

Address at NAACP Mass Rally for Civil Rights

10 July 1960
Los Angeles, Calif.

On the eve of the Democratic National Convention, demonstrators marched to the convention site where they held a brief rally. King, Roy Wilkins, Adam Clayton Powell, and presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy were among those who addressed the marchers that day. Facing scattered boos because of his uneven record on civil rights, Kennedy told the audience that "the next President of the United States cannot stand above the battle, engaging in vague sermons on brotherhood."¹ In this typescript of his remarks,

1. "Cheers and Boos Greet Kennedy at Rights Rally," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 July 1960.

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*King declares: "The cause of justice and freedom has been betrayed by both political parties."*²

Occasionally we hear both political parties talking of adopting a policy of moderation in the civil rights struggle. Our answer to this is simple. If moderation means pressing on toward the goal of justice with wise restraint and calm reasonableness, then moderation is a great virtue which all men should seek to achieve in this tense period of transition. But if moderation means slowing up in the move toward justice and capitulating to the undemocratic practices of the guardians of a deadening status quo, then moderation is a tragic vice which men of good will must condemn. The fact is that we cannot afford to slow up. The shape of the world today does not afford us the luxury of "standstillism" and token democracy.

Most of the glaring denials of basic freedoms in the south are done in the name of "states' rights". But "states' rights" are only valid as they serve to protect larger human rights. I have no opposition to state government. I believe firmly in Jeffersonian democracy, and would not advocate a centralized government with absolute sovereign powers. But I do feel that the doctrine of states' rights must not be an excuse for insurrection.

States should have rights, but no state should have the right to do wrong. There are schools in the south presently closed to Negro students, because the particular state governments refuse to comply with the Supreme Court's decision. In my own state of Georgia, the governor and the legislature are threatening to close the schools next fall in order to avoid complying with a federal court order to desegregate.³ In such situations, I think the national government has a moral and practical responsibility to federalize the schools and make it palpably clear to the world that no state will be permitted to deprive its students, Negro and white, of an equal education.

The Negro, in his efforts to achieve his rights, is determined to employ only the highest weapons of dignity and discipline. We will not succumb to the temptation of flirting with violence or indulging in hot campaigns. In seeking strong civil rights legislation, we are not seeking to defeat the white man, but to help him as well as ourselves. The festering sore of segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro.

2. According to a press account, King also stated that the demonstration was "indicative that we consider civil rights one of the most significant and vital issues facing our nation today." He added that the protesters had come "to urge the great Democratic party to take this issue seriously and earnestly plead with them to deal with this issue as one of the basic moral issues facing the world today" (Louis Lautier, "Rev. Powell Steals Show at NAACP Pre-Convention Rally," *Richmond Afro-American*, 23 July 1960).

3. In 1959, Atlanta district court judge Frank A. Hooper ordered the local board of education to prepare a plan to desegregate the city's schools. The board proposed gradual desegregation, but this plan met opposition from Georgia governor Ernest Vandiver. The following year, Vandiver created the General Assembly Committee on Schools, chaired by Georgia lawyer John A. Sibley, to investigate options to resolve the school crisis. In April 1960, the committee was unable to reach an unanimous decision and released two different plans.

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The cause of justice and freedom has been betrayed by both political parties. We have looked patiently to Washington for our Constitutional rights, and then we have found a conspiracy of apathy and hypocrisy. Now we are tired. We are compelled to take the struggle into our own limited hands because for 100 years successive Republican and Democratic national administrations have failed to enforce our Constitutional liberties. We cannot in all good conscience wait any longer. In the spirit of the students, we continue our "sit-ins" against segregation until our national government begins its "stand ups" for justice.

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