Spivak*]: Wouldn't you be on better ground, both legal and moral, if you occupied school seats than by occupying a few restaurant seats?

[*King*]: I'm not sure about that, Mr. Spivak, because I think we have an economic factor involved here, and even if one denied the legal aspect or the legal right to do it, there is a deeper moral right. As Governor Collins of Florida said, "It is a blatant injustice to welcome individuals into a store at all of the counters but the eating counter." This is a blatant injustice, and it is very unfair, so that we have not only legal rights involved here, but also moral rights.¹¹

[*Spivak*]: But wouldn't you be on stronger grounds, though, if you refused to buy at those stores and if you called upon the white people of the country to follow you because of both your moral and your legal right not to buy?

11. Responding to the sit-ins in Florida, Governor LeRoy Collins remarked: "I don't mind saying that if a man has a department store and he invites the public generally to come in his department store and trade, I think then it is unfair and morally wrong for him to single out one department, though, and say he does not want or will not allow Negroes to patronize that one department. Now he has a legal right to do this. But I still don't think he can square that right with moral, simple justice" ("Collins Criticizes Stores in Florida Racial Strife," *Washington Post*, 21 March 1960).

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[*King*]: I think, Mr. Spivak, sometimes it is necessary to dramatize an issue because many people are not aware of what's happening. And I think the sit-ins serve to dramatize the indignities and the injustices which Negro people are facing all over the nation. And I think another reason why they are necessary, and they are vitally important at this point, is the fact that they give an eternal refutation to the idea that the Negro is satisfied with segregation. If you didn't have the sit-ins, you wouldn't have this dramatic, and not only this dramatic but this mass demonstration of the dissatisfaction of the Negro with the whole system of segregation.

[*Brooks*]: Mr. Lewis.

[*Lewis*]: You've just had a strategy meeting in Raleigh, North Carolina, Dr. King, on this whole question, and I notice that one speaker was quite critical of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, speaking of it as too conservative and too slow moving.¹² Do you share that view, and just what was the feeling at this strategy meeting? What was the conclusion—that you've got to move more quickly than you have been?

[*King*]: Well, I should say, first, that I didn't hear a speaker say, make that particular point, so that I can't speak on that—whether the speaker said it or whether he didn't say it. I heard all of the speakers, and I didn't hear that. I didn't find any anti-NAACP attitude at the strategy meeting. All of the leaders from the South, the southern sit-in movement, assembled there and they assembled there, with the awareness of the fact that the NAACP has given absolute support to the sit-ins. And the NAACP has made it very clear that this is a good movement, a positive movement, that it will support throughout. Now, there was some criticism, not of the NAACP but of the snail-like pace of the implementation process—the implementation of the Supreme Court's decision—and dissatisfaction with the conniving methods and evasive schemes used to avoid following the law of the land. This isn't a criticism of the NAACP; it's a criticism of the agencies and the courts that will use the law to delay and get it bogged down in complex litigation processes.

[*Brooks*]: Mrs. Craig.

[*Craig*]: Dr. King, I have been told that there are places in Harlem which refuse to serve white customers. Do you know if that's true? If so, do you justify it as either morally or legally right?

[*King*]: I am very sorry, I didn't get the first part of the question.

[*Craig*]: I say, I understand there are places in Harlem, in New York, where they will not serve white customers. Do you know if that's true or not?

[*King*]: I am very sorry, I do not, Mrs. Craig.

[*Craig*]: I have been so told.

[*King*]: I don't know of places in Harlem that will not serve white customers. If such places exist, I think it's a blatant injustice and just redevelopment of the thing we are trying to get rid of, so I certainly wouldn't go along with that.

[*Brooks*]: Mr. Van Der Linden.

12. For more on criticisms of the NAACP at the Raleigh Youth Leadership Conference, see Roy Wilkins to King, 27 April 1960, pp. 444-446 in this volume.

[*Van Der Linden*]: Dr. King, how many white people are members of your church in Atlanta?

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[*King*]: I don't have any white members, Mr. Van Der Linden.

[*Van Der Linden*]: Well sir, you said integration is the law of the land, and it's morally right, whereas segregation is morally wrong, and the president should do something about it. Do you mean the president should issue an order that the schools and the churches and the stores should all be integrated?

[*King*]: I think it is one of the tragedies of our nation, one of the shameful tragedies, that eleven o'clock on Sunday morning is one of the most segregated hours, if not the most segregated hours, in Christian America. I definitely think the Christian church should be integrated, and any church that stands against integration and that has a segregated body is standing against the spirit and the teachings of Jesus Christ, and it fails to be a true witness. But this is something that the Church will have to do itself. I don't think church integration will come through legal processes. I might say that my church is not a segregating church. It's segregated but not segregating. It would welcome white members.

[*Brooks*]: I think at this point I'll have to interrupt. I see that our time is up. Thank you very much, Dr. King, for being with us. We'll be back with "Meet the Press" in just a moment, but first, this message.