

Who Speaks for the South?

Martin Luther King, Jr.



THE HISTORY OF OUR nation is the history of a long and tireless effort to broaden the franchise of American citizens. At the very birth of our nation, a great struggle had to be made to secure the ballot for people who did not own property. Even among the founding fathers there were men who felt that only those who owned property should have the right to vote. Over this issue a mighty struggle took place. When, after many long years, this fight was successfully won, a great effort was made by women seeking to obtain the franchise. Again after weary decades of agitation, the 19th Amendment to the Constitution opened a new chapter in the lives of women and in the life of our nation.

Thus, we see that from 1789 to 1920 disenfranchised Americans fought and won their basic right to vote. However, for the Negroes of the South, there was still no ballot. Whether they owned property or were penniless, whether male or female, these American victories in the extension of democracy did not affect them.

But this history does provide a profound lesson for the voteless Negroes. It teaches us how a struggle is won. We see that the poor men of 1776 did not accept disenfranchisement without protest. In a legal manner, these pioneers fought as hard for the vote as they had fought as minute men at Lexington and Concord.

Later when women decided the time had come for them to vote, they were far from submissive or silent. They cried out in the halls of government. They agitated in their homes. They protested in the streets. And they were jailed. But they pressed on. Their voices were vigorous, even strident, but they were always effective. Through their courage, their steadfastness, their unity and their willingness to sacrifice, they won the right to vote.

From these women we have learned how social changes take place through struggle. In this same tradition of determination, of confidence in the justice of a cause, Negroes must now demand the right to vote. And these qualities of courage, perseverance, unity, sacrifice, plus a nonviolence of spirit are the weapons we must depend upon if we are to vote with freedom.

America must begin the struggle for democracy *at home*. The advocacy of free elections in Europe by American officials is hypocrisy when free elections are not held in great sections of America. To Negro Americans it is ironic to be governed, to be taxed, to be given orders, but to have no representation in a nation that would defend the right to vote abroad. We have a duty to deliver our nation from this snare and this delusion.

Let us make our intentions crystal clear. We must and we will be free. We want freedom now. We want the right to vote now. We do not want freedom fed to us in teaspoons over another 150 years. Under God we were born free. Misguided men robbed us of our freedom. We want it back; we would keep it forever. This is not idle chatter, for we know that sacrifice is involved, that brutality will be faced, that savage conduct will need to be endured, that slick trickery will need to be overcome, but we are resolutely prepared for all of this. We are prepared to meet whatever comes with love, with firmness and with unyielding nonviolence. We are prepared to press on unceasingly and persistently, to obtain our birthright and to hand it down to our children and to their children's children.

Already this struggle has had its sacred martyrs: The Reverend George Washington Lee, shot and killed in Mississippi; Mr. and Mrs. Harry Moore, bombed and murdered here in Florida; Emmett Till, a mere boy, unqualified to vote, but seemingly used as a victim to terrorize Negro citizens and keep them from the polls. While the blame for the grisly mutilation of Till has been placed upon two cruel men, the ultimate responsibility for this and other tragic events must rest with the American people themselves. It rests with all of us, black and white, who call ourselves civilized men. For democracy demands responsibility, courage, and the will to freedom from all men.

There is blood on the hands of those who halt the progress of our nation and frustrate the advancement of its people by coercion and violence. But despite this, it is our duty to pray for those who mistreat us. We must pray for a change of attitude in all those who violate human dignity and who rob men, women and little children of human decency. We must pray for ourselves