

23 June
1958

“A Statement to the
President of the United States”

23 June 1958
Washington, D.C.

Shortly after 11 A.M. on 23 June, White House aides ushered King, Granger, Randolph, and Wilkins into Eisenhower's office. Randolph began the meeting by reading from the following statement, which the black leaders had drafted late the previous evening.¹ King followed by assenting to the president's oft-repeated statement that morality cannot be legislated, but suggested that only federal action could control the effects of racist attitudes. After listening to brief statements from Wilkins and Granger, Eisenhower said that he was dismayed to hear that, despite the efforts of his administration, “bitterness on the part of the Negro people was at its height.” Eisenhower agreed to consider the group's recommendations but said he doubted that further action would be productive.² At a press conference following the forty-five minute meeting, King told reporters that the group had asked the president to convene a White House conference on race relations: “There is a desperate need for channels of communication to be opened between Negro and white citizens particularly in the South.”³

The process of peaceful advancement toward equality of citizenship for all Americans has reached a critical turn.

New economic and cultural forces in our nation's life are changing the pattern of Negro-white relations. Any effort to impede this process will affect unfavorably all American society. Frequently tension is an inherent element of basic social change. Thus it is not a matter of choice between an unjust status quo with social peace, and integration with tension. The nation can adopt forthrightly a bold program which moves through tension to a democratic solution; or it can depend upon evasion and compromise which purport to avoid tension, but which in reality lead the entire society toward economic, social and moral frustration.

Years of educational, legislative and legal effort to bring the status of Negro Americans in line with the guarantees of the Constitution have led, inevitably,

1. Randolph to King, Wilkins, and Granger, 23 June 1958; Siciliano, Memo for the files, 24 June 1958.

2. Siciliano, Memo for the files, 24 June 1958.

3. Randolph reported that the delegation had been received “graciously and friendly” by Eisenhower and that they were “greatly impressed by his general attitude of concern” (Press conference after meeting with Eisenhower, 23 June 1958). In a 25 June memorandum to Eisenhower, Siciliano reported that he felt the meeting was a success, “even if success in this area is built on sand.” Members of the black press were less enthusiastic. Louis Lautier of the National Newspaper Publishers Association observed that “the President . . . turned on the Eisenhower charm and pacified [the] four top colored leaders.” Lautier noted especially the apparent “about face attitude” of Wilkins and King, who had criticized the president harshly for his remarks at the “Summit Meeting of National Negro Leaders” the previous month (Louis Lautier, “Negro Leaders Leave Meeting With Ike Without Criticism,” *Atlanta Daily World*, 1 July 1958).

to the determination by our highest court that enforced racial segregation and its attendant discrimination in publicly-owned facilities is morally and legally indefensible.

23 June
1958

At every intermediate stop along the way to this conclusion bitter opposition was encountered, but justice and common sense have heretofore prevailed; the unity of the nation has been strengthened; its moral fibre has been renewed.

Today, however, the last-ditch resistance to the application of principles long since accepted by most of the nation has assumed a significance beyond the question of racial justice, important as that is. The welfare of the whole country is involved in the issues with which this presentment is concerned.

Presently there is manifest a pattern of calloused disrespect for law. Moral values have been corrupted. Mob violence has emerged as an instrument to maintain the status quo.

The basic constitutional freedoms of speech, association, assembly and redress of grievances, vital to all Americans, have been perverted, abridged or denied through arbitrary practices or cynical legislation in the states.

State and local office holders of high and low station and national legislators, all sworn to uphold the Constitution, have incited to disobedience of the law and have campaigned nationally for support for their position. In community after community, fear of reprisals or of scorn has reduced to a whisper the reproach a moral people should feel for immoral behavior.

It is no secret that the foreign relations program of our nation has been hampered and damaged by the discriminatory treatment accorded citizens within the United States, solely on the basis of their race and color. In our world-wide struggle to strengthen the free world against the spread of totalitarianism, we are sabotaged by the totalitarian practices forced upon millions of our Negro citizens.

These citizens have exhibited unparalleled patience in the face of decades of proscription and persecution. They have placed unfaltering trust in the guarantees of the Constitution and in the orderly processes of the courts. Today they are frustrated and angry. In their resentment and despair, an increasing number of them are questioning whether their forbearance and respect for orderly procedure are rewarding.

The decision of Federal Judge Harry J. Lemly reversing school integration in Little Rock and postponing further effort until 1961 has shocked and outraged Negro citizens and millions of their fellow Americans.⁴ This opinion is being construed, rightly or wrongly, as a green light to lawless elements in their defiance of Federal authority.

We have come to this pass largely because we have not recognized that adjustments of the magnitude called for in this vast social change cannot be undertaken effectively without planned effort of similar magnitude. We cannot combat pneumonia by prescribing an occasional tablet of aspirin and a goblet of goodwill.

4. On 21 June federal district court judge Lemly granted the Little Rock school board's request to delay school integration until 1961. The decision was overturned by the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals in August and the Supreme Court unanimously sustained the appellate court's decision (*Cooper v. Aaron*, 358 U.S. 1 [1958]).

23 June
1958

Just as our Government has moved with pace and imagination to meet the revolution of rising expectations in other parts of the world, so it is essential that similar imagination and intelligence—and courage—be shown by our Government in meeting the results of the revolution of rising expectations at home.

This is not to say that measures taken by this Administration up to now have been without value. The nation was immeasurably strengthened in its understanding of the gravity of the constitutional issues by the action taken at Little Rock last September to uphold the sanctity of the orders of Federal courts. The Chief Executive's personal support of efforts to eliminate segregation in the armed services and on service installations has been beneficial, although pockets still remain which should be wiped out. The enactment of the 1957 Civil Rights Act with the active support of the Administration was a significant advance.

Valuable as these and other measures have been, they have not as yet clearly provided a planned and integral approach to the multitude of tough problems which must be solved along the way. It is in the hope that these essential objectives may thereby be promoted that we suggest and urge the adoption of the following program:

1. The President of the United States should declare in a nationwide pronouncement, prior to September, that the law will be vigorously upheld with the total resources at his command.
2. Much emphasis has been laid on the need for restoring communication between white and colored Southerners who are troubled by a common fear of reaction. The President can well set the example in this matter by convoking a White House Conference of constructive leadership to discuss ways and means of complying peaceably with the Court's rulings.
3. Information, resources and advice of the appropriate government agencies addressed to the problems of integration should be made available to all officials and community groups seeking to work out a program of education and action.
4. The President should request both parties to lay aside partisanship so that the Congress can enact a civil rights bill which will include Part III originally in the 1957 bill, in order that constitutional rights other than voting rights may be enforced by the United States Attorney General. Lack of adequate and clear statutory authority has made the Federal Government a mere spectator in the disgraceful maneuverings at Little Rock.
5. We urge the President to direct the Department of Justice to give all legal assistance possible under the law, including the filing of a brief as a friend of the court and appearance of counsel, in the appeal from the Lemly decision in the Little Rock case.
6. The President of the United States should direct the Department of Justice to act now to protect the right of citizens to register and vote. In the nine months since the enactment of the 1957 Civil Rights Act, overt acts have been committed against prospective Negro registrants in some areas and numer-

ous complaints have been submitted to the Department, but, to date, not a single case has reached a court of law. Unless immediate action is undertaken, thousands of Negro citizens will be denied the right to cast a ballot in the 1958 elections.

23 June
1958

7. The President should direct the Department of Justice to act under existing statutes in the wake of bombings of churches, synagogues, homes and community centers; also in the murderous brutality directed against Negro citizens in Dawson, Georgia, and other communities.
8. In order to counteract the deliberate hamstringing of the new Civil Rights Commission, the President should recommend to the Congress the extension of its life for at least a full year beyond its present expiration date.
9. The President should make it clear both in statement and in act that he believes in the principle that federal money should not be used to underwrite segregation in violation of the federal constitutional rights of millions of Negro citizens; and that this principle should be applied whether in matters of federal aid to education, hospitals, housing, or any other grants-in-aid to state and local governments. In support of national policy, the Federal Government should finance continuation of public schools where state funds are withdrawn because of integration.

In addition to the enumerations above, Negro citizens are deeply concerned over the efforts to curb the appellate jurisdiction of the Supreme Court, particularly the restrictions proposed in H.R. 3, a bill, which is both anti-civil rights and anti-labor.

Widespread discrimination against Negroes in employment persists in industry, business and government and has been underscored by the general rise in unemployment. The problem is highlighted by repeated failures of efforts to enact national fair employment legislation and by the demonstrated ineffectiveness of administrative directives.

The need continues for vigorous enforcement of the Federal policy of non-discrimination in government employment. The national government can set an example by removing the barriers which have limited the employment of Negro citizens in all U.S. installations abroad, including the foreign service.

These recommendations are made in the belief that tensions between citizens in our country, and the anxieties of citizens themselves, will be eased and eventually erased if a clear national policy and a program of implementation are established by the Chief Executive of the nation.

A. Philip Randolph
Lester B. Granger
Reverend Martin Luther King
Roy Wilkins

PD. MLKP-MBU: Box 48.