

Martin Luther King Jr. (1929-1968)

"I Have a Dream" Speech

given on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the demonstration "March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom" on August 28th, 1963

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.

Five score¹ years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation². This momentous decree³ came as a great beacon light⁴ of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared⁵ in the flames of withering⁶ injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later the Negro⁷ still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles⁸ of segregation⁹ and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished¹⁰ in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. 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, they were signing a promissory note¹¹ 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 unalienable¹² rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit¹³ of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on¹⁴ 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." But we refuse to believe that the bank of justice is bankrupt. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults¹⁵ of opportunity of this nation. So we've come to cash this check -- a check that will give us upon demand the riches of freedom and the security of justice. We have also come to this hallowed spot¹⁶ to remind America of the fierce¹⁷ urgency of now. This is no time to engage¹⁸ in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing¹⁹ drug of gradualism²⁰. Now is the time to make real the promises of Democracy. 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 to lift our nation from the quicksands²¹ of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice the reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering²² summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating²³ autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen 1963 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. 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 emerges²⁴.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold²⁵ 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. 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. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy²⁶ which has engulfed²⁷ 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 today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with our destiny and they have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably²⁸ bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge²⁹ that we shall always march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees³⁰ of civil rights, "when will you be satisfied?" We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality. We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue³¹ of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities. We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their self-hood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating: 'For whites only.' 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. No, no we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness³² like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations³³. Some of you have come

50 fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest³⁴ for freedom left you battered³⁵ by the storms of persecution and staggered³⁶ by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive³⁷.

Go back to Mississippi, 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, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed. Let
55 us not wallow³⁸ in the valley of despair.

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed³⁹: “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.”

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

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering⁴⁰ with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of
65 their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification⁴¹, one day right there 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.

70 I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted⁴², and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked⁴³ places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew⁴⁴ out of the
75 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. 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.

This will be the day when all of God’s children will be able to sing with new meaning

“My country ’tis of thee,

80 sweet land of liberty,

of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died,

land of the pilgrim’s pride,

from every mountainside,

85 let freedom ring.”

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious⁴⁵ hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania! Let freedom ring from the snow-capped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom
90 ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee. Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring, and when this happens, when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet⁴⁶, from every state and every city, 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, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, “Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!”
(1670 words)

Quelle: Folkways Records Album No. FD 5592. New York: Folkways Records & Service Corp 1964.

¹score 20 – ²Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 president Abraham Lincoln declares the freedom of all American slaves –

³momentous decree meaningful judgment – ⁴beacon light revolving signal light – ⁵seared dried up – ⁶withering here: destroying

– ⁷**Negro** The term "Negro" referring to people with a dark skin color was accepted as normal until the late 1960s. Later the word "Negro" was considered offensive so that it was replaced by the term "Black", which is still used today. – ⁸**manacle** tie, chain – ⁹**segregation** apartheid, racial separation – ¹⁰**(to) languish** (to) fail to improve, develop or become successful – ¹¹**promissory note** a document promising to pay money before a particular date – ¹²**unalienable** that cannot be taken away – ¹³**pursuit of** quest, search for – ¹⁴**(to) default on** (to) fail to pay – ¹⁵**vault** safe, strongroom – ¹⁶**hallowed spot** holy place – ¹⁷**fierce** here: great – ¹⁸**(to) engage** (to) be busy, deal with – ¹⁹**(to) tranquilize** (to) calm down – ²⁰**gradual** taking place by a series of small changes over a long period of time – ²¹**quicksand** loose wet deep sand into which people or things will sink – ²²**sweltering** uncomfortably hot – ²³**to invigorate** (to) vitalize, strengthen – ²⁴**(to) emerge** (to) arise, appear – ²⁵**threshold** doorstep – ²⁶**militancy** fighting spirit – ²⁷**(to) engulf** (to) envelop – ²⁸**inextricably** so closely linked that separation is impossible – ²⁹**pledge** guarantee – ³⁰**devotee** follower – ³¹**fatigue** great tiredness – ³²**righteousness** motivation of doing what is morally right – ³³**trials and tribulations** problems and worries – ³⁴**quest** search – ³⁵**battered** here: damaged – ³⁶**staggered** here: shocked – ³⁷**redemptive** liberating – ³⁸**(to) wallow** here: (to) take pleasure, enjoy – ³⁹**creed** believe – ⁴⁰**(to) swelter** (to) sweat – ⁴¹**interposition and nullification** intervention and abolishment – ⁴²**(to) exalt** (to) raise, increase – ⁴³**crooked** curved, bent – ⁴⁴**(to) hew** (to) make sth. by chopping or cutting – ⁴⁵**prodigious** wonderful – ⁴⁶**hamlet** rural settlement

Aufgaben

1. Outline Reverend King's views on racial equality in the USA.
2. Analyse the rhetorical devices that Reverend King uses to make his speech more powerful and convincing.
3. Comment on today's situation of blacks in the USA regarding equal rights and opportunities. You may consider fields like education, sports, politics, management, film industry and others.