

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech behind the *1964 Civil Rights Act*: Analysis and Comment

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Abstract: *The Civil Rights Act of 1964 left an indelible imprint in the history book of the United States of America, but especially in the sad history pages of African Americans. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed this act not out of generosity or for democratic reasons. It was a victory of good over evil, of nonviolent direct action over violence, the result of a long battle against injustice. Several prominent African Americans raised their eloquent voices to lead this battle in dignity and self-respect. From these warriors, emerged a courageous and charismatic leader. No American remained indifferent to his great speeches, no matter what their religious allegiances or race belongings. Martin Luther King, Jr., was the American moral voice of the 1950s and 1960s. His voice federalized the majority and minority groups and made pleas of peace and justice everywhere. Great speeches span times and generations because they have entered the eternal annals of history. This paper presents a detailed analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.'s oratory, particularly his "I Have a Dream" speech, and its significant impact on the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Through examining the rhetorical devices and historical context of King's speech, the study highlights how his eloquence and moral persuasion contributed to advancing civil rights in the United States of America.*

Keywords: 1964 Civil Rights Act, Martin Luther King, Jr., oratory analysis, rhetorical devices, human right.

1. Introduction

36th U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the *1964 Civil Rights Act* due to the protest movements all across the USA led by different influent leaders. But this was also possible thanks to the significant efforts of human rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. Prior to the signature of this momentous act, King had made a great speech at the end of several long marches that mobilized thousands of people from different creeds, races and social strata.

In his great speeches, King loved to trace African Americans' history back to 1619. He then evoked all the milestones that influenced their lives, from the Dred Scott Decision of 1857 to the 1896 Supreme Court decision. In 1619, twenty Africans brought to Jamestown, Virginia, were the first African Americans in colonial America. Although originally considered as indentured servants, by the 1660s, most African Americans were legally held as slaves. By 1775, the colonies contained some 400,000 African American slaves, of whom three-fourths were in the South (Gordon, 1975: 10).

African Americans were taken to the USA from the soils of Africa. And unlike the Pilgrim Fathers who landed at Plymouth a year later, they were taken to the USA against their wills. Throughout slavery, the African American was treated in a very inhuman fashion. He was a subhuman, a thing to be used, not a person to be respected. He was merely a depersonalized cog in a vast plantation machine (King, 1986: 17). The Dred Scott case of 1857 confirmed that since they were slaves African Americans were property and might be taken into federal territories (Gordon, 1975: 107).

After the *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), the Supreme Court unanimously held that racial segregation in public schools violated the 14th Amendment (Gordon, 1975: 227). As African Americans started gaining citizenship rights gradually, white racists and bigots formed hate organizations as in the past during slavery. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK), originally founded in 1866 in Pulaski, Tennessee, revitalized in 1915, continued to commit hate crimes and lynching with complete impunity (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024). Next to the KKK, historian David Halberstam wrote in 1956 in *Commentary*, an American magazine, that in Mississippi were born White Citizens Councils, a loosely connected series of local white groups, who struggled to achieve a constitutionally illegal purpose by "all legal means." Unlike the KKK, they shunned violence and incarnated respectability. At their meetings, there was emphasis on speakers from the ministry and the universities (Facing History & Ourselves, 2022).

Therefore, the resistance to African Americans' aspirations expressed itself in the resurgence of the KKK and the birth of the White Citizens Councils. The first organization relied on hatred, blackmails, haberdashery to install psychological fear, and barbarism and the second on unjust laws. To preserve its international image of democracy and possible dreams, the USA could not tolerate overt barbarian acts. Nonetheless, white racists and bigots used *de jure* coercion tools. The legislative halls of the South rang loud with such words as interposition and nullification to make federal laws unconstitutional (King, 1986: 66).

It is reasonable to both criticize the U.S. government and to defend it. On the one hand, with strong determination to end segregation and discrimination once for all, the race problem would have been solved a century ago before King's birth.

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On the other, legal means of interposition and nullification by some southern States, the black codes and Jim Crow laws, and racism itself as an evil in hearts and minds, made it quasi-impossible for the federal government to take a final positive decision about the black issue.

All the historical facts developed in the above lines help understand the general context that led to the signing of the 1964 *Civil Rights Act*. In almost all his works, whether written or spoken, King makes a good use of three rhetorical communication tools: *pathos*, *ethos* and *logos*. He used these communication tools to, respectively, dramatize the African American plight and gain the sympathy of moderate or neutral white people. By dramatizing, he legitimized his struggle to win white Americans' sympathy. For example, in 1965, white Americans Rev. James Reeb and Mrs. Viola Liuzzo were murdered for their unfaltering activism (King, 1986: 128). These communication tools also aided him to raise a moral concern about human rights on the national and international level, and to urge his fellow African Americans to leave their false comfort zones and stand up for their rights.

While other eloquent black leaders such as the thundering voice of Malcolm X could only address the most frustrated African Americans in the ghettos or to a smaller audience within the Nation of Islam, and intimidate white Americans, King could communicate to everybody. However, there was no Manichean relationship between these two leaders (Baldwin, 1989). Their personal voices opposed the wrong side of their common society. King's baritone voice moved, moralized, reasoned, but, more importantly, welded the broken parts of the nation. However, the more he became involved in social and political issues like poverty and war, the more the government and many of his sympathizers started losing faith in his dreams and ideals.

Ironically, the murder of his colleague Malcolm X moved him so much that he espoused some of his radicalism. After Malcolm's assassination in 1965, King wrote to his widow, Betty Shabazz: "While we did not always see eye to eye on methods to solve the race problem, I always had a deep affection for Malcolm and felt that he had the great ability to put his finger on the existence and root of the problem". Moreover, in his paper "The Nightmare of Violence" of 1965, King asserted that Malcolm's murder deprived "the world of a potentially great leader" (Stanford University, n.d.). Even if Malcolm's death signaled the beginning of bitter battles involving proponents of the ideological alternatives the two men represented, King's voice rang much louder and reached diverse ethnic groups and races.

The purpose of this article is to analyze the rhetorical strategies employed by Martin Luther King Jr., in his speeches, with a focus on the "I Have a Dream" speech, and to explore their influence on the passage of the 1964 *Civil Rights Act*. This article's significance lies in its detailed examination of King's rhetorical techniques and their impact on the Civil Rights Movement, offering insights into the power of oratory in shaping historical events. The study employs a qualitative analysis of King's speeches, focusing on rhetorical devices, historical context, and their impact on the Civil Rights Movement.

2. Context

Like any other races in the USA, African Americans deserve full citizenship rights. They have participated in every phase of the country's history, from its foundations to its emergence as a global power. A significant number of African American figures deserve consideration. In 1770, Crispus Attucks was one of the men killed when British soldiers fired upon a hostile crowd, an event the colonists called the Boston Massacre. During the Revolutionary War, of some 300,000 American soldiers, 5,000 were African Americans. Among these soldiers were Peter Salem and Salem Poor (Gordon, 1975: 106).

The 14th Amendment of the Constitution (1787), ratified on July 9, 1868, has five sections. The first section clearly states that:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.

(The United States Information Agency, n.d.)

Twenty years passed after the ratification of the 14th Amendment, but the situation of African Americans turned into an even worse status quo. In 1896, in the *Plessy vs. Ferguson* decision, the Supreme Court, by eight to one, held constitutional a Louisiana law requiring segregation by race of railroad passengers. The Court held that such segregation did not violate the "equal protection of the laws" clause in the 14th Amendment, provided that facilities were *separate but equal* (Gordon, 1975: 226). In his oratory, King dramatically narrated these painful episodes and concluded:

Through this decision segregation gained legal and moral sanction. The end result of the Plessy doctrine was that it led to a strict enforcement of the "separate," with hardly the slightest attempt to abide by the "equal." So the Plessy doctrine ended up making for tragic inequalities and ungodly exploitation. [...] The great tragedy of physical slavery was that it led to mental slavery. So long as the Negro maintained this sub-servient attitude and accepted this "place" assigned to him, a sort of racial peace existed. But it was an uneasy peace in which the Negro was forced patiently to accept insult, injustice and exploitation. It was a negative peace.

(King, 1986: 17)

King refused to abide by the uneasy and negative peace Jim Crow laws imposed. After the successful bus boycott, from December 5, 1955 to December 20, 1956, demonstrations for civil rights multiplied. African Americans kept on marching, sitting-in, freedom riding, singing freedom songs, picketing, praying-in and wading-in for eight years until the

then president signed the *1964 Civil Rights Act*. The previous year of this historic victory is not forgettable.

In the centennial of Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, in 1963, African Americans underwent extremely violent repressions and sparked off riots across the country. According to James Melvin Washington, 1963 was so particularly violent that 35th President John F. Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard to reinstall order in Alabama. On August 28, the first large integrated protest march for jobs and freedom was held in Washington, D.C., after King and other civil rights leaders met with the president. Television cameras were there to capture the event and reveal to a larger audience the genius of King (King, 1986).

3. Analysis and Comment

In "I Have a Dream," King uses three different types of figures of speech to deliver his message: figures of opposition, figures of analogy and figures of construction. However, it is not appropriate to list the different figures of speech by category because in one sentence, the pastor uses two or three figures of speech. He mainly focuses on the power of words themselves, and then the figures of speech follow suit. Right in the beginning, he refers to President Lincoln, and to the drafters of the Declaration of Independence, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Roger Sherman and Robert Livingston (The United States Information Agency, n.d.). He hints at these emblematic figures respectfully. Further, he alludes to the Emancipation Proclamation, after naming it, Washington, D.C., the national capital of the USA, and Lincoln Memorial, with these periphrases:

A great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today.
The architects of our republic.
Momentous decree.
Our nation's capital.
Hallowed spot.

(King, 1986)

The same way King respectfully refers to the Founding Fathers of America, he also uses a metonymic device to talk to bigots in Mississippi, and he derogatorily speaks of Eugene "Bull" Connor and George Wallace in these words:

...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.

Down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification".

(King, 1986)

Connor was an ardent segregationist who served for 22 years as commissioner of public safety in Birmingham, Alabama. Connor used his administrative authority over the police and fire departments to ensure that Birmingham remained the most segregated city in America (Stanford University, n.d.).

As for Wallace, he was so racist that in his inaugural address of 1963 as Alabama Governor, he yelled, in increasing gradation, "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" (Stanford University, n.d.). In 1963, the violent responses of Connor, Wallace and their police force to demonstrations propelled the Civil Rights Movement into the national spotlight.

In the spotlight of the march at the end of which, he made the "I Have a Dream" speech, King defies Connor, Wallace and all the other racists in an asyndeton, a sentence with an omission of conjunctions. King pledges, "With this faith, we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day." He keeps showing commitment to the struggle as he has done when he periphrastically referred to the march on Washington as the "greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation." He also uses other periphrases to praise the wonderful work of all activists, from both black and white communities, and anaphora to insist on their resolution never to give up, in these phrases:

The marvelous new militancy.
The devotees of civil rights.
Veterans of creative suffering.

(King, 1986)

We can never be satisfied ... We can never be satisfied ...
One hundred years later ... One hundred years later ...
One hundred years later ...
We've come ... We've come ... We've come ...
Now is the time ... Now is the time ... Now is the time ...
We cannot ... We cannot ... We cannot ...

(King, 1986)

Connor and Wallace are the opposite of the society of goodwill so dear to King. No other figure of speech can oppose racism to integration than antithesis. The antitheses in the discourse of King constitute shocks of images that oppose darkness to light, tyranny to democracy, injustice to justice, and racism to integration. They often come in this particular order as he developed in "Facing the Challenge of a New Age" in 1957. Logically, it is often after hardships that one can see the light at the end of the tunnel. King had good mastery of tropes such as metaphors and simile, and through these rhetorical figures, he molded his beautifully crafted antitheses as in these example:

It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.

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 lift our nation from the quick sands of racial injustice to the solid rock of brotherhood.

This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality.

Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning.

We must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

We will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.

We will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

(King, 1986)

King uses imagery in a Manichean way. As a religious man steeped in Christianity, son and grandson of pastors, he opposes the lexical fields of darkness and light in almost all his works. In this particular 1963 speech full of emotions, he spoke for the first time to a special congregation he did not usually see in his church. This time, people from all lifestyles, composed of Whites, Blacks, Native Americans, Hispano-Americans, Jews, Christians and Muslims filled his audience. After describing the predicament of African Americans, he declared, "And so we've come here today to dramatize a shameful condition". The table below elaborates the opposed metaphorical words and phrases that compose King's antitheses in his "I Have a Dream" speech.

Table 1: A list of opposed metaphorical words and phrases in the "I Have a Dream" speech

Long night	Joyous daybreak
Lonely island of poverty	Vast ocean of material prosperity
Dark and desolate valley	Sunlit path
Quicksands	Solid rock
Sweltering summer	Invigorating autumn
End	Beginning
Physical force	Soul force
Jangling discord	Beautiful symphony

Other metaphorical words just make the message poetical but does not add any relevance to it. If one rewrote some sentences from the speech without imagery phrases, the beauty of the sentences might fade but their relevancy would remain intact. In these examples, all high-flown or superfluous words are put in italics:

The flames of withering injustice.
The manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.
The dark and desolate valley of segregation.
Tranquilizing drug of gradualism.
The whirlwinds of revolt.
The bright day of justice.
Drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.
Battered by the storms of persecution.
Staggered by the winds of police brutality.

(King, 1986)

To legitimize his efforts as a civil rights leader, King uses simile to imply that the Emancipation Proclamation was important and should never be overlooked, in this sentence: "This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope". The legitimization process does not cease. King employs modal auxiliaries such as "must," "shall," "cannot" and "will" to respectively say that it is a moral duty to nonviolently fight for one's right; that African Americans are now determined to fight; and that all activists in love with peace refuse to abandon, and that they promise to win the fight over evil not over men.

Always in the same spirit of legitimization of the Civil Rights Movement, King uses the most quoted passage of the Declaration of Independence two times. He quotes the passage in the beginning and by the end of his speech. He calls it a "promissory note" to remind his country that its African American children are also heirs of this note, and that they have come to the capital to cash their check. The Declaration of Independence stipulates:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

(The United States Information Agency, n.d.)

He keeps insisting on this promise that dated back to July 4, 1776 employing finance-related words such as "bank," "bankrupt," "insufficient funds," "vaults" and "riches". With these elements of language, King clarifies that the United States of America must not accept to impoverish its people whatever their race because it is a rich country. The Declaration of Independence is not the only document King quotes. He also evokes the Gospel (Amos 5: 24; Isaiah 40: 4-5) as in the first two quotations below followed by Samuel Francis Smith's anthem, and a Negro spiritual song that ends the historic speech:

Let justice rolls down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together".

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride.

Free at last! Free at last!
 Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!

(King, 1986)

Another feature of the "I Have a Dream" speech is the themes of radicalism and integration. King uses the first-person plural pronoun, "we", forty times along with its possessive adjective, "our", nineteen times, while he uses the first-person singular pronoun, "I", four times only, except

the “I” in the Negro spiritual, to directly talk about his fellow African Americans, his white brothers, and his dream and hope. The entire speech has one thousand six hundred sixty-seven words in a word file. With the first-person plural pronoun, King firmly affirms that there will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the African American is granted his citizenship rights (King, 1986).

As a minister of God delivered it, the “I Have a Dream” speech has religious complexion that calls out for race integration. The lexical word of religion includes, “God’s children,” “dream,” “hope,” “faith” and “the glory of the Lord”. Faith is a recurrent word that appears in King’s speeches. It works as glue with Herculean power that sticks Blacks and Whites together during the whole process of the struggle for human rights. In King’s dream:

The sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

... 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.

Little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

(King, 1986)

4. Conclusion

In summary, this analysis of Martin Luther King Jr.’s oratory in the Civil Rights Movement underscores the profound impact of his rhetorical skills. It highlights how King’s eloquence and moral persuasion were instrumental in the passage of the 1964 *Civil Rights Act*, thereby shaping the course of American history.

When asked how she felt on August 28, 1963, Coretta Scott King commented, “At that moment it seemed as if the Kingdom of God appeared. But it only lasted for a moment” (King, 1986). “I Have a Dream” is the most known speech of Martin Luther King, Jr., and one of the most quoted speech in American history. On the day of that keynote address of the march on Washington, D.C., for freedom and jobs, television cameras were there, and they allowed the entire nation to hear and see King plead for justice and freedom. Ten months past, and on July 2, 1964, the civil rights activists’ efforts paid. King attended the signing of the Public Accommodations Bill, part of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, by President Lyndon B. Johnson in the White House. Four months later, in Oslo, Norway, King received the Nobel Peace Prize on December 10 (King, 1986).

Because of its rhetorical power full of images, the “I Have a Dream” speech not only seduces, but it also constitutes a literary masterpiece. King offers, in his game-changing speech, classroom activities. Teachers of English stand a chance of exploring the “I Have a Dream” speech and exploiting it in their classrooms inspiring by this paper. This speech presents themes such as social crisis, race integration, hope, which deserve consideration and extensive study.

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