

■ Address to the Montgomery Improvement Association

Date: December 5, 1955

Author: Martin Luther King Jr.

Genre: address; report

Summary Overview

Martin Luther King Jr.'s address to the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA), delivered during the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955–56, is famous for its powerful call for nonviolent resistance and racial equality. In his speeches, including his iconic “I Have a Dream” speech, King emphasized the importance of peaceful protest, love, and justice in the fight against racial segregation and discrimination.

The Women’s Political Council (WPC) of Montgomery, Alabama had been seeking a leader to rally behind in their campaign against discriminatory bus practices. After Rosa Parks’ arrest provided the occasion for the WPC to launch into a larger protest against segregation, the WPC elected to form the Montgomery Improvement Association under the leadership of a Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. This young but talented minister shaped the course of the fight for civil rights. King emphasized resisting not with violence, but with grace and perseverance against oppression. Although there would be those in the civil rights movement who believed peaceful resistance to be too slow, King’s theory of nonviolence would still put him in grave danger from those who supported Jim Crow laws maintaining segregation. The bus boycott that started with the WPC and King eventually would lead to the 1956 ruling *Browder v. Gayle* that would rule bus segregation unconstitutional.

This address marked a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights Movement, embodying principles of American liberalism such as equality, justice, and nonviolent activism. It inspired widespread efforts to end racial segregation and promote civil rights in the United States.

Defining Moment

By the time of the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955, segregation had been a part of daily life for African Americans, especially in the South, for over half a century. In 1896, the Supreme Court ruled in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that “separate but equal” train cars for white and Black passengers were constitutional. Of course, “separate but equal” facilities were anything but equal for those who were separated. Jim Crow laws introduced during the Reconstruction period limited the access that African Americans had to appeal to the government and confined them to worse access to public services. Finally, in 1954, a first step towards reversing state-sponsored segregation came: the Supreme Court overturned segregation in public schools in the decision of *Brown v. Board of Education*. However, even though technology had improved since the days of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, African Americans still were forced to endure unjust policies

on public transportation, where they accounted for the majority of patrons.

Organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had been campaigning steadily to reverse any national policies that maintained segregation: for example, the families who brought their suit to the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* to end segregated public schools were sponsored by the NAACP. On the local level, different groups fought to end segregation in all its insidious forms in daily life. In Montgomery, the Women’s Political Council had been attempting to end segregation practices on city buses to no avail. Rosa Parks’ arrest for failing to move to the back of the bus for a white man provided the impetus the WPC needed for stronger action. The WPC started a new organization, the Montgomery Improvement Association, and recruited a twenty-six year old pastor, Martin Luther King Jr., to lead the call to action. At an



Rosa Parks' arrest provided the occasion for the WPC to launch into a larger protest against segregation. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

African Methodist Episcopal (AME) church on December 5, 1955, just four days after Parks' arrest, King established for the gathered members his civil rights ideology, which would define his legacy and the movement itself: nonviolence, Christian love, and the power of democracy to overcome injustice.

Author Biography

Martin Luther King Jr. left behind a grand legacy when he was assassinated in 1968. A beloved Baptist minister, activist, and humanitarian, King became the voice of the civil rights movement after the Montgomery Bus Boycott in 1955. He advocated a program of nonviolent resistance against oppression. At the time

of the first meeting of the Montgomery Improvement Association, King was only twenty-six years old. A talented orator, King used his newfound position at the head of the Montgomery Improvement Association in 1955 to espouse the ideals that would come to define his legacy: the qualities of Christian love and democratic justice would gain the civil rights movement the support and respect it needed. King's role as a leader and spokesperson in this bus boycott gained him both international attention as a role model for challenging segregation and opprobrium from detractors. Some within the fight for civil rights were impatient with the rate of improvement; others, often opponents of the movement to end segregation, targeted King's family and home with violent and abusive tactics.



Historical Document

Address to the Montgomery Improvement Association

My friends, we are certainly very happy to see each of you out this evening. We are here this evening for serious business. [Audience:] (Yes) We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens (That's right), and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning. (Yeah. That's right) We are here also because of our love for democracy (Yes), because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action (Yes) is the greatest form of government on earth. (That's right)

But we are here in a specific sense because of the bus situation in Montgomery. (Yes) We are here because we are determined to get the situation corrected. This situation is not at all new. The problem has existed over endless years. (That's right) For many years now, Negroes in Montgomery and so many other areas have been inflicted with the paralysis of crippling fear (Yes) on buses in our community. (That's right) On so many occasions, Negroes have been intimidated and humiliated and oppressed because of the sheer fact that they were Negroes. (That's right) I don't have time this evening to go into the history of these numerous cases. Many of them now are lost in the thick fog of oblivion (Yes), but at least one stands before us now with glaring dimensions. (yes)

Just the other day, just last Thursday to be exact, one of the finest citizens in Montgomery—(Amen) not one of the finest Negro citizens (That's right), but one of the finest citizens in Montgomery—was taken from a bus (Yes) and carried to jail and arrested (Yes) because she refused to get up to give her seat to a white person. (yes, that's right) Now the press would have us believe that she refused to leave a reserved section for Negroes (Yes), but I want you to know this evening that there is no reserved section. (All right) The law has never been clarified at that point. (Hell no) Now I think I speak with legal authority—not that I have any legal authority, but I think I speak with legal authority behind me—(All right) that the law, the ordinance, the city ordinance has never been totally clarified. (That's right)

Mrs. Rosa Parks is a fine person. (Well,) And, since it had to happen, I'm happy that it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks, (Yes) for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity. (Sure enough) Nobody can doubt the height of her character (Yes), nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment and devotion to the teachings of Jesus. (All right) And I'm happy, since it had to happen, it happened to a person that nobody can call a

disturbing factor in the community. (All right) Mrs. Parks is a fine Christian person, unassuming, and yet there is integrity and character there. And just because she refused to get up, she was arrested.

And you know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. [sustained applause] There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation, where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. (Keep talking) There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November. (that's right) [applause] There comes a time. (Yes sir teach) [applause continues]

We are here, we are here this evening because we are tired now. (Yes) [applause] And I want to say that we are not here advocating violence. (No) We have never done that. (Repeat that, repeat that) [applause] I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation (Well) that we are Christian people. (Yes) [applause] We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. (Well) The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. (Yes) [applause] That's all.

And certainly, certainly, this is the glory of America, with all of its faults. (Yeah) This is the glory of our democracy. If we were incarcerated behind the iron curtains of a Communistic nation, we couldn't do this. If we were dropped in the dungeon of a totalitarian regime, we couldn't do this. (All right) But the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right. (That's right) [applause] My friends, don't let anybody make us feel that we are to be compared in our actions with the Ku Klux Klan or with the White Citizens Council. [applause] There will be no crosses burned at any bus stops in Montgomery. (Well, that's right) There will be no white persons pulled out of their homes and taken out on some distant road and lynched for not cooperating. [applause] There will be nobody among us who will stand up and defy the Constitution of this nation. [applause] We only assemble here because of our desire to see right exist. [applause] My friends, I want it to be known that we're going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses in this city. [applause]

And we are not wrong; we are not wrong in what we are doing. (Well) If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. (Yes sir) [applause] If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. (Yes) [applause] If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. (That's right) [applause] If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to Earth. (Yes) [applause] If we are wrong, justice is a lie (Yes), love has no meaning. [applause] And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water (Yes), [applause] and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Keep talking) [Applause]

I want to say that in all of our actions, we must stick together. (That's right) [applause] Unity is the great need of the hour (Well, that's right), and if we are united we can get many of the things that we not only desire but which we justly deserve. (Yeah) And don't let anybody frighten you. (Yeah) We are not afraid of what we are doing (Oh no), because we are doing it within the law. (All right) There is never a time in our American democracy that we must ever think we are wrong when we protest. (Yes, sir) We reserve that right. When labor all over this nation came to see that it would be trampled over by capitalistic power, it was nothing wrong with labor getting together and organizing and protesting for its rights. (That's right) We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality. [applause]

May I say to you, my friends, as I come to a close, and just giving some idea of why we are assembled here, that we must keep—and I want to stress this, in all of our doings, in all of our deliberations here this evening and all of the week and while,—whatever we do—, we must keep God in the forefront. (Yeah) Let us be Christian in all of our actions. (That's right) But I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love, love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. (All right) Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love. (Well)

The Almighty God himself is not only, not the God just standing out saying through Hosea, "I love you, Israel." He's also the God that stands up before the nations and said: "Be still and know that I'm God (Yeah), that if you don't obey me I will break the backbone of your power (Yeah) and slap you out of the orbits of your international and national relationships." (That's right) Standing beside love is always justice, and we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we've come to see that we've got to use the tools of coercion. Not only is this thing a process of education, but it is also a process of legislation. (Yeah) [applause]

And as we stand and sit here this evening and as we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead, let us go out with the grim and bold determination that we are going to stick together. [applause] We are going to work together. [applause] Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future (Yes), somebody will have to say, "There lived a race of people (Well), a black people (Yes sir), 'fleecy locks and black complexion' (Yes), a people who had the moral courage to stand up for their rights. [applause] And thereby they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization." And we're going to do that. God grant that we will do it before it is too late. (Oh yeah) As we proceed with our program, let us think of these things. (Yes) [applause]



Document Analysis

When Martin Luther King Jr. delivered this speech in a church to the newly assembled Montgomery Improvement Association on December 5, 1955, his purpose was to unite the African American population behind the bus boycott. It was necessary that the African American community in Montgomery act together in their boycott if they wanted to accomplish any change at all. King builds this call for unity and action by using the rhetorical devices of amplification and antithesis. The rhetorical complexity in this plea for unity predates King's most famous speech, "I Have A Dream."

First, King uses the amplification to impose upon his audience the necessity of unified action. Amplification is the technique of repeating a word or phrase and adding details and information. For example, King starts with the simple sentence: "Mrs. Rosa Parks is a fine person." He then elaborates on her moral character as a way to create pathos in the audience: "nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity...Nobody can doubt the height of her character...nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment." King also binds the audience together by asserting that "nobody can doubt" what he is saying. If the audience believes this to be true, then they are automatically bound to the group of people recognizing that injustice has been done. Another strong use of it appears in the following passage: "And we are not wrong; we are not wrong in what we are doing....If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong....If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong...If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong." King repeatedly stresses the pronoun "we" in this passage; he also continues to add greater and more significant reasons why this "we" cannot be wrong.

Antithesis is another major rhetorical device that King relies upon to craft his united vision of activism. From the very beginning, he juxtaposes opposite ideas to demonstrate to the audience how small actions can have big effects: he says that democracy has the power to turn "thin paper to thick action." When King transitions to the recent catalyzing event of Rosa Parks' arrest, he uses antithesis again: "Many of them

now are lost in the thick fog of oblivion...but at least one stands before us now with glaring dimensions." The audience members can choose the hopeless oblivion or empowered light. Further, King supports group unity when he says: "we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality." In this statement, he uses both antithesis (the "long night of captivity" and its opposite, the "daybreak of freedom") and amplification. King often combined rhetorical devices to capture the audience's attention; the audience's responses to this speech in the transcript indicate that King was successful at the time.

In conclusion, King was not only a talented leader, but also a gifted orator who knew how to affect his audience profoundly so that they would be encouraged to act. King's call to action in this speech shows the beginnings of the rhetoric and ideology he would eventually deliver in Washington in 1968. The "dream," about which King later spoke, would only come about because of the activists' unified voices.

Essential Themes

In this speech, Martin Luther King Jr. establishes a method for resistance against segregation. In King's ideology, nonviolent disobedience was both a Christian and a democratic imperative for an ethical community. The culmination of the same rhetoric would come for the American public in King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech during the 1968 March on Washington. King's rhetoric stressed the universalism of peace: segregation was not just a Black issue, but one that concerned all races. King's leadership has remained a model for those who wish to fight institutionalized oppression, but there were and continue to be those who believe more aggressive responses should be taken against unjust treatment.

In particular, King's usage of Christian doctrine and emphasis on integration were destined to alienate individuals who were not Christian or who believed that a stronger mode of action was required. Malcolm X advocated a very different solution: African Americans should separate completely, employing whatever

means possible to defend themselves in the process. Many African Americans found this to be a better solution to their problems. King and his supporters had been working tirelessly for over a decade by the time any real action against discriminatory practices came about from the government: Malcolm X's rhetoric seemed to offer a more immediate and powerful option for those who were tired of waiting.

How aggressively should a people defend their bodily integrity against injustice? Should a campaign against injustice work within the power structure or take the offensive? The Black Lives Matter movement, starting in earnest after the death of Trayvon Martin in 2013, has had to answer the same questions as the earlier activists. The variance between King's optimism about racial equality and more pessimistic tones taken by Malcolm X has not diminished. Black Lives Matter, much like its activist predecessors, has

had to contend with the multitudes of opinions and methods that show up in a grassroots movement.

—Ashleigh Fata, MA

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