

“The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness,”
Address at the Golden Anniversary
Conference of the National Urban League

6 Sept
1960

6 September 1960
New York, N.Y.

In this typed draft of his address, King asserts that “there need be no essential conflict” between the Urban League’s efforts to help “the Negro adjust to urban living” and the need for “more militant civil rights organizations” to present a “frontal attack on the system of segregation.” He advises that “the NAACP’er must not look upon the Urban Leaguer as a quiet conservative and the Urban Leaguer must not look upon the NAACP’er as a militant troublemaker. Each must accept the other as a necessary partner in the complex yet exciting struggle to free the Negro.” King concludes by calling for the realization of democratic American ideals in a land “where men do not argue that the color of a man’s skin determines the content of his character.”¹ King delivered his remarks before an overflow audience of nearly three thousand at the Community Church of New York.²

I am indeed happy to have the opportunity of being with you on this auspicious occasion. I bring warm and sincere greetings to you from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and all of its affiliate organizations. For fifty long years you have worked assiduously to improve the social and economic conditions of Negro citizens through interracial teamwork. Under the dedicated leadership of Lester B. Granger your purposes have always been noble and your work has always been creatively meaningful. One day all of America will take pride in your achievements. Now as you face the unfolding sixties with the problems of urban dislocation mounting on every hand, your work will be even more necessary. It is my hope and prayer that all people of goodwill will join and support you as you face the difficult, yet challenging days ahead.

I have been asked to speak this evening from the subject “The Rising Tide of Racial Consciousness.” While I feel that a social scientist would be much more competent to interpret the emotions, the economics and the politics that have pro-

1. An abridged version of this address was later published in the December 1960 issue of the *YWCA Magazine*.

2. “King Stirs Urban League N.Y. Meet,” *Atlanta Inquirer*, 14 September 1960. Following the event King thanked Lester Granger, who served as executive director of the National Urban League from 1941 until 1961, for arranging the speech. King also apologized for inadvertently disclosing to a reporter that the Urban League intended to give him a \$500 honorarium for his appearance, despite the organization’s policy against contributing to other civil rights causes (King to Granger, 28 September 1960, and Trezzvant W. Anderson, “The Truth about Earnings of Dr. Martin Luther King,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, 18 June 1960). Granger reassured King that he was not “upset” over the statement and explained that “while our honorarium did violate the spirit of our organization’s policy, it did not violate the letter—for we have a right to determine our honoraria.” Granger further conveyed that he was “glad that the incident happened” because “it gave me a chance to get a letter from you which I treasure very much” (Granger to King, 30 September 1960).

6 Sept
1960

duced the tide of racial pride and self-consciousness sweeping through the Negro group, I will seek to bring my limited insights to bare on this important theme.

We are all familiar with the historical circumstances and the psychological conditions that gave many Negroes a sense of inferiority. From 1619 through 1862 the Negro was forced to live through the long night of slavery. He was little more than a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine. After slavery ended the Negro found himself shackled with the cruel chains of segregation. Living with these conditions many Negroes lost faith in themselves and came to feel that perhaps they were less than human. But as the years unfolded something happened to the Negro. He began to look at himself in a new light. He came to feel a new sense of "somebodiness."

What are the factors that have led to this new sense of dignity and self-respect on the part of the Negro?

First, we must mention the population shift from rural to urban life. For many years the vast majority of Negroes were isolated on the rural plantation. They had very little contact with the world outside their geographical boundaries. But gradually circumstances made it possible and necessary for them to migrate to new and larger centers—the spread of the automobile, the great depression, and the social upheavals of the two world wars. These new contacts led to a broadened outlook. These new levels of communication brought new and different attitudes.

A second factor that has caused the Negroes' new self consciousness has been his rapid educational advance. Over the years there has been a steady decline of crippling illiteracy. At emancipation only five percent of the Negroes were literate. Today more than ninety-five percent are literate. Constant streams of Negro students are finishing colleges and universities every year. More than sixteen hundred Negroes have received the highest academic degree bestowed by an American university. These educational advances have naturally broadened his thinking. They have given the Negro not only a larger view of the world, but also a larger view of himself.

A third factor that produced the new sense of pride in the Negro was the gradual improvement of his economic status. While the Negro is still the victim of tragic economic exploitation, significant strides have been made. The annual collective income of the Negro is now approximately 18 billion dollars, which is more than the national income of Canada and all of the exports of the United States. This augmented purchasing power has been reflected in more adequate housing, improved medical care and greater educational opportunities. As these changes have taken place they have driven the Negro to change his image of himself.

A fourth factor that brought about the new sense of pride in the Negro was the Supreme Court's decision outlawing segregation in the public schools. For all men of goodwill May 17, 1954, came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of enforced segregation. In simple, eloquent and unequivocal language the court affirmed that "separate but equal" facilities are inherently unequal, and that to segregate a child on the basis of his race is to deny that child equal protection of the law. This decision brought hope to millions of disinherited Negroes who had formerly dared only to dream of freedom. Like an exit sign that suddenly appeared to one who had walked through a long and desolate corridor, this decision came as a way out of the darkness of segregation. It served to transform the fatigue of despair into the bouyancy of hope. It further enhanced the Negro's sense of dignity.

6 Sept
1960

A fifth factor that has accounted for the new sense of dignity on the part of the Negro has been the awareness that his struggle for freedom is a part of a world wide struggle. He has watched developments in Asia and Africa with rapt attention. On these vast prodigious continents dwell two-thirds of the world's people. For years they were exploited economically, dominated politically, segregated and humiliated by foreign powers. But there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. So the wind of change began blowing in Asia and Africa—and what a mighty wind it is! Fourteen years ago the British Empire had under her domination more than six hundred million people in Asia and Africa. But that number will be reduced to less than forty million (40,000,000) after Nigeria receives her independence a few days from now.³ Thirty years ago there were only three independent countries in the whole of Africa—Liberia, Ethiopia and South Africa. By 1962 there may be as many as thirty independent nations in Africa. These rapid changes have naturally influenced the thinking of the American Negro. He knows that his struggle for human dignity is not an isolated event. It is a drama being played on the stage of the world with spectators and supporters from every continent.

These are the factors which have conjoined to cause the Negro to take a new look at himself. He has come to feel that he is somebody. He is no longer ashamed of the color of his skin or the texture of his hair. He has come to see the meaning of the words of the eloquent poet:

Fleecy locks and black complexion
Cannot forfeit nature's claim
Skin may differ, but affection
Dwells in black and white the same.
And were I so tall as to reach the pole
Or to grasp the ocean at a span
I must be measured by my soul,
The mind is the standard of the man.⁴

This growing self-respect has inspired the Negro with a new determination to struggle and sacrifice until first-class citizenship becomes a reality. This is at bottom the meaning of what is happening in the South today. Whether it is manifested in nine brave children of Little Rock walking through jeering and hostile mobs, or 50,000 people of Montgomery, Alabama, substituting tired feet for tired souls and walking the streets of that city for 381 days, or thousands of courageous students electrifying the nation by quietly and non-violently sitting at lunch counters that have been closed to them because of the color of their skin, the motivation is always the same—the Negro would rather suffer in dignity than accept segregation in humiliation.

This new determination on the part of the Negro has not been welcomed by

3. Nigeria gained its independence on 1 October 1960; the following month, King attended the inauguration of Nnamdi Azikiwe, Nigeria's governor-general and commander-in-chief (see Azikiwe to King, 26 October 1960, pp. 533–534 in this volume).

4. The first four lines are quoted from "The Negro's Complaint" (1788) by William Cowper, and the remaining lines are quoted from *Horae Lyricae*, "False Greatness" (1706) by Isaac Watts.

6 Sept
1960

some segments of the nation's population. In some instances it has collided with tenacious and determined resistance. This resistance has risen at times to ominous proportions. A few states have reacted in open defiance. The legislative halls of the South ring loud with such words as "interposition" and "nullification." Many public officials are going to the absurd and fanatical extreme of closing the schools rather than to comply with the law of the land.

This resistance to the Negroes' aspirations expresses itself in the resurgence of the ku klux klan and the birth of white citizens councils. Both of these organizations are determined to preserve segregation at any cost. Members of the klan often publicly admit that they will use violence if necessary to block integration. Many of the bombings of homes, schools, churches and synagogues can be traced directly to the klan's activities. The citizens councils often argue piously that they abhor violence, but their defiance of the law and their vitriolic public pronouncements inevitably create the atmosphere in which violence thrives.

The fact is that many of these men are desperate men, they are fanatical men willing to go to any extreme to obtain their ends. Under the proud banner of white supremacy, they have proved that they will murder little children, deprive men and women of meat and bread, and initiate a reign of terror reminiscent of the gestapo practices of Adolph Hitler. They are the high priests of the false religion of racism. They would baptize their converts in the polluted waters of hate and serve them the poisonous wine of defiance.

The resistance to the Negroes' aspirations does not only express itself in obvious method of defiance, but in the subtle and skillful method of truth distortion. In an attempt to influence the minds of northern and southern liberals, the segregationists will cleverly disseminate half truths. Instead of arguing for the validity of segregation and racial inferiority on the basis of the Bible, they set their arguments on cultural and sociological grounds. The Negro is not ready for integration, they say; because of academic and cultural lags on the part of the Negro, the integration of schools will pull the white race down. They are never honest enough to admit that the academic and cultural lags in the Negro community are themselves the result of segregation and discrimination. The best way to solve any problem is to remove the cause. It is both rationally unsound and sociologically untenable to use the tragic effects of segregation as an argument for its continuation.

All of these calculated patterns—the defiance of southern legislative bodies, the activities of white supremacy organizations, and the distortions and rationalizations of the segregationists—have mounted up to massive resistance. This resistance grows out of the desperate attempt of the white south to perpetuate a system of human values that came into being under a feudalistic plantation system and which cannot survive in a day of growing urbanization and industrial expansion.

The great challenge facing the nation today is to solve this pressing problem and bring into full realization the ideals and dreams of our democracy. How we deal with this crucial situation will determine our political health as a nation and our prestige as a leader of the free world. The price that America must pay for the continued oppression of the Negro is the price of its own destruction. The hour is late; the clock of destiny is ticking out. We must act now! It is a trite yet urgently

6 Sept
1960

true observation that if America is to remain a first-class nation, it cannot have second-class citizens.

But after saying this I would like to make it clear that our 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 our 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. Racial discrimination substitutes an "I-it" relationship for the "I-thou" relationship.⁵ It relegates persons to the status of things. Whenever racial discrimination exists it is a tragic expression of man's spiritual degeneracy and moral bankruptcy. Therefore, it must be removed not merely because it is diplomatically expedient, but because it is morally compelling.

Given this appraisal of the situation, what can be done?

Of course there is need for strong and aggressive leadership from the Federal Government. So far only the judicial branch of our government has rendered strong leadership. The executive and legislative branches have all too often been engaged in a conspiracy of silence and apathy. There must be a determined effort to arouse our government out of this apathetic slumber. In the past apathy was a moral failure. Today, it is a form of moral and political suicide.

I must make it palpably clear that the dearth of positive leadership from Washington is not confined to one political party. The fact is that both major parties have been hypocritical on the question of civil rights. Each of them has been willing to follow the long pattern of using the Negro as a political football.

It is noteworthy that both political parties have emerged with the strongest civil rights platforms in their history. They have signed huge promissory notes. But we must not be content with empty promises. We know that platforms in the past have too often been used to get elected on and not to stand on. We must demand implementation. We must make it clear that neither political party can deliver its platform promises alone. The job can only be done through a sincere determined bi-partisan effort. Both parties missed a marvelous opportunity to demonstrate their good faith on the civil rights issue by failing to pass desperately needed civil rights legislation in the post convention session of Congress.⁶ Here we saw a vivid example of the same old game of hypocrisy, immoral compromises, and political chicanery. The fact remains, however, that the issue of racial injustice cannot be successfully evaded nor will it disappear with double-talk.

Another group with a vital role to play in the struggle for racial justice and equality is the white northern liberals. The racial issue that we confront in America is not a sectional but a national problem. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice

5. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1937).

6. In an address two weeks earlier in Louisville, Kentucky, King had also criticized the Democratic and Republican parties: "Already the democratic majority in the senate has made a tragic blunder by allowing civil rights legislation to be tabled. I submit that if the democratic party [~~strikeout illegible~~] emerges from this session of Congress without supporting new civil rights legislation, merely to appease the southern Dixiecrats, it may well be committing political suicide where the negro vote is concerned" (King, Excerpts, Address at Jefferson County Armory, 23 August 1960).

6 Sept
1960

everywhere. Therefore, no American can afford to be apathetic about the problem of racial justice. It is a problem that meets every man at his front door.

There is a pressing need for a liberalism in the North which is truly liberal, a liberalism that firmly believes in integration in its own community as well as in the deep South. There is need for the type of liberal who not only rises up with righteous indignation when a Negro is lynched in Mississippi, but will be equally incensed when a Negro is denied the right to live in his neighborhood, or join his professional association, or secure a top position in his business. This is no day to pay mere lip service to integration, we must pay life service to it.

There are several other agencies and groups that have significant roles to play in this all important period of our nation's history. Time will not permit me to discuss them at this point. Suffice it to say that the problem of racial injustice is so weighty in detail and broad in extent that it requires the concerted efforts of numerous individuals and institutions to bring about a solution.

In the final analysis if first-class citizenship is to become a reality for the Negro he must assume the primary responsibility for making it so. The Negro must not be victimized with the delusion of thinking that others should be more concerned than himself about his citizenship rights. Neither the white liberal nor the federal government will pass out the Negroes' rights on a silver platter.

In this period of social change the Negro must work on two fronts. On the one hand we must continue to break down the barrier of segregation. We must resist all forms of racial injustice. This resistance must always be on the highest level of dignity and discipline. It must never degenerate to the crippling level of violence. There is another way—a way as old as the insights of Jesus of Nazareth and as modern as the methods of Mahatma Gandhi. It is a way not for the weak and cowardly but for the strong and courageous. It has been variously called passive resistance, non-violent resistance or simply Christian love. It is my great hope that as the Negro plunges deeper into the quest for freedom, he will plunge deeper into the philosophy of non-violence. As a race we must work passionately and unrelentingly for first-class citizenship, but we must never use second class methods to gain it. Our aim must not be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must never become bitter nor should we succumb to the temptation of using violence in the struggle, for if this happens, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness and our chief legacy to the future will be an endless reign of meaningless chaos.

I feel that this way of non-violence is vital because it is the only way to reestablish the broken community. It is the method which seeks to implement the just law by appealing to the conscience of the great decent majority who through blindness, fear, pride or irrationality have allowed their consciences to sleep.

The non-violent resisters can summarize their message in the following simple terms: we will take direct action against injustice without waiting for other agencies to act. We will not obey unjust laws or submit to unjust practices. We will do this peacefully, openly and cheerfully because our aim is to persuade. We adopt the means of non-violence because our end is a community at peace with itself. We will try to persuade with our words, but if our words fail, we will try to persuade with our acts. We will always be willing to talk and seek fair compromise, but we are ready to suffer when necessary and even risk our lives to become witnesses to the truth as we see it.

6 Sept
1960

I realize that this approach will mean suffering and sacrifice. It may mean going to jail. If such is the case the resistor must be willing to fill the jail houses of the South. It may even mean physical death. But if physical death is the price that a man must pay to free his children and his white brethren from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing could be more redemptive. This is the type of soul force that I am convinced will triumph over the physical force of the oppressor.

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 weapons of truth, non-injury, 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 our nation. For the last few months they have moved in a uniquely meaningful orbit imparting light and heat to distant satellites. Through their non-violent 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.

Now that I have discussed the need for the Negro to work courageously to remove the barriers of segregation, let me mention another front on which he must work that is equally significant. The Negro must make a vigorous effort to improve his personal standards. I know that this is one of those matters that we often hesitate to mention publicly for fear that it will serve to aid and abet the enemy in his mad quest to convince the nation that the Negro is neither ready for nor capable of facing the responsibilities of integration. The only answer that we can give to those who through blindness and fear would question our readiness and capability is that our lagging standards exist because of the legacy of slavery and segregation, inferior schools, slums, and second-class citizenship, and not because of an inherent inferiority. As I said earlier, there is no more torturous logic than to take the tragic effects of segregation and use them as an argument for the need of its continuation. The fact that so many Negroes have made lasting and significant contributions to the cultural life of America in spite of these crippling restrictions is sufficient to refute all of the myths and half truths disseminated by the segregationist.

Yet we cannot ignore the fact that our standards do often fall short. Therefore I take the bold risk of being misquoted by the enemy in order to lay before you a fact that we must honestly face. One of the sure signs of maturity is the ability to rise to the point of self criticism. Whenever we are objects of criticism from white men, even though the criticisms are maliciously directed and mixed with half truths, we must pick out the elements of truth and make them the basis of creative reconstruction.

Let us face it. We have been affected by our years of economic deprivation and social isolation. Some Negroes have become cynical and disillusioned. Some have so conditioned themselves to the system of segregation that they have lost that cre-

6 Sept
1960

ative something called initiative. So many have used their oppression as an excuse for mediocrity. Many of us live above our means, spend money on non-essentials and frivolities, and fail to give to serious causes, organizations, and educational institutions that so desperately need funds. Our crime rate is far too high.

Therefore there is a pressing need for the Negro to develop a positive program through which these standards can be improved. After we have analyzed the sociological and psychological causes of these problems, we must seek to develop a constructive action program to solve them. By improving our standards here and now we will go a long way toward breaking down the arguments of the segregationist.

We must constantly stimulate our youth to rise above the stagnant level of mediocrity, and seek to achieve excellence in their various fields of endeavor. Doors are opening now that were not open in the past, and the great challenge facing minority groups is to be ready to enter these doors as they open. No greater tragedy could befall us at this hour but that of allowing new opportunities to emerge without the concomitant preparedness to meet them. Ralph Waldo Emerson said in a lecture back in 1871 that "if a man can write a better book, or preach a better sermon, or make a better mousetrap than his neighbor, even if he builds his house in the woods the world will make a beaten path to his door."⁷ This has not always been true. But I have reason to believe that because of the shape of the world today and the fact that we cannot afford the luxury of an anemic democracy, this affirmation will become increasingly true. We must make it clear to our young people that this is an age in which they will be forced to compete with people of all races and nationalities. We cannot aim merely to be good Negro teachers, good Negro doctors, or good Negro skilled laborers. We must set out to do a good job irrespective of race. We must seek to do our life's work so well that nobody could do it better. The Negro who seeks to be merely a good Negro, whatever he is, has already flunked his matriculation examination for entrance into the university of integration.⁸

This is the challenge of the hour. It seems to me that in this two-fold job ahead we see the role of an organization like the Urban League and that of the more militant civil rights organizations like the NAACP, CORE and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Just as there must be a division of labor in organizational work. It appears to me that there is no organization more uniquely equipped in structure, technical know how and program than the Urban League to carry out this all important job of helping the Negro adjust to urban living and improve his general standards. Naturally, this job will call for imaginative, bold and constructive action. It will call for thorough community organization. As the problem of urban dislocation becomes more critical the Urban League must intensify its program, and justifiably expect new and larger financial support.

While the Urban League works creatively and constructively on this front, the more militant civil rights organizations must continue the frontal attack on the

7. The source of this quotation, generally attributed to Emerson, is uncertain (see note 6 to "Mother's Day in Montgomery," 18 May 1956, in *Papers* 3:266).

8. In an earlier speech, King attributed this advice to Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays. For the entire quote, see King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," 1 January 1957, in *Papers* 4:79.

6 Sept
1960

system of segregation. Although there will be some inevitable overlapping, there need be no essential conflict. The NAACP'er must not look upon the Urban Leaguer as a quiet conservative and the Urban Leaguer must not look upon the NAACP'er as a militant troublemaker. Each must accept the other as a necessary partner in the complex yet exciting struggle to free the Negro, and thereby save the soul of America.

In thinking of this two-fold task ahead, I would like to again suggest the role of the Federal government. This is based on some recent insights that I gained while traveling in India. I discovered that the Indian government had made much more progress in eliminating caste untouchability than we have made in eliminating segregation. This is because the national government of India has worked vigorously on two fronts. First the government set forth a constitutional provision making untouchability illegal. To discriminate against an untouchable is a crime punishable by imprisonment. But the government does not stop here. It carries on an active program of education and propaganda to get these ideas over. Moreover, the government spends millions of dollars a year in scholarships, housing, and community development to lift the standards of the untouchables. This is the government's way of atoning for the long years of demoralization inflicted upon these people by the system of untouchability.

So when our government takes this matter seriously it will continue to use its constitutional authority to end the system of segregation. But it will go beyond this. Through the Department of Health, Welfare and Education it will carry on an active program of propaganda to promote the idea of integration. Moreover the government should seriously consider making federal funds available to do this tremendous job of lifting the standards of a people too long ignored by America's conscience.

This then must be our present program; non-violent resistance to all forms of racial injustice, even when this means going to jail; and bold, constructive action to end the demoralization caused by the legacy of slavery and segregation. The non-violent struggle, if conducted with the dignity and courage already shown by the sit-in students of the South, will in itself help end the demoralization; but a new frontal assault on the poverty, disease, and ignorance of a people too long deprived of the God-given rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, will make the victory more certain.

We must work assiduously and with determined boldness to remove from the body politic this cancerous disease of discrimination which is preventing our democratic and Christian health from being realized. Then and only then will we be able to bring into full realization the dream of our American democracy—a dream yet unfulfilled. A dream of equality of opportunity, of privilege and property widely distributed; a dream of a land where men will not take necessities from the many to give luxuries to the few; a dream of a land where men do not argue that the color of a man's skin determines the content of his character, where they recognize that the basic thing about a man is not his specific but his fundamentum; a dream of a place where all our gifts and resources are held not for ourselves alone but as instruments of service for the rest of humanity; the dream of a country where every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, and men will dare to live together as brothers—that is the dream. Whenever it is fulfilled we will emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man

507

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Papers Project

25 Sept
1960

into the bright and glowing daybreak of freedom and ~~in~~justice for all of God's children.

THD. UAWRCR-NNU-LA.