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AN EXPERIMENT IN POWER

Mr. President, members of the Board, affiliate leaders, delegates and friends of this Ninth Annual Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. I consider it much more than a pleasure to deliver this keynote address; it is a grave responsibility, one for which I feel dreadfully inadequate. I say this as no empty gesture at humility, but in a realization of the fact that the issues which confront mankind at this juncture of our history are so grave that the very survival of mankind is at stake in the day to day action which grows from this organization.

Therefore I ask you to bear with my chauvinism, both racial and organizational, for both as a people and as an organization, we seem to be caught up in an inescapable network of destiny. For at least the past two years the progress of our nation has stemmed from the work of this organization. The domestic crises of our time have been joined by the people who now gather here and we must humbly face the fact that not only did two Civil Rights Acts grow from our collective action, but the impetus and inspiration for the Coalition of Conscience which made possible the Poverty Program, the actualization of President Johnson's plan for a Great Society, the repeal of the so-called Right to Work Laws as well as the awakening of the academic communities of our nation on the issues of World Peace.

I say this not to claim any special credit for either the race or the organization, for I know too well that there is no special merit in either. But

somehow, God in His good pleasure has raised up from the dust of the Southern Black Belt and the suffering of two centuries of slavery a people to whom He has entrusted His Power. We are not a rich people. We are not an especially brilliant people. We are not, God forgive us, even a particularly industrious people. And we are hardly what moralists would call a good people. But somehow, God has chosen us as His people, and called His children from the far corners of the world, the diverse nationalities of our nation, and the myriad religious expressions of our time to gather around us in a glorious procession to a land of freedom and justice.

Seeking Hot Dogs Instead of Jobs

The past ten years have been but our infancy, and like an infant, we have stumbled and stammered as we learned to walk through the valleys and shadows which encompassed us. We have groped for words, and sung songs of faith when we had no word. We have blindly treaded in faith through the injustices of our society, seeking hot dogs when we needed jobs, standing in at movies when we needed education, arguing over bus rides when we needed houses and staging boycotts for jobs which would soon be non-existent when we needed political rights to shape and structure our own destiny.

Those days are fast coming to an end, and we must now take the next steps into adolescence and begin to perceive ourselves and our movement as more than a passing fancy to work out our frustra-

tions and bitterness on occasion and then return to the status quo until the following summer of our discontent.

Just as an awakening adolescent becomes aware of the power of his own will, the power in his body, and the power in his soul, if he is lucky, so the movement, and SCLC in particular, must accept the presence of power and learn to understand it and deal with it responsibly.

I liken these experiences of power, as seen in adolescent individuals, to the potential social power we see in the South; the power to have a will of our own in our political life; the potential power which is present in the tremendous bodies of people who gathered around Dr. King in the North; and the power of truth—that beloved soul force about which Gandhi spoke so much, and which we have only begun to explore.

The next phase of the movement must be an experiment in power.

Political Power in the South

The passage of the Voting Rights Bill gives us a new opportunity to reform the political structure of America and make democracy a reality. Already we have begun to see Congressmen change their tunes. Weltner of Atlanta voted with liberals of the Johnson Administration on all but one issue, the repeal of the right to work laws. Talmadge, whose name is synonymous with racism and bigotry, has offered to nominate Negroes to the military academies and entertained Senator Leroy Johnson at his Lovejoy, Georgia, plantation. Mayor Ivan Allen, who ran as a segregationist for Governor of Georgia only a few years ago, was the only elected official to testify in behalf of the public accommodations section of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. These occurrences and many more fulfill the maxim of Frederick Douglas: that this is a struggle to save Black men's bodies and white men's souls. We are going to see many more Southern Congressmen "get religion" and start thinking about their Black Brothers.

There are also now 10 Negroes sitting in the Georgia Legislature, and the next election will certainly triple the number of Negro elected officials across the Southland.

A Century of Fear

But all of this is dependent upon organization and action on our part. People will not lightly throw off a century of fear and go gaily skipping

down to the Court House to register. Civics is not taught in the schools, so they don't know the value of the ballot, and they do know the value of their jobs, their plantation homes and their lives; and in spite of all the good that this Bill will do, it offers very little protection against intimidation and economic reprisal. Only group action and concerted organized effort can overcome these obstacles.

The question remains, how do we organize? Do we simply seek to join a local precinct? Do we organize independent Negro Voting Leagues? And if so, what can we do to keep us from exploitation by Negro politicians? These are the questions which come with the presence of real power. Power corrupts, and therefore some method must be followed to insure a balance of power and checks against the abuse of power.

The Freedom Democratic Party in Mississippi has sought to organize the masses under the assumption that there is some inherent purity in poverty. Tennessee Voters Council is essentially a Negro middle-class operation, which while it has done a tremendous job in voter registration, unification of Negro voting power and election of Negro officials, has yet to deliver anything concrete to the masses of people such as a minimum wage law with extended coverage.

A Coalition of Classes

I would think that SCLC would make an effort to avoid both of these extremes and organize a coalition of classes, where representation and leadership might come not only from every geographic area of a state or region, but also see to it that every strata of society continues to be represented.

In this principle we recognize that a man's worth is not dependent on wealth or education, but on the fact that he is God's child and that God has given men integrity, sensitivity, proficiency and dedication regardless of their station in life and the opportunities which society has afforded. The history of the movement thus far is that the "little people" have carried the bulk of the burden. But "little people" can sometimes be more easily tempted by newly-acquired power than persons who have grown accustomed to dealing in power and money, therefore a coalition organization is required to insure a balance of power and checks against its abuse.

The question of the partisan or nonpartisan

nature of this coalition is academic at this point in the South's history. The Goldwater forces ran us out of the Republican Party, but this means that it is even more imperative that we not be considered the captives of the Democratic Party. The coming years must see us as an independently organized force which functions within the Democratic Party but which is capable of functioning independently of that party and even switching whenever the opportunity affords it. We must still find every opportunity to encourage the development of a two-party South.

Newly-Accessible Power

The implications of this newly-accessible power are tremendous, not only for the Negro in the South as he determines the kinds of schools, hospitals, jobs, and sheriffs he will have, but will go a long way toward freeing the nation as a whole from a corrupt and powerful Southern bloc which dominates our legislative halls and impedes every progressive foreign and domestic issue which arises.

Smith of Virginia, as Chairman of the House Rules Committee, determines the bills which come before the House, when and how they come forth. From this position of power, every liberal in the House is forced to pay some dues to the Southern oligarchy in every measure offered for legislation. McMillan of South Carolina cripples a half million Negroes in the District of Columbia, and is in the process of making the nation's Capitol one of the most backward cities in America.

To free the nation from racist domination and influence is the key to the future. Urban Affairs, whether they be urban transit between the metropolitan and suburban complexes, urban housing, expansion of the minimum wage coverage to include service occupations in which minorities predominate or increased educational supports for ghetto schools all tend to be side-tracked or emasculated by the reactionary Southern ax. Our domestic problems, and the future crises of our nation, are in cities. Nothing is more important to our national health than to free our Congress to deal creatively with these problems. This is one of the issues which hangs in the balance of how effectively we do our job in the South.

Costs of War

The international issues of our time also rest on the redistribution of Southern power. Our concern for the war in Viet Nam and the senseless

intervention in the Dominican Republic is only natural. As Dr. King says so eloquently, "there is no need in fighting to integrate a society which any day may be blown out from under us." We are also concerned that the national budget is seriously overburdened by the costs of war when the demand at home and abroad is for a war against poverty rather than against people. We can never have the funds needed to make for peace and prosperity so long as we spend so much to make war and the weapons of war.

However, we should not abandon our task and turn our attention to organizing marches on Redstone Arsenal. One of the significant differences between the civil rights movement and the peace movement in this country is that we have taken power and political reform seriously, while dramatizing an issue, while the peace movement has often appealed to conscience in an area where the loyalties and ethical mandates are not always clear and simple.

We are as much against the war in Viet Nam as anyone, but, let us not abandon our tried and tested methods of producing social change in an emotional effort to get on a band wagon that's playing a "square" tune.

The Threat of Nuclear Annihilation

Increasing the Negro vote in an organized manner will rid the South of men like Congressman Passman of Louisiana who has conducted a very effective campaign against the very foreign aid and technical assistance which could make unnecessary the so called wars of liberation which constantly threaten to erupt into a world holocaust as East and West vie for the right of oppression and exploitation. As long as men like Passman and Richard Russell of Georgia have great power in the Foreign Affairs and Armed Forces Committees of Congress we are constantly under the threat of nuclear annihilation. But let's not run to Washington to picket the White House, let's stay here and organize to replace them with men of good will who will understand that "I am my brother's keeper" and be as willing to vote a Marshall Plan for Asia, Africa and Latin America as they were to do so for Europe.

At this juncture, SCLC must cast its resources toward the long haul of building a peace through an enlightened electorate which can look squarely into the 20th Century and not be afraid of Com-

munism or of the miserable, squalid conditions in which Communism flourishes.

The Power of Numbers in the North

The recent Northern Tour by Dr. King and our staff unfolded an additional source of power which we have at our disposal. It is a power so awesome that it frightens me to think about it; and I tremble to think what might happen if it is not organized and disciplined in the interest of positive social change. This is the sheer power of human bodies, massed and committed around a creative program.

In two or three days we were able to gather people by the tens of thousands in Chicago, Cleveland, Philadelphia and Washington. I think it is safe to say that with a little planning and effort it would be possible to recruit a nonviolent army of upwards of one hundred thousand in any major city in the country. Can you imagine what it would mean for a hundred thousand persons to hold a week long vigil in the "Spaghetti Bowl" interchange of Chicago's Expressway System? Or let's suppose we decided to organize marches from Newark, Brooklyn, Jamaica, L. I., and Harlem to converge on Wall Street in an appeal for a morally responsible approach to the whole question of automation and unemployment.

These kinds of demonstrations are so well within our capabilities that we must be careful to employ them with extreme caution and with the utmost preparation and responsibility. You might remember that Dr. King took his second team of organizers with him on this past tour and they only worked a few days preparing each community. James Orange, Andrew Marrisett, Jimmy Collier, J. T. Johnson, Eric and Ann Kindberg did a marvelous job along with the others. But just imagine what it would be like to turn Jim Bevel, Hosea Williams and C. T. Vivian loose on a community for a few weeks along with Dr. King and the others. You could truly amass a number that no man could number and commit them to almost any program of action that spoke to their needs.

Cancerous Social Decay

This power could be the answer to the basic issues and structural problems in our society which threaten to breed a cancerous social decay within metropolitan life. I am speaking of unemployment; slum housing; and over-crowded, segregated and otherwise generally-inadequate education. These

problems must be dealt with. They are not just Negro problems either. They are flaws in the basic nature of our society which affect the whole society.

SCLC has been gifted with this tremendous power to mobilize and inspire, but we will not use it to attempt to take over the country. Rather, we will be a consultative firm of social engineers which will make its services available to the forces of good will within a community in projects of moral and spiritual urban renewal, redeeming the soul of America and constructing the social foundations of a beloved community.

Before we move in any area, however, we must spend time training a dedicated cadre of informed nonviolent local leadership so that we can insure discipline and control of the demonstrations under any circumstance. We must research issues carefully and call upon the best minds of the community to work out the approach to the community's problems and develop a sound definition of the issues at hand.

There will be problems with political power structures which will be complicated by the fact that there will be Negroes involved and even at the helm of the opposition. There will not be the same kind of press support or financial support that we have received from the North as the movement comes closer to home and threatens vested interests. But if we are true to Gandhi and seek to attack issues rather than people, we can hope to inspire even our opposition to new moral heights, and thereby overcome.

The Power of Truth

Ultimately, any power which God has placed at our disposal is grounded in the fact that our cause is just, our method of pursuit—noble.

Any success which grows out of our efforts must be totally dependent upon the power of truth: "soul force." In this spirit there must be continuous self criticism and self analysis. Even more so in view of the fact that our opposition has grown more sophisticated and subtle. In the past we could count on a Bull Conner or Jim Clark to create such a savage and brutal image that our own weaknesses were ignored amid the blatant horror and injustice which surrounded all our demonstrations.

The future means a more diligent pursuit of the truth, and a more disciplined cultivation of the power within our souls. The tactical nonviolence which was sufficient in the past will be weighed in

the balance and found wanting in the future. Men must begin to learn to love one another, not just restrain themselves from killing one another. The non-violent attitude will be every bit as important as the non-violent action. Our speech must lose the harsh and hostile tones which creep into our negotiations. Our eyes must soften their glances and be free of any residue of malice or resentment. This is not just a necessity for a non-violent movement, it is a necessity for the maintenance of human community.

Learning to Live

One of the blessings of automation will be that it will force us to learn to live . . . simply to "be" where we have cluttered our existence with striving and doing.

Unfortunately, there will be more suffering, but the few who are chosen for nonviolent leadership must voluntarily take on that suffering in order that untold millions may live free of that suffering. The brief history of our movement should remind us of the harsh lesson of life that God's way of progress is the way of the cross. There will still be crosses to bear.

There will also be temptations. We have come through the fear of death and the threat of violence. Many have been fired from jobs, but they wouldn't let this turn them around. Homes have been bombed and night riders terrorized our communities. Churches have been burned and children murdered in Sunday School, but this could not turn us around.

Crowded in Jails Like Cattle

We have filled the jail houses of the South. We have been crowded into jail cells like cattle and our jailers have turned the heat on when it was 90 degrees in the summertime, and they have opened the windows and taken away our blankets when it was 16 degrees in the wintertime. We have been carted to jail in garbage trucks, made to sit in the Florida sun for days with no shade and no water in an animal compound, but we wouldn't let this turn us around.

Fire hoses, dogs, cattle prods, sweat boxes and many inexpressible cruelties have been met with courage and determination, and none of these could turn us around.

We have overcome the test of physical violence, now we must face the tests of spiritual trial.

The enemies we now face will not beat us, they

will offer us bribes. We will be offered high-paying jobs and positions of honor and prestige. But if we are to work together to continue this movement we cannot sell our souls for a mess of pottage. It will be tempting, for they will be honorable jobs with poverty programs and social welfare causes. The attack will now be made against the spirit, and the weaknesses of our egos will be set against each other. We will be tempted to struggle for the "seats of honor in the Synagogue" and to compete with each other for the praise and acclamation of men. But if we are to overcome we will have to remember that, "he who would be greatest among you, let him be the servant of all," and that, "he who loses his life for my sake and the gospels will truly find it."

The Enemies Within

The enemies we now face are often within. The publicity that we have received may well give us the impression that we are experts and that we don't need to think things through together, read and study the thoughts of others or remain open for new truth.

The enemies we now face will tempt us with comfort and pleasure that we might forget our brothers in the teeming ghettos of the nation while we languor in air-conditioned comfort. It will be increasingly easy for us to fall into the trap of large scale tokenism for those who have been to college and ignore the hungry millions from Mississippi to Madras.

Only a broadening of our vision can save us from these obstacles. We must see that our work extends beyond the South and into the North, and when we have completed our work there we must go from New York to London and Paris and from there to Brazzaville and Johannesburg until the rights of man are secure the world over.

Not too long ago my daughter asked me, "Daddy, will I have to go to jail when I grow up, or will Negroes be free by then?" I stopped for a minute, for I wanted to say that she wouldn't have to go to jail. I wanted to think that we could complete the color revolution in our generation, but then I remembered that this is a movement against evil and injustice and I said, "Yes, Baby, you will have to go to jail when you grow up, but it may not be for the freedom of Negroes, but somewhere in the world some people will be oppressed, and you may have to go to jail for their freedom."