

## An Unfinished Dream

'Give us the ballot,' Martin Luther King Jr. said in his first Lincoln Memorial speech. That was just the start.

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Very few people remember the first speech that Martin Luther King Jr. gave from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. It wasn't "I Have a Dream," and it took place more than six years before the famous 1963 March on Washington.

The date was May 17, 1957—three years to the day since the United States Supreme Court had held racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional in the landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. King and his civil-rights-movement colleagues wanted to use the *Brown* anniversary to bring the broader goals of the Southern black freedom struggle to the attention of the nation's political leaders.

Hardly five months had passed since the triumphal end of the Montgomery bus boycott when the federal courts' extension of *Brown* from schools to seating practices on municipal buses had vindicated a yearlong struggle by the black citizenry of the Alabama city that a century earlier had been the Confederacy's capital. Twenty-six-year-old Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., pastor of Montgomery's Dexter Avenue Baptist Church for hardly a year, had been elected president of the protest effort following the arrest of Mrs. Rosa Parks, a respected civic activist, for refusing to surrender her bus seat to a white man. The black community withdrew its patronage from the city buses en masse, and when white officials refused to negotiate a compromise in segregation's strictures, the black activists filed suit, leading to the Supreme Court order that extended *Brown* and sent black riders back to Montgomery's now integrated buses.

King and his advisers wanted to use Montgomery's fame and success to launch a crusade that would target far more than just public-seating practices. King was as committed to grounding the struggle in religious faith and the church as he was to confronting President Dwight D. Eisenhower's refusal to publicly endorse racial equality, so the May 17 Washington gathering called itself the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom while throwing down a gauntlet not far from the Oval Office's door.

But the title of King's first Lincoln Memorial speech reveals why now, in early 2009, it should be remembered rather than forgotten: "Give Us the Ballot." Calling the *Brown* decision "a great beacon light of hope to millions of disinherited people throughout the world," King decried white opposition to the ruling but quickly shifted his focus to the "conniving methods" that Southern officials were still using "to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters" all across the region. "So our most urgent request to the president of the United States and every member of Congress is to give us the right to vote."

Applause from the audience of some 20,000 people interrupted King's remarks, but he launched into a repeated clarion call for greater protection of Southern blacks' right to vote:

"Give us the ballot and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights ...

"Give us the ballot and we will no longer plead to the federal government for passage of an anti-lynching law ...

"Give us the ballot and we will fill our legislative halls with men of good will ...

"Give us the ballot and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will do justly and love mercy ...

"Give us the ballot and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's decision of May 17, 1954."

Voting rights would remain at the very top of the civil-rights agenda for the following eight years, until passage of the remarkably forceful Voting Rights Act of 1965, but King's aspirations for the movement ranged beyond legislative enactments. Federal officials, Northern white liberals, Southern white moderates and blacks themselves would all have to contribute to moving the struggle forward, King emphasized, but legal victories had to be welcomed with humility, not triumphalism. "We must respond to every decision with an understanding of those who have opposed us and with an appreciation of the difficult adjustments that the court orders pose for them.

"Each of us must keep faith in the future," King declared. "Let us realize that as we struggle for justice and freedom, we have cosmic companionship" and that "the universe is on our side ... Move on with dignity and honor and respectability ... Keep moving amid every obstacle."

The Prayer Pilgrimage occasioned no sudden change in the behavior of either the Eisenhower administration or Southern white segregationists, but the faith of which King spoke propelled the black freedom movement forward through the final years of the 1950s and into the far more eventful days of the early 1960s. The student sit-ins of 1960 gave way to the Freedom Rides of 1961 and the desegregation of Ole Miss in 1962, each step coming at the cost of some blood but adding further nails into segregation's coffin. Then in April and May of 1963 the black young people of Birmingham, Ala., stepping out well ahead of almost all their elders, led the civil-rights revolution into the streets and parks of one of the South's largest and most violently policed cities. "Bull" Connor's unforgettably graphic response—the snarling police dogs, the high-pressure fire hoses—placed the Southern struggle on the evening news and the nation's front pages day after day, elevating civil rights to the top of the national political agenda for the first time since the 1870s.

Then, from multiple voices deep within the movement came calls for a massive march on Washington. The primary thought was to lobby Congress on behalf of the impressively strong civil-rights bill that the Kennedy administration had tardily put forward immediately after Birmingham, but here once again the formal name of the gathering—the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom—reminds us of things now largely long forgotten. Passage of the civil-rights bill was many activists' uppermost goal, but the most savvy and experienced strategists wanted to marry the movement's desire for desegregation and legal equality to a far broader agenda advocating both black economic betterment—ergo "Jobs"—and the promise of tangible, substantive equality between the races.

That program was little publicized at the time, and the overwhelming public impact of King's "I Have a Dream" speech obscured it even further. The huge success of the march gave an ineffable boost to the civil-rights bill, which Lyndon Johnson steered to congressional passage the following year after his ascension to the presidency, but the March on Washington did indeed signify the beginning of a shift "from protest to politics" even if King's rhetorical triumph drew far more attention.

The one legal task that the Civil Rights Act of 1964 left undone for black Southerners was the toughest, to "give us the ballot," and before the end of 1964, King was mounting a carefully

targeted campaign that would propel Johnson and the Congress to surmount that hurdle too. The protest campaign in Selma, Ala., in February and March 1965 is now as famous as the 1963 events in Birmingham, and its direct legislative legacy, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, did indeed give the ballot to previously disenfranchised black citizens all across the South.

On one hand, the Voting Rights Act opened the door to the full inclusion of African-Americans as truly equal participants in U.S. politics. At first slowly, and then in a rush, its provisions led to an explosion in the number of black elected officials in the South, and soon city after city—Atlanta, New Orleans, even Birmingham and Selma—was presided over by black mayors. Numerous members of Congress and even a governor—Virginia's L. Douglas Wilder—followed in years to come.

But Selma and the Voting Rights Act marked an end as well as a beginning. King, appreciating how the 1964 and 1965 acts had ratified the movement's Southern legal agenda, turned his attention to the far more politically difficult and sometimes socially intractable issues that the economic part of the 1963 march's agenda had raised but not pursued. King shifted his focus from the Deep South to the ghettos of Chicago, but his attempts to spur the creation of "unions to end slums" foundered amidst urban despair and the biracial organizational muscle of Mayor Richard J. Daley's political machine.

Chicago's inner-city schools were not segregated by law, but the education they afforded disadvantaged black students was abysmal, just as the housing conditions and employment prospects their families confronted were often worse than black Alabamians or Mississippians experienced. King testified before Congress to urge enactment of a truly radical war on poverty, based upon a guaranteed annual income for all citizens, but the foreign mire of Vietnam gradually swallowed even the much more modest domestic promises of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Increasingly despondent, King began to talk regularly about how the "dream" he had had in Washington in 1963 was turning into a "nightmare" where black Americans were guaranteed full legal equality but possessed neither the educational opportunities nor the employment options to better either their lives or their children's.

King found the public opposition and disdain toward his new agenda deeply dispiriting. His newly outspoken opposition to the Vietnam War threatened to politically marginalize him even further, and by late 1967 King's growing political despair led him to call for a multiracial "Poor People's Campaign" that would descend upon Washington in the spring of 1968 in a manner radically different from the famous march less than five years earlier.

"We must fashion new tactics which do not count on government good will, but instead serve to compel unwilling authorities to yield to the mandates of justice," King told his aides. "Mass civil disobedience" was essential for "active, nonviolent resistance to the evils of the modern system ... Our economy must become more person-centered than property-centered and profit-centered." Announcing the campaign publicly, King warned that "waves of the nation's poor and disinherited" would arrive in Washington and stay "until some definite and positive action is taken to provide jobs and income for the poor."

King's new dream was far-reaching indeed, but in the initial weeks of 1968 his depression deepened as his staff seemed unable or unwilling to pull together the massive undertaking he envisioned. Some of his oldest and closest friends criticized his plan both to him and to the press, and by the time a ministerial colleague successfully pleaded with him to visit Memphis, Tenn., to boost the cause of black sanitation workers who were on strike because of the city's refusal to recognize their union or negotiate improvements in their dire working conditions,

King was almost happy for the distraction from a Washington game plan that was threatening to come unstitched at seemingly every possible corner.

Martin Luther King Jr. died with no more than one half of his dreams fulfilled. He died despairing of his inability to advance the seemingly distant achievement of his unfulfilled ones rather than celebrating the attainment of those he and his movement colleagues had seen realized between 1956 and 1965. The freedom struggle had made black legal equality a constitutional and legislative reality, but those victories in turn illuminated how much of black inequality in American life could not be remedied simply by the enforcement of statutory equality and true protection of Southern African-Americans' right to vote.

"Give us the ballot" now sounded like a call from an age long gone, but throughout the four decades following King's assassination, his 1966 demand for a guaranteed annual income seemed like a plea from a time that had barely existed and could never imaginably return.

King would certainly be overjoyed by Barack Obama's inauguration but we must avoid, and indeed reject, any careless claims that Obama's swearing in marks the fulfillment of King's dream. Yes, the landmark 1964 and 1965 acts that represent the civil-rights movement's legislative legacy have indeed provided full legal equality and political opportunity to black Americans, but those aspects of King's dream that in the latter years of his life reached far beyond "give us the ballot" remain mostly unrealized and largely forgotten. Neither Barack Obama nor any other mainstream electoral politician will give voice to those radical precepts in the world of 2009, and we should never be so naive as to expect even an African-American president to do so. President Obama's achievements and failures must be evaluated by comparison to those chief executives who have come before him, and not be measured against the prophetically moral voice of Martin Luther King Jr.

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