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King's speech at March on Washington still resonates today

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.

These powerful words resonate as clearly today as they did 50 years ago when, on Aug. 28, 1963, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and called for an end to social injustice and the start of an era of racial equality. Standing in the shadow of the statue of the Great Emancipator, King shared his vision of fairness for all with more than 250,000 civil rights supporters from across the country, who converged on our nation's capital during the historic March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

These 17 minutes forever changed history, as King's moving and eloquent speech touched the hearts and minds of Americans, serving as a catalyst for positive change through non-violent means.

Five decades later, King's remarks have been recognized by scholars as one of the greatest speeches of the 20th century. Through his incredible mastery of the spoken word, and his reliance upon vivid and powerful imagery, King galvanized support to end discrimination while inspiring all segments of society to join together to achieve a better future hallmarked by harmony and justice.

In his speech, King eschewed the use of technical legal arguments in favor of reliance upon history and philosophy. For example, King began by drawing parallels to Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. By noting that the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed "[f]ive score years ago," King reminded listeners of Lincoln's opening statement of "[f]our score and seven years ago," thereby planting the seed

that this speech was a similarly historic event.

King also employed several effective stylistic devices, such as repeating words at the beginning of neighboring sentences. For example, King wished to emphasize that "now is the time" to leave behind the unjust practices of the past and embark on a new road to equality. King highlighted the urgency of the moment by repeating the phrase "now is the time" on four occasions in one paragraph calling for specific action:

"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 open the doors of opportunity to all of God's children. Now is the time to lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood. Now is the time to make justice a reality for all of God's children."

King used this same technique in the best-known part of the speech. After vividly setting forth the tremendous difficulties faced by blacks, King transitioned into declaring his dream for a future in which all could live as equals in harmony. Stating "I have a dream" nine times, King set forth with passion and power his vision of a better, fairer future:

"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.

LAW FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

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"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.

“King’s speech worked to advance civil rights legislation in Congress, resulting in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.”

"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; one day right there 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 straight, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

Finally, King also repeated the key theme of "freedom," using that word nearly two dozen times within his remarks and closed his speech with this powerful image:

"[W]hen we allow freedom to 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!'"

King's speech worked to advance civil rights legislation in Congress, resulting in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King was named Time magazine's Man of the Year in 1963 and, in 1964 — at the age of 35 — was the youngest person ever honored with the Nobel Peace Prize.

Tragically, King lost his life to an assassin's bullet in 1968, at the age of 39. King's legacy, however, lives on in his powerful words which changed the course of history.