

## Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., “Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March” (1965)

*In 1965, over 3,500 Civil Rights activists joined Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., on a march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama to demand voting rights for African Americans. It would be the third attempt to make such a march: the first two were violently stopped by Alabama State troopers under the command of Governor George Wallace. The third time, however, the marchers were accompanied by federalized national guardsmen and FBI agents, who protected the activists as they marched. Having successfully arrived in Montgomery, Dr. King delivered the following speech.*



*Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speaking at Montgomery, Alabama*

Our whole campaign in Alabama has been centered around the right to vote. In focusing the attention of the nation and the world today on the flagrant denial of the right to vote, we are exposing the very origin, the root cause, of racial segregation in the Southland. Racial segregation as a way of life did not come about as a natural result of hatred between the races immediately after the Civil War. There were no laws segregating the races then. And as the noted historian, C. Vann Woodward, in his book, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow*, clearly points out, the segregation of the races was really a political stratagem employed by the emerging Bourbon interests in the South to keep the southern masses divided and southern labor the cheapest in the land. You see, it was a simple thing to keep the poor white masses working for near-starvation wages in the years that followed the Civil War. Why, if the poor white plantation or mill worker became dissatisfied with his low wages, the plantation or mill owner would merely threaten to fire him and hire former Negro slaves and pay him even less. Thus, the southern wage level was kept almost unbearably low.

Toward the end of the Reconstruction era, something very significant happened. (Listen to him) That is what was known as the Populist Movement. (Speak, sir) The leaders of this movement began awakening the poor white masses (Yes, sir) and the former Negro slaves to the fact that they were being fleeced by the emerging Bourbon interests. Not only that, but they began uniting the Negro and white masses (Yeah) into a voting bloc that threatened to drive the Bourbon interests from the command posts of political power in the South.

To meet this threat, the southern aristocracy began immediately to engineer this development of a segregated society. (Right) I want you to follow me through here because this is very important to see the roots of racism and the denial of the right to vote. Through their control of mass media, they revised the doctrine of white supremacy. They saturated the thinking of the poor white masses with it, (Yes) thus clouding their minds to the real issue involved in the Populist Movement. They then directed the placement, on the books of the South of laws that made it a crime



for Negroes and whites to come together as equals at any level. (Yes, sir) And that did it. That crippled and eventually destroyed the Populist Movement of the nineteenth century. [. . .] Thus, the threat of the free exercise of the ballot by the Negro and the white masses alike (Uh huh) resulted in the establishment of a segregated society. They segregated southern money from the poor whites; they segregated southern mores from the rich whites; (Yes, sir) they segregated southern churches from Christianity (Yes, sir); they segregated southern minds from honest thinking; (Yes, sir) and they segregated the Negro from everything. (Yes, sir) That's what happened when the Negro and white masses of the South threatened to unite and build a great society: a society of justice where none would pray upon the weakness of others; a society of plenty where greed and poverty would be done away; a society of brotherhood where every man would respect the dignity and worth of human personality. (Yes, sir)[. . .]

Today I want to tell the city of Selma, (Tell them, Doctor) today I want to say to the state of Alabama, (Yes, sir) today I want to say to the people of America and the nations of the world, that we are not about to turn around. (Yes, sir) We are on the move now. (Yes, sir)

Let us therefore continue our triumphant march (Uh huh) to the realization of the American dream. (Yes, sir) Let us march on segregated housing (Yes, sir) until every ghetto or social and economic depression dissolves, and Negroes and whites live side by side in decent, safe, and sanitary housing. (Yes, sir) Let us march on segregated schools (Let us march, Tell it) until every vestige of segregated and inferior education becomes a thing of the past, and Negroes and whites study side-by-side in the socially-healing context of the classroom.

Let us march on poverty (Let us march) until no American parent has to skip a meal so that their children may eat. (Yes, sir) March on poverty (Let us march) until no starved man walks the streets of our cities and towns (Yes, sir) in search of jobs that do not exist. (Yes, sir) Let us march on poverty (Let us march) until wrinkled stomachs in Mississippi are filled, (That's right) and the idle industries of Appalachia are realized and revitalized, and broken lives in sweltering ghettos are mended and remolded.

Let us march on ballot boxes, (Let's march) march on ballot boxes until race-baiters disappear from the political arena. Let us march on ballot boxes until the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs (Yes, sir) will be transformed into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens. (Speak, Doctor). Let us march on ballot boxes (Let us march) until the Wallaces of our nation tremble away in silence. Let us march on ballot boxes (Let us march) until we send to our city councils (Yes, sir), state legislatures, (Yes, sir) and the United States Congress, (Yes, sir) men who will not fear to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with thy God. Let us march on ballot boxes (Let us march. March) until brotherhood becomes more than a meaningless word in an opening prayer, but the order of the day on every legislative agenda. Let us march on ballot boxes (Yes) until all over Alabama God's children will be able to walk the earth in decency and honor. [. . .]

And so as we go away this afternoon, let us go away more than ever before committed to this struggle and committed to nonviolence. I must admit to you that there are still some difficult days ahead. We are still in for a season of suffering in many of the black belt counties of Alabama, many areas of Mississippi, many areas of Louisiana. I must admit to you that there are still



jail cells waiting for us, and dark and difficult moments. But if we will go on with the faith that nonviolence and its power can transform dark yesterdays into bright tomorrows, we will be able to change all of these conditions.

And so I plead with you this afternoon as we go ahead: remain committed to nonviolence. Our aim must never be to defeat or humiliate the white man, but to win his friendship and understanding. We must come to see that the end we seek is a society at peace with itself, a society that can live with its conscience. And that will be a day not of the white man, not of the black man. That will be the day of man as man. (Yes)