

Transcript of the
ADDRESS OF REVEREND DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
New York State Civil War Centennial Commission
Park Sheraton Hotel, New York City
Wednesday Evening, September 12, 1962

Mr. Chairman; my good friend, Governor Rockefeller, his Eminence, Cardinal Spellman; ladies and gentlemen. I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here this evening and to be a part of this auspicious occasion. Mankind through the ages has been in a ceaseless struggle to give dignity and meaning to human life. It is that quest which distinguishes man from the lower animals. If our nation had done nothing more in its whole history than to create just two documents, its contribution to civilization would be imperishable. The first of these documents is the Declaration of Independence and the other is that which we are here to honor tonight, the Emancipation Proclamation. All tyrants, past, present and future, are powerless to bury the truths in these declarations, no matter how extensive their legions, how vast their power and how malignant their evil.

The Declaration of Independence proclaimed to a world, organized politically and spiritually around the concept of the inequality of man, that the dignity of human personality was inherent in man as a living being. The Emancipation Proclamation was the offspring of the Declaration of Independence. It was a constructive use of the force of law to uproot a social order which sought to separate liberty from a segment of humanity.

Our pride and our progress would be unqualified if the story ended here. But history reveals that America has been a schizophrenic personality where these two documents are concerned. On the one hand she has proudly professed the basic principles inherent in both documents. On the other hand she has sadly practiced the antithesis of these principles.

If we look at our history with honesty and clarity, we will be forced to admit that our Federal form of government has been, from the day of its birth, weakened in its integrity, confused and confounded in its direction, by the unresolved race question. We seldom note or give adequate significance to the fact that Thomas Jefferson's text of the Declaration of Independence was revised by the Continental Congress to eliminate a justifiable attack on King George for encouraging slave trade. It was changed lest it offend the southern representatives, just as today still legislation is discarded or emasculated lest it too give offense to southern representatives. Jefferson knew that such compromises with principle struck at the heart of the nation's security and integrity. In eighteen-twenty, six years before his death, he wrote these melancholy words:

“...but this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of seventeen-seventy-six to acquire self-government and happiness to their country is to be thrown away, and my only consolation is to be that I live not to weep over it.”

Our nation has experienced a ceaseless rebellion against the Const.. the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Supreme Court by one

region. In the Revolutionary War powerful slave elements in the south fought with the British. The development of the nation to the west was complicated and hindered by the slave power, and only the holocaust of war settled the direction and character of our growth. But the rebellion against equality continued into the second half of the 19th century and into the 20th century, diminishing the authority of the Federal government and corroding its authority. It has contaminated every institution in our society. Today that single region of our country still holds a veto power over the majority of the nation, nullifying basic constitutional rights, and in the exercise of its illegal conduct, retarding our growth. The south in walling itself off from the application of laws and judicial decrees behind an iron curtain of defiance, becomes a law unto itself. It is an autonomous region whose posture toward the central government has elements as defiant as a hostile nation.

The unresolved race question is a pathological infection in our social and political anatomy, which has sickened us throughout our history, and is still today a largely untreated disease. How has our social health been injured by this condition? The legacy is the impairment of the lives of nearly twenty-million of our citizens. Based solely on their color, they have been condemned to a sub-existence, never sharing the fruits of progress equally. The average income of Negroes is approximately thirty-three hundred dollars per family annually, against fifty-eight hundred dollars for white citizens. This differential tells only part of the story, however, the more terrible aspect is found in the inner structure and quality of the Negro community. It is a community artificially but effectively separated from the dominant culture of our society. It has a pathetically small, grotesquely distorted, middle class. There are virtually no Negro bankers, no industrialists; few commercial enterprises worthy of the name of businesses, the overwhelming majority of Negroes are domestics, laborers, and always the largest segment of

the unemployed. If employment entails heavy work, if the wages are miserable, if the filth is revolting, the job belongs to the Negro.

And every Negro knows these truths and his personality is corroded by a sense of inferiority, generated by this degraded status. Negroes, north and south, still live in segregation, housed in slums, eat in segregation, pray in segregation and die in segregation. The life experience of the Negro in integration remains an exception even in the north.

The imposition of inferiority, externally and internally, are the slave chains of today. What the Emancipation Proclamation proscribed in a legal and formal sense has never been eliminated in human terms. By burning in the consciousness of white Americans a conviction that Negroes are by nature subnormal, much of the myth was absorbed by the Negro himself, stultifying his energy, his ambition and his self-respect. The Proclamation of Inferiority has contended with the Proclamation of Emancipation, negating its liberating force. Inferiority has justified the low living standards of the Negro, sanctioned his separation from the majority culture, and enslaved him physically and psychologically. Inferiority as a fetter is more subtle and sophisticated than iron chains; it is invisible and its victim helps to fashion his own bonds.

Inequality before the law is so pervasive in the life of the Negro that its detailing is impossible. We boast that ours is a government of laws, but every Negro knows a thousand examples in which law and government do not protect him. In the past three weeks, three Christian churches have been burned in a single community in Georgia. If a government building were bombed in Washington the perpetrators would be apprehended immediately. But if violence affects a Negro church, all of the agencies of government cannot find or convict the arsonists.

This is the essential texture of freedom and equality for the Negro one hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation; and one hundred and eighty-six years after the Declaration of Independence.

This somber picture may induce the somber thought that there is nothing to commemorate about the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. But tragic disappointments and undeserved defeats do not put an end to life, nor do they wipe out the positive, however submerged it may have become beneath floods of negative experience.

The Emancipation Proclamation had four enduring results. First, it gave force to the executive power to change conditions in the national interest on a broad and far-reaching scale. Second, it dealt a devastating blow to a system of slave-holding and an economy built upon it, which had been muscular enough to engage in warfare on the Federal government. Third, it enabled the Negro to play a significant role in his own liberation with the ability to organize and to struggle, with less of the bestial retaliation his slave status had permitted to his masters. Fourth, it resurrected and restated the principle of equality upon which the founding of the nation rested.

When Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation it was not the act of an opportunistic politician issuing a hollow pronouncement to placate a pressure group. Our truly great presidents were tortured deep in their hearts by the race question. Jefferson with keen perception saw that the festering sore of slavery debilitated white masters as well as the Negro. He feared for the future of white children who were taught a false supremacy. His concern can be summed up in one quotation: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

Lincoln's torments are well known, his vacillations were facts. In the seething cauldron of sixty-two and sixty-three Lincoln was called the "Baboon President" in the North, and

“coward”, assassin, and savage in the South. Yet he searched his way to the conclusions embodied in these words; words already quoted this evening: “In giving freedom to the slave we assure freedom to the free, honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve.” On this moral foundation he personally {AUDIO CUTS OUT} prepared the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, and to emphasize the decisiveness of his course he called his cabinet together and declared he was not seeking their advice as to its wisdom but only suggestions on subject matter. Lincoln achieved immortality because he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. His hesitation had not stayed his hand when historic necessity charted but one course. No President can be great, or even fit for office, if he attempts to accommodate to injustice to maintain his political balance.

The Emancipation Proclamation shattered in one blow the slave system, undermining the foundations of the economy of the rebellious south; and guaranteed that no slave-holding class, if permitted to exist in defeat, could prepare a new and deadlier war after resuscitation. The Proclamation opened the door to self-liberation by the Negro {AUDIO RESUMES} upon which he immediately acted by deserting the plantations in the south and joining the Union armies in the north. Henry Longfellow, seeing a regiment of Negroes march through Beacon Street in Boston, wrote in his diary, “An imposing sight, with something wild and strange about it, like a dream. At last the North consents to let the Negro fight for freedom.” Beyond the war years the grim and tortured struggle of Negroes to win their own freedom is an epic of battle against frightful odds. If we have failed to do enough, it is.. it was not the will for freedom that was weak, but the forces against us which were too strong.

We have spelled out a balance sheet of the Emancipation Proclamation, its contributions and its deficiencies which our lack of zeal permitted to find expression.

And there is but one way to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation, and that is to make its declaration of freedom real; to reach back to the origins of our nation when our message of equality electrified an unfree world, and reaffirm democracy by deeds as bold and daring as the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.

We do not have as much time as the cautious and the patient try to give us. We are not only living in a time of cataclysmic change – we live in an era in which human rights is a central world issue. The shape of the world today does not afford us the luxury of an anemic democracy. A totally new political phenomenon has arisen from the rubble and destruction of World War two. A neutralist sector has established itself between the two contending camps of the world. More than a billion people are in the neutralist arena and it is growing everywhere even in the western hemisphere covering territory larger than our own national boundaries. These nations are neutral because they do not trust the integrity of East or West on the issue of equality and human rights. In India, Indonesia, and Brazil, to mention but a few the right to vote has been exercised even by illiterate peasants in primitive villages still surrounded by jungle. In some of our glittering cities in the south, college professors cannot vote, cannot eat and cannot use a library or a park in equality.

In Africa, Negroes have formed states, governed themselves and function in world tribunals with dignity and effectiveness. The simple fact is that the relative progress in undeveloped sectors of the world in human rights races at jet like speed, while we strain in a horse and buggy for advancement. We are not moving in the world tempo of change. Worse still, as earth shrinks, through communication revolutions, and the shame of Little Rock, Arkansas and Albany, Georgia flashes around the globe, the world is becoming more aware of our deficiencies. Floods of consumer goods, and super-highways, super-markets and Telstars do

not obscure the existence of racial injustice; and this fact more than any other explains why more emerging nations move away from us than toward us. The touchstone is not the sophistication of our industrial devices, but our commitment to freedom and equality. Without faith that we are wedded to these truths, our power and strength become a menace to other peoples and they will maintain their distance until we have justified their confidence.

And while stressing the damage that racial injustice does to our image abroad, there is a more basic reason for grappling with this problem. In the final analysis we must not seek to solve this problem merely to face a Communist challenge. We must not seek to do it merely to appeal to Asian and African peoples. In the final analysis, racial injustice must be uprooted from American society, because it is morally wrong. It must be uprooted because it stands against all of the noble precepts of our Hebraic-Christian heritage. It must be done because segregation substitutes an "I-It" relationship for the "I-Thou" relationship, and relegates persons to the status of things. And so there is a great moral challenge at this hour. And it must be done not merely because it is diplomatically expedient, but because it is morally compelling.

The Negro will never cease his struggle to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation by making his emancipation real. If enough Americans in numbers and influence join him, the nation we both labored to build may yet realize its glorious dream.

There is too much greatness in our heritage to tolerate the pettiness of race hate. The Declaration of Independence and the Emancipation Proclamation deserve to live in sacred honor; many generations of Americans suffered, bled and died, confident that those who followed them would preserve the purity of our ideals. Negroes have declared they will die if need be for these freedoms. All Americans must enlist in a crusade finally to make the race question an ugly relic

of a dark past. When that day dawns, the Emancipation Proclamation will be commemorated in luminous glory.

We are at one of history's awesome crossroads. Our technological creativity is almost boundless. We can build machines that think. We can dot the landscape with houses and super-highways teeming with cars. We can now even destroy our whole planet with the nuclear weapons we alone possess. We have wrought distance and place time in chains. And our guided ballistic missiles have carved highways through the stratosphere. In short we have the capacity to re-build our whole planet, filling it with luxury – or we are capable of destroying it totally. The shocking issue of our age is that no one can confidentially say which we will do. Whether we will survive indeed depends upon whether we build moral values as fast and extensively as we construct material things. The struggle for civil rights is rooted in moral values. As we pursue our goals everywhere, everyone will benefit from the moral awakening our movement compels. We must all maintain faith in the future, and believe that the American dream can and will become a reality. This is my faith. I know that dark days still lie ahead. Gigantic mountains of opposition will still stand before us. We will encounter new setbacks, and some will still have to suffer persecution. But Valley Forge was followed by Yorktown. The persecution of Christians in ancient Rome was efficient and thorough, and yet it resulted in total failure.

There is something in this universe which justifies Carlisle in saying, "No lie can live forever." And there is something in this universe which justifies William Cullen Bryant in saying, "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." And this is the faith that will carry us on. And with this faith we will be able to adjourn the councils of despair, and bring new light into the dark chambers of pessimism. And we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our

nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. This is the faith that will help us solve the problem. We have a long, long way to go before it is solved. But all of us can at least think of the fact that we have made some strides.

And so I close by quoting the words of an old Negro slave preacher who didn't quite have his grammar right but uttered words of great symbolic profundity and they were uttered in the form of a prayer: "Lord, we ain't what we oughta be. We ain't what we want to be. We ain't what we gonna be. But, thank God, we ain't what we wuz."

CONCLUSION

Martin Luther King

EP Dinner / NYC

September 12, 1962