

“The Negro and the American Dream,”
Excerpt from Address at the Annual Freedom
Mass Meeting of the North Carolina State
Conference of Branches of the NAACP

25 September 1960
Charlotte, N.C.

In this typed draft of his address, King shares his dream of a nation “where men of all races, colors, and creeds will live together as brothers” but warns that American racism has put the country’s international standing “at its lowest ebb.”¹ He further recommends five ways that black people can continue “to remind America” of the dream: continue to challenge segregation, utilize the freedom blacks currently enjoy, obtain the ballot, “suffer and sacrifice” to achieve freedom, and use nonviolent methods in the struggle. A newspaper account reported that King was introduced by author and editor Harry Golden to a crowd of 2,700 people at Charlotte’s Park Center.²

This afternoon I would like to speak from the subject, “The Negro and the American Dream.” In a real sense America is essentially a dream—a dream yet unfulfilled. It is the dream of a land where men of all races, colors and creeds will live together as brothers. The substance of the dream is expressed in these sublime words: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” This is the dream. It is a profound, eloquent and unequivocal expression of the dignity and worth of all human personality.

But ever since the founding fathers of our nation dreamed this dream, America has manifested a schizophrenic personality. She has been torn between {two} selves—a self in which she has proudly professed democracy and a self in which she has sadly practiced the antithesis of democracy. Slavery and segregation have been strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal.

Now more than ever before America is challenged to bring her noble dream into reality. The shape of the world today does not permit America the luxury of

1. In a 22 August telegram, King had accepted North Carolina NAACP president Kelly Alexander’s invitation to address the organization.

2. Don Seaver, “King Tells Negroes to Start Voter Registration Protests,” *Charlotte Observer*, 26 September 1960.

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exploiting the Negro and other minority groups. The price that America must pay for the continued oppression of the Negro is the price of its own destruction. My recent travel in Asia, Africa, the Middle East and South America have convinced me that America is at its lowest ebb in international prestige; and most of this loss of prestige is due to our failure to grapple with the problem of racial injustice. We must face the painful fact that we are losing out in the struggle to win the minds of the uncommitted peoples of the world. Just this week the most eloquent spokesman of the Communist bloc, Nikita Khrushchev, suggested in his speech to the U.N., among other things, that the headquarters of this great organization be moved from the United States. The American press generally was very careful to conceal one of the reasons Mr. Khrushchev gave for suggesting this move. His direct words were: "Facts are known . . . of representatives of young African and Asian states being subjected to racial discrimination in the United States."³ While we are used to Mr. Khrushchev's intemperate and sometimes irresponsible words, we cannot dismiss these as totally false. The hour is late: the clock of destiny is ticking out. We must act now! It is a trite yet urgently true observation that if America is to remain a firstclass nation it cannot have second-class citizens.

But after saying this I would like to make it clear that the primary reason for bringing an end to racial discrimination in America must not be the Communist challenge. Nor must it be merely to appeal to Asian and African peoples. The primary reason for uprooting racial discrimination from our society is that it is morally wrong. It is a cancerous disease that prevents us from realizing the sublime principles of our Judeo-Christian tradition. It relegates persons to the status of things.

Therefore, those persons who are working courageously to break down the barriers of segregation and discrimination are the real saviors of democracy.

So many forces in our nation have served to scar the dream of our democracy. The Klu Klux Klan, the White Citizens Council and other extremists groups have scarred the dream by their fanatical acts and bitter words. But our federal government has also scarred the dream through its apathy and hypocrisy, its betrayal of the cause of justice. And even many white people of good-will have scarred the dream through silence and fear. In the midst of this conspiracy of silence and apathy the Negro must act. It may well be that the Negro is God's instrument to save the soul of America.

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What can the Negro do to continue to remind America of the necessity of realizing its dream?:

1. We must continue courageously to challenge the system of segregation. We must not rest until segregation is removed from every area of our nation's life. Segregation, whether at a lunch counter, in a public park. In a school

3. Khrushchev addressed the United Nations General Assembly on 23 September. A complete transcript of his speech appeared in the *New York Times* the following day.

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room, or in the Christian church, is a cancer in the body politic which must be removed before our moral and democratic health can be realized.

We must also make it palpably clear that we can never settle for token integration. If token integration is a good faith start, it may have some merit: but too often it is nothing but a bad faith evasive scheme. Ultimately, token integration is no more than token democracy.

2. We must make full and constructive use of the freedom we already possess. We must not use our oppression as an excuse for mediocrity. History has proven that inner determination can often break through the outer shackles of circumstance.
3. We must make a determined effort to gain the ballot. One of the most significant steps that the Negro can take at this hour is that short walk to the voting booth. I propose that the creative movement that has electrified our nation as a result of the courageous student sit-ins, wade-ins, and kneel-ins will now add the deminsion of stand-ins at places of voter registration. Even in counties of the deep South where resistance is great, Negroes must organize themselves by the hundreds and thousands to stand nonviolently and peacefully for hours in the corridors and on the sidewalks of places of registration.⁴ Such a movement may be the only thing that will dramatize the continued injustices the Negroes face in the area of voter registration, and the only thing that will arouse the conscience of our nation on this pressing issue.

External resistance is not the only present barrier to Negro voting. Apathy among Negroes themselves is also a factor. Even where the polls are open to all Negroes have shown themselves too slow to exercise their voting privileges.

4. We must be willing to suffer and sacrifice to achieve our freedom. Our freedom will never be handed out on a silver platter. Freedom is not free. It is always purchased with the high price of sacrifice and suffering.
5. We must be sure that our struggle is conducted on the highest level of dignity and discipline. Our method must be nonviolent to the core. We must not flirt with retaliatory violence or drink the poisonous wine of hate. Our aim must not be to defeat the white man or pay him back for past injustices heaped upon us.

I feel that this way of nonviolence is vital because it is the only way to reestablish the broken community. It is a powerful way to take direct action against injustice without waiting for other agencies to act.

This approach to the problem of oppression is not without successful precedent. We have the magnificent example of Gandhi who challenged the might of the British Empire and won independence for his people by using only the

4. An article in the *Charlotte Observer* reported that King encouraged mass "stand-ins" at voter registration places throughout the South (Seaver, "King Tells Negroes to Start Voter Registration Protests," *Charlotte Observer*, 26 September 1960).

weapons of truth, noninjury, courage and soul force. Today we have the example of thousands of Negro students in the South who have courageously challenged the principalities of segregation. These young students have taken the deep groans and the passionate yearnings of the Negro people and filtered them in their own souls and fashioned them in a creative protest which is an epic known all over the nation. For the last few months they have moved in a uniquely meaningful orbit imparting light and heat to distant satellites. Through their nonviolent direct action they have been able to open hundreds of formerly segregated lunch counters in almost eighty cities. It is no overstatement to characterize these events as historic. Never before in the United States has so large a body of students spread a struggle over so great an area in pursuit of a goal of human dignity and freedom. I am convinced that future historians will have to record this student movement as one of the greatest epics of our heritage.

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