

1963

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.'S "I HAVE A DREAM"

On August 28, 1963, more than 250,000 people participated in the March on Washington in support of civil rights.

The demonstrators gathered near the Lincoln Memorial, where Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. His address is remembered as one of the most powerful and effective speeches of modern times. An excerpt appears here.

Five score¹ years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree² came as a great beacon³ light to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared⁴ in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous day-break to end the long night of captivity.

But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles⁵ of segregation and the chains of discrimination. . . .

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 note⁶ to which every American was to fall heir.⁷ This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the unalienable⁸ rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted⁹ on 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. . . .

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold¹⁰ 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 degenerate¹¹ into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. . . .

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment 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 creed:¹² "We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal."

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 desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression,¹³ 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 their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day the state of Alabama, whose governor's lips are presently dripping with the words of interposition¹⁴ and nullification,¹⁵ will be transformed into a situation where little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls and walk together as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted,¹⁶ every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked 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 with which I return to the South. With this faith we will be able to hew¹⁷ out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords¹⁸ of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. . . .

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning, "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrims' pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious¹⁹ 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 snowcapped Rockies of Colorado! Let freedom ring from the curvaceous peaks of California! But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia! Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!



Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet,²⁰ 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,²¹ 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!"

Understanding Primary Sources

1. What did Martin Luther King Jr. mean when he said that the United States had given African Americans a "bad check"?
2. What did King caution African Americans against in their fight for freedom?

Five score: 100	8 unalienable: permanent	16 exalted: glorified
decree: important order	9 defaulted: failed to pay	17 hew: carve
beacon: light of hope	10 threshold: entrance	18 discords: disagreements; moments of disharmony
seared: burned	11 degenerate: fall	19 prodigious: vast
manacles: handcuffs	12 creed: formal statement	20 hamlet: community
promissory note: note promising to pay	13 oppression: persecution	21 Gentiles: non-Jews
to fall heir: inherit	14 interposition: interference	
	15 nullification: refusal	