

5/21/61

Statement to Freedom Riders Rally
First Baptist Ch.
Montgomery, Ala.

STATEMENT BY DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.
PRESIDENT OF THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP
CONFERENCE
DELIVERED AT A RALLY TO SUPPORT THE FREEDOM RIDERS
SUNDAY, MAY 21, 1961
FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH
MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

The words that I will utter tonight were written this morning as I flew at an altitude of 38,000 feet on a jet plane from New York to Atlanta, Georgia. As that gigantic instrument stretched its wings through the air like an eagle and moved smoothly toward its destination, many thoughts ran through my mind. On the one hand I thought of how the technological developments of the United States had brought the nation and the world to an awe-inspiring threshold of the future. I thought of how our scientific genius had helped us to draw distance and place time in chains. I thought of how we had carved highways through the stratosphere, and how our jet planes had compressed in to minute distances that once took days. On the other hand I thought of that brutal mob in Alabama and the reign of terror that had engulfed Anniston, Birmingham and Montgomery. I thought of the tragic expressions of man's inhumanity to man that still exist in certain sections of our country. I could not help being concerned about this glaring contrast, this tragic gulf. Through our scientific and technological developments we have lifted our heads to the sky and yet our feet are still firmly planted in the muck of barbarism and racial hatred. Indeed this is America's chief moral dilemma. And unless the Nation grapples with this dilemma forthrightly and firmly, she will be relegated to a second rate power in the world. The price that America must pay for the continued oppression of the Negro is the price of its own destruction. America's greatest defense against communism is to take the offense for justice, freedom, and human dignity.

The Freedom Ride grew out of a recognition of the American delinma and a desire to bring the nation to a realization of its noble dream. We are all deeply indebted to CORE for this creative idea. These courageous freedom riders have faced ugly and howling mobs in order to arouse the dozing conscience of the nation. Some of them are now hospitalized as a result of physical injury. They have accepted blows without retaliation. One day all of America will be proud of their achievements.

Over the past few days Alabama has been the scene of a literal reign of terror. It has sunk to a level of barbarity comparable to the tragic days of Hitler's Germany.

Now who is responsible for this dark night of terror in Alabama? Certainly the mob itself must be condemned. When people sink to such a low level of hatred and evil that they will beat unmercifully non-violent men and women, they should be apprehended and prosecuted on the basis of the crime they have committed. But the ultimate responsibility for the hideous action in Alabama last week must be placed at the doorsteps of the Governor of this State. His consistent preaching of defiance of the law, his vitriolic public pronouncements, and his irresponsible actions created the atmosphere in which violence could thrive. When the governor of a state will urge people to defy the Law of the Land, and teach them to disrespect the Supreme Court, he is consciously and unconsciously aiding and abetting the forces of violence.

Among the many sobering lessons that we can learn from the events of the past week is that the deep South will not impose limits upon itself. The limits must be imposed from without. Unless the Federal Government acts forthrightly in the South to assure

every citizen his constitutional rights, we will be plunged into a dark abyss of chaos. The federal government must not stand idly by while blood thirsty mobs beat non-violent students with impunity.

The familiar cry of state rights will certainly come up at this time. The South will argue that Federal intervention is an invasion of the Rights of States. We must answer this argument by making it clear that we too believe in State Rights. We are committed to Jeffersonian democracy and would not want to see a complete centralization^{of} government. But although States must have Rights, no State must have the right to do wrong. We must not allow state wrongs to exist under the banner of State Rights. To deny individuals the right to vote through threats, intimidations and other insidious methods is not a State Right, But a State Wrong. To trample over a people with the iron feet of economic exploitation is not a State Right, but a State Wrong. To keep a group of people confined to nasty slums and dirty hovels is not a State Right, but a State Wrong. To confine certain citizens to segregated schools and deprive them of an equal education is a State Wrong moving under the guise of a State Right. To allow hooded perpetrators of violence and vicious mobs to beat, kick and even kill people who only want to be free is a State Wrong without one scintilla of right. We are for State Rights when they are Right.

The other familiar cry that we will hear is that freedom riders, the federal government and no other agency can force integration upon the South. Morals, they argue, cannot be legislated.

To this we must answer it may be true that morals cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that laws and federal action cannot change bad internal attitudes, but they can control the external effects of those internal attitudes. The law may not be able to make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me. The fact is that the habits, if not the hearts of men have been, and are being changed everyday by federal action.

The recent developments in Alabama should challenge us more than ever before to delve deeper into the struggle for freedom in this State. There must now be ^a full scale non-violent assault on the system of segregation in Alabama. In a few days I will call a meeting of the executive board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to map plans for a massive campaign to end segregation in Alabama. This will include an intensified voter registration drive, a determined effort to integrate the public schools, lunch counters, public parks, theaters etc. In short, we will seek to mobilize thousands of people, committed to the method of non-violence, who will physically identify themselves with the struggle to end segregation in Alabama. We will present our physical bodies as instruments to defeat the unjust system.

We cannot in all good conscience sit complacently by while Alabama has no respect for law and order and while it continues to impose upon the Negro the most inhuman form of oppression. We must stand up now not for ourselves alone, but in order to carry our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in the formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. If Alabama continues to follow its present course of defiance, lawlessness, and Hitlerism, the

image of the United States will be irreparable scarred and the results may be fatal in terms of our national survival.

As I close may I strongly urge you to continue to follow the path of non-violence. The freedom riders have given us a magnificent example of strong courageous action devoid violence. This I am convinced is our most creative way to break loose from the paralyzing shackles of segregation. As we intensify our efforts in Alabama, Mississippi, and the deep South generally, we will face difficult days, angry passions of the opposition will be aroused. Honesty impels me to admit that we are in for a season of suffering. I pray that recognizing the necessity of suffering we will make of it a virtue. To suffer in a righteous cause is to grow to our humanity's full stature. If only to save ourselves, we need the vision to see the ordeals of this generation as the opportunity to transform ourselves and American society.

So in the days ahead let us not sink into the quicksands of violence; rather let us stand on the high ground of love and non-injury. Let us continue to be strong spiritual anvils that will wear out many a physical hammer.

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