

Address at March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

28 August 1963

Washington, D.C.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation. [applause]

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. [Audience:] (My Lord) One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later (My Lord), the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later [applause], the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence (Well), they were

Comment: Coretta Scott King recalled that her husband began writing his speech "several weeks before we came to Washington, and he planned to do rewrites and editing in our [Willard] hotel room, with the support of some of his key staff members. It is impossible to say exactly when Martin began to conceive the key elements of the 'I Have a Dream' speech because he expressed some of its ideas and phrases in earlier speeches. My husband worked on the speech all night, and when I went to bed around 2 a.m., he was still working. Martin had been allotted only 8 minutes for his speech because there were so many other speakers, and he was very concerned that he stay within the limit. Finally, Bayard Rustin, the coordinator of the March, came by our room. He said, 'The 8-minute time limit doesn't apply to you, Martin. Take as much time as you need, because the people are coming to hear you.' I awoke that morning and realized that he had stayed up all night working on his speech. When he finished, everyone seemed satisfied that he had written a good speech. As it turned out, however, he would deliver a better one." March director A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, introduced King as the final speaker of the program.

Comment: The prepared text of King's speech does not include this sentence. Two months earlier at a 23 June civil rights rally in Detroit, King indicated the deep joy he experienced as a participant "in what I consider the largest and greatest demonstration for freedom ever held in the United States." King's Detroit address before a crowd of more than one hundred thousand included several other passages that would be adapted for his subsequent speech at the Washington march.

Comment: King's reference to Abraham Lincoln borrows from the familiar opening of Lincoln's 1863 Gettysburg Address: "Four score and seven years ago..."

Comment: Prepared text: "But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free." On 11 June 1963 President John F. Kennedy made a similar point in his nationally television speech introducing new civil rights legislation: "One hundred years of delay have passed since President Lincoln freed the slaves, yet their heirs, their grandsons, are not fully free."

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signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the “unalienable Rights of Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked “insufficient funds.” [applause]

Comment: Prepared text: “This note was a promise that all men would be granted the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. [applause] We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. And so we’ve come to cash this check (Yes), a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom (Yes) and security of justice. (Yes) [applause]

Comment: In a 25 September 1960, speech on “The Negro and the American Dream,” delivered in Charlotte to the Annual Freedom Mass Meeting of the North Carolina State Conference of NAACP Branches, King expressed an early version of this idea: “In a real sense America is essentially a dream – a dream yet unfulfilled. . . . 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.” . . . 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.”

We have also come to this hallowed spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of Now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism. [applause] Now is the time (Yes, Yes it is) to make real the promises of democracy. (My Lord) Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley of segregation to the sunlit path of racial justice. Now is the time (Yes) [applause] to lift our nation from the quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time (Now is the time) to make justice a reality for all of God’s children.

Comment: Psalm 23:4 (KJV): “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death.”

Comment: Prepared text inserts here: ANow is the time to open the doors of opportunity to all of God’s children.*

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro’s legitimate discontent

Comment: Prepared text does not include this sentence. Coretta Scott King recalled: “when he got to the rhythmic part of demanding freedom now . . . the crowd caught the timing and shouted now in a cadence. Their response lifted Martin in a surge of emotion to new heights of inspiration” (*My Life with Martin Luther King, Jr.* [1969], p. 239).

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will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. (Yes) [applause] There will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people, who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice: in the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. (My Lord) [applause] We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. (My Lord) Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. (My Lord) The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny. [applause] They have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk we must make the pledge that we will always

Comment: Prepared text adds: "This offense we share mounted to share the battlements of injustice must be carried forth by a bi-racial army."

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march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?" (*Never*) We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is a victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. [applause] We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. (*Yeah*) We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating, "For Whites Only." [applause] We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote. (*Yes*) [applause] No, no, we are not satisfied and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." [applause]

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. (*My Lord*) Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. (*That's right*) Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by storms of persecution (*Yes*) and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive. [Go back to Mississippi (*Yes*), go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities (*Yes*), knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. (*Yes*) Let

Comment: Amos 5:24 (KJV): "But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream."

While a student at Boston University, King referred to this passage as the key passage of the entire book. It reveals the deep ethical nature of God. . . . It seems to me that Amos' concern is the ever-present tendency to make ritual and sacrifice a substitute for ethical living. Unless a man's heart is right, Amos seems to be saying, the external forms of worship mean nothing. God is a God that demands justice and sacrifice ~~for~~ can never be a substitute for it. Who can disagree with such a notion? (See ANotecards on Books of the Old Testament, in *Papers* 2, p. 165.)

The prepared text continues: "We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream. And so today, let us go back to our communities as members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction. Let us go back and work with all the strength we can muster to get strong civil rights legislation in this session of Congress. Let us go down from this place to ascend other peaks of purpose. Let us descend from this mountaintop to climb other hills of hope. @ Amos 5:24. While a student at Boston University, King referred to this passage as the key passage of the entire book. It reveals the deep ethical nature of God. . . . It seems to me that Amos' concern is the ever-present tendency to make ritual and sacrifice a substitute for ethical living. Unless a man's heart is right, Amos seems to be saying, the external forms of worship mean nothing. God is a God that demands justice and sacrifice ~~for~~ can never be a substitute for it. Who can disagree with such a notion? (See ANotecards on Books of the Old Testament, in *Papers* 2, p. 165.)

Comment: Prepared text ends: "With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. Let us work and march and love and stand tall together until that day has come when we can join hands and sing, 'Free at last, free at last; thank God almighty, we are free at last.'"

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us not wallow in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, [applause] so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow (*My Lord*), I still have a dream. (Yes) It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day (Yes, *One day*) this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal." (Yes) [applause]

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream (Yes) that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice (Yes), sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream [applause] that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character. (*My Lord*) I have a dream today. [applause]

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists (Yes), with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" (Yes). One day right here in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

[applause]

I have a dream that one day "every valley shall be exalted (Yes),

Comment: King departs from his prepared text and draws upon the rousing closing of his 23 June speech in Detroit: "And so I go back to the South not in despair. I go back to the South not with a feeling that we are caught in a dark dungeon that will never lead to a way out. I go back believing that the new day is coming." King explained in an interview a few months later with Donald Smith why he extended his speech beyond the allotted seven minutes: "The audience's response was wonderful that day, and all of the sudden this thing came to me. The previous June, following a peaceful assemblage of thousands of people through the streets of downtown Detroit, Michigan, I had delivered a speech in Cobo Hall, in which I used the phrase 'I have a dream.' I had used it many times before, and I just felt that I wanted to use it here. I don't know why. I hadn't thought about it before the speech. I used the phrase, and at that point I just turned aside the manuscript altogether and didn't come back to it."

Comment: These "dream" references recall passages from King's earlier speeches. Detroit: "And so this afternoon, I have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. Yes, I have a dream this afternoon that one day in this land the words of Amos will become real and justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream. I have a dream this afternoon that one day we will recognize the words of Jefferson 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.'" A similar passage from a speech given 27 November 1962 in Rocky Mount, North Carolina: "And so, my friends of Rocky Mount, I have a dream tonight. It is a dream rooted deeply in the American dream."

Comment: On 25 September 1960 at an NAACP conference in North Carolina, King expressed similar thoughts in an address titled "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.'"

Comment: Detroit speech in June 1963: "I have a dream that one day, right down in Georgia and Mississippi and Alabama, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to live together as brothers. I have a dream this afternoon that one day, one day little white children and little Negro children will be able to join hands as brothers and sisters. I have a dream this afternoon that one day, that one day men will no longer burn down houses and the church of God simply because people want to be free. I have a dream this afternoon that there will be a day that we will no longer face the atrocities that Emmett Till had to face or Medgar Evers had to face, that all men can live with dignity."

Comment: King used a similar phrase as early as 1958 when he wrote in an *Ebony* magazine advice column: "The content of one's character is the important thing, not the color of his skin" (Advice for Living, *Ebony*, January 1958). Speaking to a 11 May 1959 religious leaders conference in Washington, D. C., King spoke of realizing "a dream of a land where men do not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character." In Detroit, he said, "I have a dream this afternoon that my four little children, that my four little children will not come up in the same young days that I came up within but they will be judged on the basis of the content of their character, not the color of their skin. I have a dream this afternoon that one day right here in Detroit, Negroes will be able to buy a house or rent a house anywhere that their money will carry them and they will be able to get a job."

Comment: In his Rocky Mount speech in 1962, King said: "I have a dream that one day down in Sumter County, Georgia, where they burned two churches down a few days ago . . . little black boys and little black girls will be able to join hand with little white boys and little white girls and walk the streets as brothers and sisters."

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every hill and every mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight (*Yes*), and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed (*Yes*), and all flesh shall see it together.” (*Yes*)

Comment: Isaiah 40: 4 (KJV): “Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”

King in Rocky Mount: “I have a dream tonight. One day every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill shall be made low. Crooked places will be made straight, the rough places will be made plain, the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.” In his speech delivered in Detroit two months earlier, King said, “I have a dream this afternoon! I have a dream that one day ‘every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.’ I have a dream this afternoon that the brotherhood of man will become a reality in this day.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. (*Yes*) With this faith (*My Lord*) we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. (*All right*) With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. (*Talk about it*) With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day. [*applause*] This will be the day, [*applause*] this will be the day

Comment: Detroit speech: “And with this faith I will go out and carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of despair. With this faith, I will go out with you and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. With this faith, we will be able to achieve this new day when all of God’s children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing with the Negroes in the spiritual of old: ‘Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!’”

when all of God’s children (*Yes*) will be able to sing with new meaning: My country, ‘tis of thee (*Yes*), sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. (*Oh yes*)

Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrims’ pride (*Yes*),

From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

Comment: King’s use, beginning with “My country, ‘tis of thee,” of a traditional patriotic song was probably influenced by noted Chicago minister Archibald J. Carey, Jr., whose similar closing to his address on July 8, 1952 to the Republican National Convention may have provided a model for King’s spontaneous peroration in Washington.

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.

Comment: In a St. Louis address on 10 April 1957, King obliquely acknowledged Carey’s influence, noting that he had heard “a powerful orator say not long ago that must become literally true: Freedom must ring from every mountain side. Let us go out this evening with that determination.”

And so let freedom ring (*Yes, Let it ring*) from the hilltops of

New Hampshire;

Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York;

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of

Pennsylvania (*Yes*);

Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado

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(Yes);

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. (Yes)

But not only that:

Let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia (Yes);

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee (Yes);

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi

(Yes);

From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, [*applause*] and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city (Yes), we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics (Yes), will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual:

Free at last! (Yes) Free at last!

Thank God Almighty, we are free at last! [*applause*]

Comment: Carey's 1952 address extended the "mountain" metaphor: "That's exactly what we mean: from every mountain side, let freedom ring. Not only from the Green Mountains and the White Mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire; not only from the Catskills of New York; but from the Ozarks in Arkansas, from the Stone Mountain in Georgia, from the Great Smokies of Tennessee and from the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. Not only for the minorities of the United States, but for the persecuted of Europe, for the rejected of Asia, for the disfranchised of South Africa and for the disinherited of all the earth. May the Republican Party, under God, from every mountain side, LET FREEDOM RING!" The influence of Carey is apparent in King's 1957 address in St. Louis: "Yes, let it ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado. Let it ring from the prodigious hill tops of New Hampshire. Let it ring from the mighty Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. Let it ring from the curvaceous slopes of California. But not only that. From every mountain side let freedom ring. Yes, let us go out and be determined that freedom will ring from every mole hill in Mississippi. Let it ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia. Let it ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee."

Comment: The Detroit speech ends: "And with this faith I will go out and carve a tunnel of hope through the mountain of despair. With this faith, I will go out with you and transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows. With this faith, we will be able to achieve this new day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing with the Negroes in the spiritual of old: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!"

Comment: King's address, which lasted 16 minutes, 38 seconds, received almost no attention in the following morning's *Washington Post*, which reported: "It was Randolph who secured the great emotional response in the request for a pledge by the demonstrators to return to their homes and continue the fight."

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