

## ■ “I Have a Dream”

**Date:** August 28, 1963

**Author:** Martin Luther King Jr.

**Genre:** speech; address

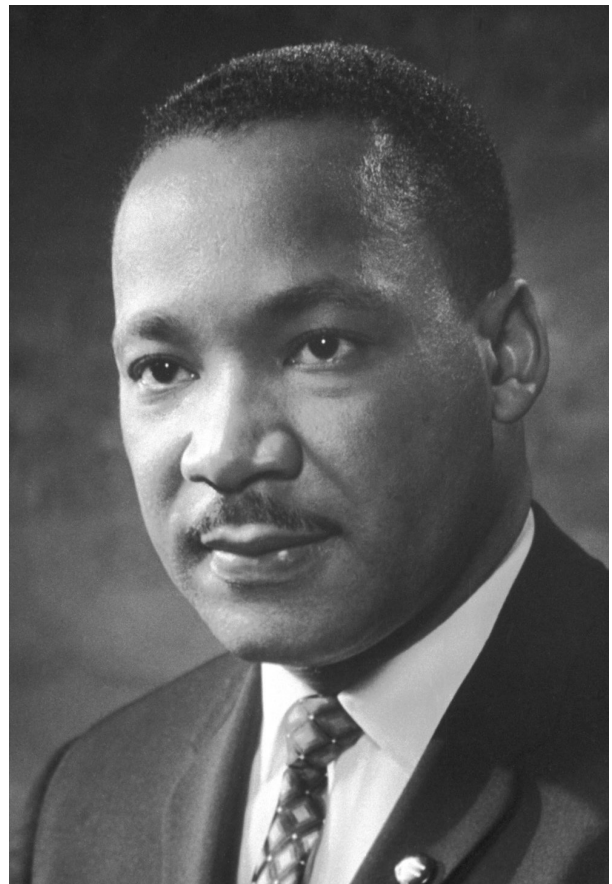
### Summary Overview

Central to the goals of the civil rights movement in the twentieth century was the pursuit of equal rights and justice, seeking to eliminate racial discrimination and ensure that all individuals are treated equally under the law. The movement also emphasized the inherent dignity and human rights of every person, challenging systems of segregation and dehumanization. The movement called for greater government accountability, urging federal intervention and enforcement of civil rights laws to protect citizens’ rights and promote social justice. Through its deep commitment to fairness, equality, and the safeguarding of individual rights, the movement reflected ideals that lay at the heart of modern liberalism.

On August 28, 1963, a quarter of a million Americans gathered in Washington, D.C., to show their support for President John F. Kennedy’s proposed legislation to obtain equal civil rights for African Americans. After a long afternoon of speeches by representatives of the civil rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. stepped to a podium overlooking the Lincoln Memorial and delivered a powerful speech in support of the proposed legislation. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech was not only the defining moment of the March on Washington, but also of the civil rights movement in general. Many consider it to be King’s most significant speech and also one of the most powerful speeches in American history. King spoke passionately about the mistreatment of African Americans throughout American history. He called on Americans of all races and creeds finally to live up to the promises expressed in the Declaration of Independence and grant African Americans their merited rights of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” King also encouraged all Americans to imagine and work towards a brighter future in which Black people were not defined by their skin color but by the content of their character.

### Defining Moment

During the spring of 1963 the focus of the civil rights movement had shifted to Birmingham, Alabama, where the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), led by Fred Shuttlesworth, and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC),



*Martin Luther King, Jr. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]*

led by Martin Luther King Jr., had organized a series of boycotts, pickets, demonstrations, and sit-ins to protest local segregation laws. The city government, led by Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor responded with extremely brutal police attacks against demonstrators, attracting the attention of President Kennedy and the public.

On June 11, 1963, Kennedy addressed the nation on the topic of equal civil rights for African Americans. He expressed support for the civil rights movement and called for an end to racial segregation. A few weeks later, he presented a bill to Congress that included provisions to end segregation in public facilities, to ban discrimination in federally supported programs, and to empower federal authorities to help desegregate public schools.

To demonstrate both their support for Kennedy’s civil rights bill and to promote other civil rights issues not mentioned in the bill most notably voting rights, the SCLC, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the National Urban League (NUL) organized the March on Washington. On August 28, 1963, upwards of 250,000 marchers gathered in front of the Lincoln Memorial where they listened to musicians play freedom songs and prominent civil rights leaders give passionate speeches in support of Kennedy’s proposed civil rights bill. At the end of the program, Martin Luther King Jr. stepped to the podium and delivered what many consider to be one of the most powerful speeches in United States history. King’s “I Have a

Dream” speech provided not only a passionate advocacy of African American civil rights but also a compelling vision of a future where racism and racial differences no longer defined relations between Black and white Americans.

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### **Author Biography**

Born on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia, Martin Luther King Jr. followed his father’s example by becoming a Baptist minister. He received a doctorate in theology from Boston University in 1955. King gained national attention for his leadership of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott that same year. In 1957 King helped form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) that he would lead for the next eleven years. In 1963 King helped launch a movement of boycotts, demonstrations, and protests, all of which were to be nonviolent, in the Deep South, most notably in Birmingham, Alabama. These events and King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” brought national attention to the civil rights movement and his leadership. After President John F. Kennedy presented to Congress civil rights legislation, King and hundreds of thousands of supporters gathered around the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., to gain public support for federal legislation. Here, King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech on August 28, 1963. King’s activism would eventually expand beyond demands for civil rights to economic advancement for Black people. Tragically, he was assassinated by James Earl Ray on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee.



## Historical Document

### “I Have a Dream”

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 score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation 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 languished in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we've 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 note 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 unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted 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. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation. So we have 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 spot to remind America of the fierce urgency of now. This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.

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 quicksands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children.

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three 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 emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold 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 militancy which has engulfed 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 inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone.

And as we walk, we must make the pledge that we shall march ahead. We cannot turn back. There are those who are asking the devotees 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 fatigue 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 selfhood 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 righteousness like a mighty stream.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow jail cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

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 us not wallow 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 creed: “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 slave owners 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 sweltering 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 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 nullification, that one day right down 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.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, 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 that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the 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, 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 prodigious 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 the 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.

And when this happens, and when we allow freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, 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!"



## Document Analysis

On August 28, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered a compelling speech on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before 250,000 supporters who had come to the capital as part of the March on Washington rally. King's "I Have a Dream" speech was not only the concluding speech given that day but in many respects it was the defining civil rights speech of the era.

King began by reminding his audience of the long history of the Black struggle for equality in the United States, noting that it was the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. Certainly, the abolition of slavery provided a "beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice" but the lives of African Americans continued to be defined and limited "by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."

Given the continued mistreatment of African Americans, King demanded that the United States begin to live up to the promises made in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence and extend the rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness to Black people. The American government had the opportunity to create a much different future by passing legislation to protect the rights and freedoms of African Americans.

King maintained that until genuine improvements in the Black position were made, protests would continue. African Americans were no longer interested in gradual reforms or piecemeal solutions but demanded a complete dismantling of segregation.

Not surprisingly, given his steadfast commitment to nonviolence as the only acceptable tactic of protest, King reminded his supporters that they must never embrace violent methods of protest. He also emphasized his support for alliances with "white brothers," many of whom had "come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom."

Speaking to those who asked what societal changes would satisfy civil rights protestors, King asserted that they would only be satisfied when they no longer faced the indignities of not being able to stay in a hotel, drink out of water fountains, or vote because of their race or skin color. As for civil rights activists, many of whom

had already been imprisoned and suffered violence at the hands of police and racist white mobs, King urged them to continue fighting for their rights.

King concluded his speech by offering a different vision of a future America, a "dream deeply rooted in the American dream" in which "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood" and his four children "will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

King argued that the eradication of racial intolerance would place the United States in concert with "the glory of the Lord." His speech portrayed the civil rights movement as not only a moral movement but a religious movement in keeping with God's wants and desires. King's speech ended with another religious reference. After urging his supporters to "let freedom ring" in every corner of the United States, King concluded by stating that one day "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!'"

## Essential Themes

Years before Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his speech at the Lincoln Memorial, he had established himself as the official leader of the civil rights movement. However, King's "I Have a Dream" speech, widely considered to be one of the most historically significant and powerful speeches of the twentieth century, solidified his importance in the pantheon of both African American history and American history. King spoke eloquently about the discrimination faced by African Americans and the need for strong efforts to achieve civil rights for Black people, but also of a future in which African Americans' lives and aspirations were not defined by their race or skin color but by the "content of their character."

The primary objective of the march was to express support for President Kennedy's proposed bill. The organizers also hoped to put pressure on the Kennedy administration and Congress to support other goals of the civil rights movement, most notably the right to vote. The March on Washington and especially King's

speech undoubtedly brought greater attention to the demands of the civil rights movement, but southern Democrats were determined to obstruct all civil rights legislation. Kennedy's proposed bill did not become law. However, this did not dissuade civil rights protestors from continuing to demand change. After Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, his successor Lyndon B. Johnson fully committed his administration to the passage of civil rights legislation. On July 2, 1964, Congress passed the Civil Rights Act that banned racial discrimination in all public facilities and in employment. The following year, the Voting Rights Act of 1965 passed providing federal protection for Black voters in the South.

—Gerald F. Goodwin, PhD

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