

Remarks of Dr. Martin Luther King

Thursday, September 17, 1959

From the Hawaii House of Representatives, 1959 First Special Session, House Journal – Fifteenth Day

The Speaker here announced the presence of Dr. Martin Luther King and appointed Representatives Gill, Devereux and Lanham to escort Dr. King to the rostrum.

Dr. Martin Luther King addressed the members of the House as Follows:

“Mr. Speaker, distinguished members of the House of Representatives of this great new state in our Union, ladies and gentlemen:

It is certainly a delightful privilege and pleasure for me to have this great opportunity and, I shall say, it is a great honor to come before you today and to have the privilege of saying just a few words to you about some of the pressing problems confronting our nation and our world.

I come to you with a great deal of appreciation and great feeling of appreciation, I should say, for what has been accomplished in this beautiful setting and in this beautiful state of our Union. As I think of the struggle that we are engaged in in the South land, we look to you for inspiration and as a noble example, where you have already accomplished in the area of racial harmony and racial justice, what we are struggling to accomplish in other sections of the country, and you can never know what it means to those of us caught for the moment in the tragic and often dark midnight of man’s inhumanity to man, to come to a place where we see the glowing daybreak of freedom and dignity and racial justice.

People ask me from time to time as I travel across the country and over the world whether there has been any real progress in the area of race relations, and I always answer it by saying that there are three basic attitudes that one can take toward the question of progress in the area of race relations. One can take the attitude of extreme optimism. The extreme optimist would contend that we have come a long, long way in the area of race relations, and he would point proudly to the strides that have been made in the area of civil rights in the last few decades. And, from this, he would conclude that the problem is just about solved now and that we can sit down comfortably by the wayside and wait on the coming of the inevitable.

And then there is the extreme, the attitude of extreme pessimism, that we often find. The extreme pessimist would contend that we have made only minor strides in the area of human relations. He would contend that we have created many more problems than we have solved. He would look around and see the tensions in certain sections of the country; he would listen to the rhythmic beat of the deep rumblings of discontent; he would point to the presence of Federal troops in Little Rock, Arkansas; he would point to schools being closed in some states of the Union and from all of this, he would conclude that we have retrogressed instead of progressed. And then he would go on later and contend that a monster human nature cannot be changed. Sometimes he will turn to the realm of theology and talk about the tragic taint of original sin hovering over every individual, or he might turn to psychology and talk about the inflexibility of certain habit structures once they have been molded and from all of this, he would conclude that there can be no progress in the area of human relations because human beings cannot be changed once they have started on a certain road.

Now, it is interesting to notice that the extreme optimist and the extreme pessimist have at least one thing in common. They both agree that we must sit down and do nothing in the area of race relations. The extreme optimist says do nothing because integration is inevitable. The extreme pessimist says do nothing because integration is impossible. But I think there is a third position, a third attitude that can be taken, namely the realistic position. The realistic attitude seeks to reconcile the truths of two opposites while avoiding the extremes of both. So the realist in the area of race relations would agree with the optimist that we have come a long, long way, but he would balance that by agreeing with the pessimist that we have a long, long way to go. And so this is my answer to the questions of whether there has been any progress in the area of race relations. I seek to be realistic and say we have a long, long way to go.

Now, it is easy for us to see that we have come a long, long way. Twenty-five years ago, fifty years ago, a year hardly passed that numerous Negroes were not brutally lynched in our nation by vicious mobs. Lynchings have about ceased today. We think about the fact that just twenty-five years ago, most of the Southern states had a system known as a poll tax to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters. The poll tax has been eliminated in all but four states. We think about the fact that the Negro is voting now more than he has ever voted before. At the turn of the century, there were very few Negro registered voters in the South. By 1948 that number had reached to 750,000, and, today, it stands at about 1,300,000.

And even in the area of economic justice, we have seen a good deal of progress. The average Negro wage earner in the South today and over the nation makes four times more than the average Negro wage earner of ten years ago and the national income of the Negro is now \$17 billion a year. That is

more than all of the exports of the United States and more than the national income of Canada. So, we've come a long, long way.

Then we've come a long, long way in seeing the walls of segregation gradually crumble. When the Supreme Court rendered its decision in 1954, seventeen states and the District of Columbia practiced segregation in the public schools, but, today, most of these states have complied with the decision and just five states are left that have not made any move in the area of compliance and two of these states are now under orders to integrate – Atlanta, Georgia and New Orleans, Louisiana. So after next September, that will only leave Mississippi, Alabama and South Carolina as the states that have not complied with the Supreme Court's decision.

So, you can see that we have come a long, long way. But before stopping –it would be wonderful if I could stop here – but I must move on for two or three more minutes and say that there is another sign.

You see, it would be a fact for me to say we have come a long, long way, but it wouldn't be telling the truth. A fact is the absence of contradiction, but truth is the presence of coherence. Truth is the relatedness of facts. Now, it is a fact that we have come a long, long way, but in order to tell the truth, it is necessary to move on and say we have a long, long way to go. If we stop here, we would be the victims of a dangerous optimism. We would be victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality. So, in order to tell the truth, it's necessary to move on and say we have a long, long way to go.

Now, it is not difficult to see that. We know that the forces of resistance are rising at times to ominous proportions in the South. The legislative halls of many of our states ring loud with such words as 'interposition' and 'nullification.' While lynchings have ceased to a great extent, other things are happening. Churches are being bombed, homes are being bombed, schools are being bombed, synagogues are being bombed by forces that are determined to stand against the law of the land.

And although the Negro is voting more than ever before, we know that there are still conniving forces being used to keep the Negro from being a registered voter. Out of the potential 5,000,000 Negro registered voters in the South, we only have 1,300,000. This means that we have a long, long way to go in order to make justice a reality there in the registration of voting. And although we have come a long, long way in the economic realm, we have a long, long way to there in order to make economic justice a reality.

And then segregation is still with us. Although we have seen the walls gradually crumble, it is still with us. I imply that figuratively speaking, that Old Man Segregation is on his death bed, but you know history has proven that social systems have a great last-minute breathing power, and the guardians of the status quo are always on hand with their oxygen tents to keep the old order alive, and this is exactly what we see today. So segregation is still with us. We are confronted in the South in its glaring and conspicuous forms, and we are confronted in almost every other section of the nation in its hidden and subtle forms. But if democracy is to live, segregation must die. Segregation is a cancer in the body politic which must be removed before our democratic health can be realized. In a real sense, the shape of the world today does not permit us the luxury of an anemic democracy. If we are to survive, if we are to stand as a force in the world, if we are to maintain our prestige, we must solve this problem because people are looking over to America.

Just two years ago I traveled all over Africa and talked with leaders from that great continent. One of the things they said to me was this: No amount of extensive handouts and beautiful words would be substitutes for treating our brothers in the United States as first-class citizens and human beings. This came to me from mouth of Prime Minister Nkrumah of Ghana.

Just four months ago, I traveled throughout India and the Middle East and talked with many of the people and leaders of that great country and other people in the Middle East, and these are the things they talked about: That we must solve this problem if we are to stand and to maintain our prestige. And I can remember very vividly meeting people all over Europe and in the Middle East and in the Far East, and even though many of them could not speak English, they knew how to say 'Little Rock.'

And these are the things that we must be concerned about – we must be concerned about because we love America and we are out to free not only the Negro. This is not our struggle today to free 17,000,000 Negroes. It's bigger than that. We are seeking to free the soul of America. Segregation debilitates the white man as well as the Negro. We are to free all men, all races and all groups. This is our responsibility and this is our challenge, and we look to this great new state in our Union as the example and as the inspiration. As we move on in this realm, let us move on with the faith that this problem can be solved, and that it will be solved, believing firmly that all reality hinges on moral foundations, and we are struggling for what is right, and we are destined to win.

We have come a long, long way. We have a long, long way to go. I close, if you will permit me, by quoting the words of an old Negro slave preacher. He didn't quite have his grammar right, but he uttered some words in the form of a prayer with great symbolic profundity and these are the words

he said: 'Lord, we ain't what we want to be; we ain't what we ought to be; we ain't what we gonna be, but thank God, we ain't what we was.' Thank you."

At the conclusion of his address, there was much applause.