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The Lasting Power of Dr. King's Dream Speech

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

It was late in the day and hot, and after a long march and an afternoon of speeches about federal legislation, unemployment and racial and social justice, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. finally stepped to the lectern, in front of the Lincoln Memorial, to address the crowd of 250,000 gathered on the National Mall.

He began slowly, with magisterial gravity, talking about what it was to be black in America in 1963 and the “shameful condition” of race relations a hundred years after the [Emancipation Proclamation](#). Unlike many of the day's previous speakers, he did not talk about particular bills before Congress or the marchers' demands. Instead, he situated the civil rights movement within the broader landscape of history — time past, present and future — and within the timeless vistas of Scripture.

Dr. King was about halfway through his prepared speech when Mahalia Jackson — who earlier that day had delivered a stirring rendition of the spiritual “I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned” — shouted out to him from the speakers' stand: “Tell 'em about the 'Dream,' Martin, tell 'em about the 'Dream!'” She was referring to a riff he had delivered on earlier occasions, and Dr. King pushed the text of his remarks to the side and began an extraordinary improvisation on the dream theme that would become one of the most recognizable refrains in the world.

With his improvised riff, Dr. King took a leap into history, jumping from prose to poetry, from the podium to the pulpit. His voice arced into an emotional crescendo as he turned from a sobering assessment of current social injustices to a radiant vision of hope — of what America could be. “I have a dream,” he declared, “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!”

Many in the crowd that afternoon, 50 years ago on Wednesday, had taken buses and trains from around the country. Many wore hats and their Sunday best — “People then,” the civil rights leader John Lewis would recall, “when they went out for a protest, they dressed up” — and the Red Cross was passing out ice cubes to help alleviate the sweltering August heat. But if people were tired after a long day, they were absolutely electrified by Dr. King. There was reverent silence when he began speaking, and when he started to talk about his dream, they called out, “Amen,” and, “Preach, Dr. King, preach,” offering, in the words of his adviser Clarence B. Jones, “every version of the encouragements you would hear in a Baptist church multiplied by tens of thousands.”

You could feel “the passion of the people flowing up to him,” James Baldwin, a skeptic of that day's March on Washington, later wrote, and in that moment, “it almost seemed that we stood on a height, and could see our inheritance; perhaps we could make the kingdom real.”

Dr. King's speech was not only the heart and emotional cornerstone of the March on Washington, but also a testament to the transformative powers of one man and the magic of his words. Fifty years later, it is a speech that can still move people to tears. Fifty years later, its most famous lines are recited by schoolchildren and sampled by musicians. Fifty years later, the four words “I have a dream” have become shorthand for Dr. King's commitment to freedom, social justice and nonviolence, inspiring activists from Tiananmen Square to Soweto, Eastern Europe to the West Bank.

Why does Dr. King's “Dream” speech exert such a potent hold on people around the world and across the generations? Part of its resonance resides in Dr. King's moral imagination. Part of it resides in his masterly oratory and gift for connecting with his audience — be they on the Mall that day in the sun or watching the speech on

television or, decades later, viewing it online. And part of it resides in his ability, developed over a lifetime, to convey the urgency of his arguments through language richly layered with biblical and historical meanings.

The son, grandson and great-grandson of Baptist ministers, Dr. King was comfortable with the black church's oral tradition, and he knew how to read his audience and react to it; he would often work jazzlike improvisations around favorite sermonic riffs — like the “dream” sequence — cutting and pasting his own words and those of others. At the same time, the sonorous cadences and ringing, metaphor-rich language of the King James Bible came instinctively to him. Quotations from the Bible, along with its vivid imagery, suffused his writings, and he used them to put the sufferings of African-Americans in the context of Scripture — to give black audience members encouragement and hope, and white ones a visceral sense of identification.

In his “Dream” speech, Dr. King alludes to a famous passage from Galatians, when he speaks of “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.” As he did in many of his sermons, he also drew parallels between “the Negro” still an “exile in his own land” and the plight of the Israelites in Exodus, who, with God on their side, found deliverance from hardship and oppression, escaping slavery in Egypt to journey toward the Promised Land.

The entire March on Washington speech reverberates with biblical rhythms and parallels, and bristles with a panoply of references to other historical and literary texts that would have resonated with his listeners. In addition to allusions to the prophets Isaiah (“I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low”) and Amos (“We will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream”), there are echoes of the [Declaration of Independence](#) (“the unalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”); Shakespeare (“this sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent”); and popular songs like Woody Guthrie's “This Land Is Your Land” (“Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York,” “Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California”).

Such references added amplification and depth of field to the speech, much the way T. S. Eliot's myriad allusions in “The Waste Land” add layered meaning to that poem. Dr. King, who had a doctorate in theology and once contemplated a career in academia, was shaped by both his childhood in his father's church and his later studies of disparate thinkers like Reinhold Niebuhr, Gandhi and Hegel. Along the way, he developed a gift for synthesizing assorted ideas and motifs and making them his own — a gift that enabled him to address many different audiences at once, while making ideas that some might find radical somehow familiar and accessible. It was a gift that in some ways mirrored his abilities as the leader of the civil rights movement, tasked with holding together often contentious factions (from more militant figures like Stokely Carmichael to more conservative ones like Roy Wilkins), while finding a way to balance the concerns of grass-roots activists with the need to forge a working alliance with the federal government.

At the same time, Dr. King was also able to nestle his arguments within a historical continuum, lending them the authority of tradition and the weight of association. For some, in his audience, the articulation of his dream for America would have evoked conscious or unconscious memories of Langston Hughes's call in a 1935 poem to “let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed” and W. E. B. Du Bois's description of the “wonderful America, which the founding fathers dreamed.” His final lines in the March on Washington speech come from a Negro spiritual reminding listeners of slaves' sustaining faith in the possibility of liberation: “Free at last, free at last; thank God Almighty, we are free at last.”

For those less familiar with African-American music and literature, there were allusions with immediate, patriotic connotations. Much the way Lincoln redefined the founders' vision of America in his [Gettysburg Address](#) by invoking the Declaration of Independence, so Dr. King in his “Dream” speech makes references to both the Gettysburg Address and the Declaration of Independence. These deliberate echoes helped universalize the moral underpinnings of the civil rights movement and emphasized that its goals were only as revolutionary as the founding fathers' original vision of the United States. Dr. King's dream for America's “citizens of color” was no more, no less than the American Dream of a country where “all men are created equal.”

As for Dr. King's quotation of "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" — an almost de facto national anthem, familiar even to children — it underscored civil rights workers' patriotic belief in the project of reinventing America. For Dr. King, it might have elicited personal memories, too. The night his home was bombed during the bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala., endangering the lives of his wife, Coretta, and their infant daughter, he calmed the crowd gathered in front of their house, saying, "I want you to love our enemies." Some of his supporters reportedly broke into song, including hymns and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee."

The March on Washington and Dr. King's "Dream" speech would play an important role in helping pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the pivotal Selma to Montgomery march that he led in 1965 would provide momentum for the passage later that year of the [Voting Rights Act](#). Though Dr. King received the [Nobel Peace Prize in 1964](#), his exhausting schedule (he had been giving hundreds of speeches a year) and his frustration with schisms in the civil rights movement and increasing violence in the country led to growing weariness and depression before his assassination in 1968.

The knowledge that Dr. King gave his life to the cause lends an added poignancy to the experience of hearing his speeches today. And so does being reminded now — in the second term of Barack Obama's presidency — of the dire state of race relations in the early 1960s, when towns in the South still had separate schools, restaurants, hotels and bathrooms for blacks and whites, and discrimination in housing and employment was prevalent across the country. Only two and a half months before the "Dream" speech, Gov. George Wallace had stood in a doorway at the University of Alabama in an attempt to block two black students from trying to register; the next day the civil rights activist [Medgar Evers](#) was assassinated in front of his home in Jackson, Miss.

President Obama, who once wrote about his mother's coming home "with books on the civil rights movement, the recordings of Mahalia Jackson, the speeches of Dr. King," has described the leaders of the movement as "giants whose shoulders we stand on." Some of his own speeches owe a clear debt to Dr. King's ideas and words.

In his 2004 Democratic National Convention keynote address, which brought him to national attention, Mr. Obama channeled Dr. King's vision of hope, speaking of coming "together as one American family." In his 2008 speech about race, he talked, much as Dr. King had, of continuing "on the path of a more perfect union." And in his 2007 speech commemorating the 1965 Selma march, he echoed Dr. King's remarks about Exodus, describing Dr. King and the other civil rights leaders as members of the Moses generation who "pointed the way" and "took us 90 percent of the way there." He and his contemporaries were their heirs, Mr. Obama said — they were members of the Joshua generation with the responsibility of finishing "the journey Moses had begun."

Dr. King knew it would not be easy to "transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood" — difficulties that persist today with new debates over voter registration laws and the Trayvon Martin shooting. Dr. King probably did not foresee a black president celebrating the 50th anniversary of his speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial, and surely did not foresee a monument to himself just a short walk away. But he did dream of a future in which the country embarked on "the sunlit path of racial justice," and he foresaw, with bittersweet prescience, that 1963, as he put it, was "not an end, but a beginning."

"I Have a Dream" is a public speech that was delivered by American civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom on August 28, 1963, in which he called for civil and economic rights and an end to racism in the United States. Delivered to over 250,000 civil rights supporters from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., the speech was a defining moment of the civil rights movement and among the most iconic speeches in American history. Why does Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech exert such a potent hold on people around the world and across the generations? Part of its resonance resides in Dr. King's moral imagination. Part of it resides in his masterly oratory and gift for connecting with his audience—be they on the Mall that day in the sun or watching the speech on television or, decades later, viewing it online. The son, grandson and great-grandson of Baptist ministers, Dr. King was comfortable with the black church's oral tradition, and he knew how to read his audience and react to it; he would often work jazzlike improvisations around favorite sermonic riffs—like the "I Have a Dream" sequence—cutting and pasting his own words and those of others. In this speech, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. recited his perspective on segregation at one of the most significant civil rights rallies in history. King's intentions were to let people know that racism must come to an end and African Americans must gain civil and economic rights. Don't waste time. Get a verified writer to help you with The Lasting Power of Dr. King's Dream Speech. Hire verified writer. \$35.80 for a 2-page paper. The way King initiated his message through the use of rhetorical devices, pathos, ethos, and logos, allowed his audience to hear and connect with his message sufficiently. The use of pathos in this speech leaves the audience with a sense of compassion and empowerment. This speech is clearly delivered with great passion that allows the audience to feel determined.