

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Address to the 1964 National Baptist Convention

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Not all African American leaders interested in advancing the cause of African Americans approved of Martin Luther King Jr.'s strategies of direct action and civil disobedience. A highly prominent example, now almost forgotten, was the Reverend Joseph H. Jackson (1905?–90). Jackson rose from the hardship of his early life in Mississippi to become pastor of the historic Olivet Baptist Church in Chicago, and eventually served as president of the National Baptist Convention from 1953–82, longer than any one before or since. Jackson had supported King (including financially) during the Montgomery Bus Boycott, but the two men fell out over Baptist Convention politics; and Jackson fully separated himself from King once King's nonviolent resistance embraced also civil disobedience. In this speech, delivered in 1964 at the annual National Baptist Convention, Jackson emphasizes instead a strategy reminiscent of Booker T. Washington, the most prominent black leader at the turn of the twentieth century, who had counseled his black brethren to befriend people of all races and to advance themselves through education, self-discipline, and persistent hard work in industry, commerce, service, and the professions. Yet more like King than like Washington, Jackson also stresses the importance of gaining civil and political rights.

Both King and Jackson were strongly identified Christian leaders. But whereas King had sought to hold America accountable to Jesus' teaching and the principles of Christian love, Jackson begins by saying that "As Christians, we are a part of our nation and a part of the struggle of America," and he makes no specifically religious, but only patriotic and civic, arguments. Like King, Jackson appeals to the Constitution and the principles of the Declaration of Independence, but unlike King, he staunchly favored obedience to the laws as written, and he emphasizes the Declaration's rights of individuals rather than, like King, the brotherly community founded in love. How does Jackson understand the struggle for civil rights? What, concretely, is his specific advice to African Americans? What does he mean by "direct action in the positive"? Imagining yourself as an auditor of Jackson's speech, what in it do you find persuasive? With what do you disagree?

Participating in the Struggle of America

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As Christians we are a part of our nation and a part of the struggle of America. America was brought into being to satisfy and to answer the human longing for freedom. There was the urge in man to be related to other men as men without a modifier or any kind of limitation or restriction. There was an awareness of a human kinship deeper than race, more profound than nationality, and more inclusive than any accepted religious creed. In addition to the quest for a new geographical spot there was a search for a new human relationship, a new freedom, and new opportunities. These basic urges inspired the early colonies to brave the dangers of a rough and unknown sea, and seek a land in which they could live as free men and aspire to the highest possible goals of life without the enslavement of the past or being the victims of the determinism of enforced circumstances. They wanted a chance to explore and to search out the meaning of life for themselves, and an opportunity to worship God according to the dictates of their conscience.

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They soon became convinced that there was no such land, no such Utopia, but all they would find would be an opportunity to make such a land and such a country. They were convinced it could be made out of the desires that now possessed their souls and out of the thirst for liberty that dominated their lives.

America was born in a struggle and as a struggle for freedom, and for the opportunity to develop the highest resources of mankind. The Declaration of Independence and the Federal Constitution were the results of our fathers' attempts to put on paper the ideals that inspired the birth of the nation, and those principles by which and on which the nation was erected and sustained. There have been errors, mistakes, and gross sins committed against this American venture, but this high venture has not been repudiated or negated. The Massachusetts theocracy became oppressive and hostile toward freedom. Some human beings were slain in the episode of the great Witch Hunt. Slavery took its toll, denying to thousands the human dignity that God had bestowed upon them; and as a result of the defense of this cruel institution, the nation was divided into two armed camps, and a cruel civil war saw Americans take the lives of Americans, and brothers shedding their brothers' blood. But from the dust and dirt of this tragic event the American ideals sprang up again with new vigor and vitality, and continued its upward march on the rough highway of human history. This American venture is powerful but not perfect; ever growing but not grown; and still becoming, but is not yet complete. The kind hand of destiny and the benevolent providence of Almighty God have placed the American Negro along with other races and nationalities in this flowing stream of the nation's life for which we are justly proud. As patriotic Americans we are devoted to our

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nation's cause, and are wedded to its ideals and principles. By precept and example, by instinct and intuition, we now know the difference between that which is truly American and that which is not. We draw a clear distinction between that which is germane to the nation's life and that which is foreign, hostile, and antagonistic to the soul of our nation. To the former we pledge our total allegiance and commit every ounce of energy, our strength, all of our powers, and even our very lives. But against the latter we stand with uncompromising determination, and will not rest until all the enemies of our nation have been subdued and conquered. This is the true meaning of the civil rights struggle.

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The Civil Rights Struggle

Much time and space is given in the public press to the problem of civil rights. It has engaged the minds of our congressmen, and has occasioned many days of debate and deliberation. In the name of civil rights thousands have marched through the streets of our cities, boycotts have been staged, picket lines have been thrown around places of businesses, institutions of learning; and in every nook and corner of the country voices have been heard in the defense of and in the interest of civil rights.

What is this struggle for civil rights? I answer, it is an effort of American citizens to get full equality of opportunity. It is the resolution and the determination that there shall be in these United States one class of citizens and that is first class citizens. This is a struggle to adopt in practice as well as theory the concept of man on which the Declaration of Independence is based, and to fully implement the Federal Constitution, one of the greatest documents for human freedom since the writing of the Magna Carta. The civil rights struggle is a struggle for full freedom, justice, and equality before the law. It is a struggle to bring from paper the lofty ideals of America, and to apply them in practice to the lives and actions of all Americans. In reality it is America's struggle to be herself, to fulfill the highest promises of her being, and to build a social order after the pattern and dreams of our founding fathers and in the light of the wisdom of the ages.

The civil rights struggle then is not a struggle to negate the high and lofty philosophy of American freedom. It is not an attempt to convert the nation into an armed camp or to substitute panic and anarchy in the place of law and order. It is in no wise an attempt to negate or to amend downward the highest laws of this land proclaiming freedom and justice for all.

Why Then the Struggle?

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The answer is there is a group in the United States that believes that when the constitution speaks of the rights of American citizens it meant only men whose skins were white. This group believes in segregation as a means of protecting the best interests of the nation and of keeping the races separate and pure. But as we look at the degrees of pigmentation among all the races in these United States, I ask my segregationist friends, don't you think it is rather late now to talk about the purity of the race; for the blood of white segregationists is in the veins of many whom they would ostracize, and their kinship is a biological fact. Many segregationists fear that granting equality of opportunity to people of color will in some way jeopardize their liberties, encroach upon their freedom, and threaten their rank, position, and security. But such fear is unfounded if the doctrine of American democracy is true. For no free man has any grounds to fear the spread of the privileges of true freedom to all men, for the greater the number of free men the more secure is freedom and less is the power and danger of oppression. Abraham Lincoln sensed this fact when he said: "By giving freedom to the slaves we insure freedom to the free." The presence of one bound man pollutes the whole stream of human society; and the rattle of one chain of oppression creates a discord that breaks the harmony in every democratic system, and disturbs the mind and poisons the heart of every man with fear and dread, so that the would-be master finds himself mentally and morally the dweller in the hovels of slaves, the servant of a cause that is hostile to democracy, and becomes himself, the victim of the baser emotions of his own nature.

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This struggle for civil rights has remained for a hundred years because there are persons among us who are still the victims of the psychology of chattel slavery and are yet blinded to the verdict of history and indifferent to the logic of life, and in deep rebellion against the voice of God. Some believe that their very future and the future well-being of their families depend on keeping alive the cursed demon of segregation. In the language of one segregationist: "Yes, we believe in segregation, and we will not be changed. We will not be frightened or forced. We will oppose you with every ounce of strength that we have. We will fight you from breakfast until noon. We will eat our noon-day meal and then return to the field of battle and fight you until sunset. If opportunity permits we will catch a bite to eat in the twilight and return to our post and fight until the morning comes." With such determination, with such faith in the way of segregation, with such commitment to the evils of discrimination, and with such opponents of democracy and freedom, it is no surprise that the struggle for civil rights has remained so long and still remains one of the grave struggles of the land and country.

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The second reason why the struggle for civil rights has continued is that the segregated does not and cannot accept segregation as a way of life. The bound men have read with care the great promises of our Federal Constitution, and they have heard clearly the pronouncements of statesmen, and have followed the logic of every philosopher of freedom, and they now know that segregation and racial discrimination have no logical or legitimate place in the American character and constitution. The segregated is just as determined to destroy the awful demand of racial segregation as segregationists are to keep it alive.

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This struggle will continue because of the inner nature of the segregated themselves. There has been implanted in the hearts and minds of all men the hope, the love, and expectation of freedom, and this inner conviction compels us, and the freedom of soul constrains us so that we cannot rest in chains or be at peace in a house of bondage, or compromise with the dungeons of discrimination and accept as our lot the cruel and oppressive hand of those heartless masters who allow pigmentation of skin to blind them to the inner principles of truth and to the revealed purposes of God. The struggle goes on because two determinations meet: one; to enslave, and the other; to be free, and here can be no compromise, and from the task of solving the problem of freedom there must be no retreat.

Some Suggestions to the American Negro

But we as a people must keep ever before us the true meaning of our struggle so that we will never be used as tools in the hands of those who love not the nation's cause but seek the nation's hurt and not our help. Hence there are some things that we must do.

1. In our struggle for civil rights we must remain always in the mainstream of American democracy. Our cause must never be divorced from the American cause, and our struggle must not be separated from the American struggle. We must stick to law and order, for as I have said in the past I say now, there are no problems in American life that cannot be solved through commitment to the highest laws of our land and in obedience to the American philosophy and way of life. In spite of criticisms and not-with-standing threats and open attacks, I have not retreated from this position and never will as long as America is the America of the Federal Constitution and a land of due process of law. We cannot win our battle through force and unreasonable intimidation. As a minority group we cannot win outside of the protection and power of the just laws of this land. Read history with open eyes and attentive minds, and we will discover that no minority group

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has and can win in a struggle by the direct confrontation of the majority and by employing the same type of pressures and powers that the majority possess in abundance. The hope of the minority struggle is with the just laws of the land and the moral and constructive forces that are germane to this nation's life and character.

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While we must be determined to achieve the best, we must not be guided by a spirit of revenge, blind emotions, and uncontrolled temper. When we act by these baser emotions we find ourselves contradicting ourselves. We will deny freedom of speech to those who differ with us, and will seek to do the things that will embarrass others however costly it may be to us and to them. When we are guided by revenge we do not choose our program of action wisely. There are some groups who are thus motivated, will go in, sit in, or lie in, in places that have objected to their presence. These same groups when they are dissatisfied in places that have accepted them, will give up their achieved rights and walk out in protest and revenge. Our actions must be guided both by logic and by law.

2. The methods that we employ in the present struggle must not lead us into open opposition to the laws of the land. In some cases the technique of direct action and demonstrations have led to mob violence and to vandalism. At least some who have desired to practice these negative methods have used the technique of so-called direct action. . . .

3. Negroes must become registered voters and fight their battles in the polling booth. In the coming campaign we must not allow our prejudices, our hatred for individuals, to lead us into emotional outbursts and disrespect. The candidates contending for the presidency of the United States deserve, and should enjoy, the respect from every American citizen. It is beneath the dignity of this fair land of ours to seek to howl down, and to boo from platforms any candidate whom we do not favor. We must make choice of the candidate whom we think will serve the best interest of this nation and the nation's cause, and then take our ballot and help to elect our choice. As I told this convention in 1956, I tell you again, the ballot is our most important weapon. We must not neglect it, forfeit or sell it, but use it for the protection of the nation, the promotion of freedom, the promotion of every citizen, and for the glory of the United States of America. What I said in 1956 I still say now.

4. Negroes must still make their own leaders. We must not expect the public press, radio, and television to do this job for us. These news media are too busy with other

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responsibilities to be assigned the task of choosing Negro leaders to represent the race in these days of stress and strain. Negroes must not forget that we have many fields in which leaders are necessary and important, and we should accept and follow the leaders in their respective field; that is, when they are right. We have political leaders, many of whom are worthy of our confidence and our respect. We shall follow them and show our appreciation for them. We have some dedicated civil rights leaders. We should respect them and follow them in their chosen field when they are right. We have religious leaders. We should respect and follow them when they are committed to the task of human betterment, human uplift, and the work of re-making the social order in the name of justice, righteousness, and peace.

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We have worthy business leaders who can show us the way to improve our economic status, and to develop our available economic resources. Let us follow them. We have educators who are making their contribution in the field of thought and of mental growth. Let us honor them and respect them, and let us not discourage Negro educators by advocating directly or indirectly, that they are by nature inferior to educators in other racial groups.

We have athletes and comedians. Let us still applaud our athletes when they achieve on the field of competition, and let us join with others and freely laugh at the jokes that our comedians give. But we must not confuse these various fields. There must not develop any dictatorship of any one field, and athletes and comedians must not make the mistake of assuming the role of political, religious, and cultural leaders. We as a race must see to it that each man serves in his field, and we must not allow the white community to pick our leaders or to tell us what Negro we should follow.

5. Let us be courageous enough not only to oppose the wrong and the un-American actions in our nation, but we must also appreciate and rejoice in the achievements of our nation. There are some recent achievements which give us reason for hope, grounds for trust, and basis for rejoicing.

Ten years ago the Supreme Court of the United States rose above its old concept of separate but equal, and declared that segregation had no place in America's system of public education. This year, after a long, hard, and laborious fight, the Congress of the United States passed the strongest civil rights bill in its history, and the president signed into law a document that said that segregation has no place in American life and destiny. The call is to all of us to accept these facts and build on them. We must not ignore the

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constructive laws of our land, we must not organize, condone, or support mobs that parade in the name of freedom. We must not turn aside from decency and the constructive American standards in our quest for freedom. In our haste let us not be haughty. In our determination we must not become detrimental, and in our demonstrations we cannot afford to damn the nation of which we are a vital part.

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Direct Action in the Positive

We have heard much in recent months about direct action in terms of boycotts, pickets, sit-ins, and demonstrations of various kinds. In each case the purpose as stated is a lofty one; namely, the winning of civil rights and the achievement of the equality of opportunity. I repeat, these are worthy ends and desirable goals, but this kind of direct action is orientated against others, and for the most part, must be classified in the negative since they have been designed to stop, arrest, or hinder certain orderly procedures in the interest of civil rights. In some cases however, these actions have been against practices and laws considered to be both evil and unjust.

Today, I call for another type of direct action; that is, direct action in the positive which is orientated towards the Negro's ability, talent, genius, and capacity. Let us take our economic resources, however insignificant and small, and organize and harness them, not to stop the economic growth of others, but to develop our own and to help our own community. If our patronage withdrawn from any store or business enterprise will weaken said enterprise, why not organize these resources and channel them into producing enterprises that we ourselves can direct and control. In the act of boycotting, our best economic talents are not called into play, and we ourselves are less productive and seek to render others the same. Why not build for ourselves instead of boycotting what others have produced? We must not be guilty of possessing the minds and actions of a blind Sampson who pulled a massive building down upon himself as well as his enemies, and died with them in a final act of revenge. No act of revenge will lift a race from thralldom, and any direct actions that reduce the economic strength and life of the community is sure to punish the poor as well as the rich. Direct actions that encourage and create more tensions, ill will, hostility, and hate, will tend to make more difficult the mental, moral, and spiritual changes essential to new growth and creativity in human relations. Remember that when we seek to change certain acquired notions and habits of men we are seeking to change that which is very vital in human nature. When we labor to change segregationists and racists who believe they are right, we are facing the task of re-conditioning human emotions and building within new patterns of thought, and changing

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human nature itself. In addition to that type of direct action which is negative and aimed at the correction of others, we need the type of direct action also that starts with ourselves which tends to produce a higher type of life within us as well as within others, and which aims to build a better community in which the available moral forces may be used to create new attitudes and new dispositions where human beings will regard others as they regard themselves. Why should we expect direct actions against others to bear immediate fruit, and then procrastinate and postpone the direct actions that will make us better business men, better statesmen, better thinkers, and better men and women with better homes and better fellowship NOW? Now must not only be applied to the needs for changes and attitudes of segregationists, it must also be applied to us as a people and as a race when we aspire for the best and seek the more constructive and creative methods of life. We can be better now. We can acquire a better education now, we can organize our capital now and receive our share in this economy of free enterprise now. In spite of all that we have attained as a people we have not exhausted our possibilities, and the past does not define the limits of our potential. Are we not as well equipped to respond to the call of the right, the just, the good, the highest, and the best as are the white segregationists against whom we fight? Has not the great God put in our souls the thirst for truth and righteousness? Are we not endowed as co-workers with the great creative spirit of the universe? Then we need not wait until all is well before we harness our resources and venture upon new ways of life and creativity.

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We must not play ourselves too cheap or postpone the day of greater things when the hour of fulfillment is already at hand. To the leaders of school boycotts who have called children to remain out of school in order to help correct the evils and errors of an imperfect system of education, are you willing now to use your influence to lead young people to desert the ranks of drop-outs and struggle now to make the best out of the education that is now available? The call to stay out of school does not appeal to the highest in students but to the ordinary and the easy. It requires less initiative to stay out of school than it does to attend school. It requires less mental alertness to refuse to study than it does to study. Is not some education better than no education? Of course we should get all the education possible and go as far up the ladder of intellectual attainments as our powers will allow us. We must strive for the very best opportunities, the best possible schools, and the best possible teachers, but if these are not available to us then let us make the best use of what we do have. Remember that the future is with the person who knows, thinks, understands, and who has character and soul, and who can produce, invest, create and live in harmony with the highest and the best. Of course we adults must continue to correct all the evils which make education more difficult. We

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must strive for quality education and seek to make available all the resources possible for the education of the young, but our young people must keep their feet in the upward path of learning and their minds stayed on the quest for truth.

The progress of the race lies not in continued street demonstrations, and the liberation of an oppressed people shall not come by acts of revenge and retaliation but by the constructive use of all available opportunities and a creative expansion of the circumstances of the past into stepping stones to higher things.

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