

Martin Luther King's First Speech to a National Audience



Martin Luther King Speaking at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in 1957

Accessed at <http://the60sat50.blogspot.com/2013/07/friday-may-17-1957-prayer-pilgrimage.html>

On May 17, 1957, Martin Luther King delivered his first speech to a national audience at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom in Washington, DC. Approximately twenty thousand people attended the three-hour event that commemorated the third anniversary of the *Brown v Board of Education* decision which ruled that school segregation was unconstitutional. In this activity, students will learn more about Dr. King's message by reading and analyzing two primary sources.

Targeted Benchmark: Civics Standard 3 [Citizenship] Grades 6-8a - Students will understand that civil rights secure political freedom while property rights secure economic freedom and that both are essential protections for United States citizens.

Literacy Standards Supported by this Activity

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.4](#)

Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including vocabulary specific to domains related to history/social studies

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.6](#)

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

[CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.6-8.7](#)

Integrate visual information (e.g., in charts, graphs, photographs, videos, or maps) with other information in print and digital texts.

Source 1: Text of Martin Luther King's speech at the Prayer Pilgrimage in 1957.

Mr. Chairman...fellow Americans. Three years ago the Supreme Court of this nation rendered in simple, eloquent, and unequivocal language a decision which will long be stenciled on the mental sheets of succeeding generations. For all men of goodwill, this May seventeenth decision came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of human captivity. It came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of disinherited people throughout the world who had dared only to dream of freedom.

Unfortunately, this noble and sublime decision has not gone without opposition. This opposition has often risen to ominous proportions. Many states have risen up in open defiance...

...all types of conniving methods are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters. The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic tradition. And so our most urgent request to the president of the United States and every member of Congress is to give us the right to vote.

Give us the ballot, and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights.

Give us the ballot, and we will no longer plead to the federal government for passage of an anti-lynching law; we will by the power of our vote write the law on the statute books of the South and bring an end to the dastardly acts of the hooded perpetrators of violence.

Give us the ballot, and we will transform the salient misdeeds of bloodthirsty mobs into the calculated good deeds of orderly citizens.

Give us the ballot, and we will fill our legislative halls with men of goodwill and send to the sacred halls of Congress men who will not sign a "Southern Manifesto" because of their devotion to the manifesto of justice.

Give us the ballot, and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will do justly and love mercy, and we will place at the head of the southern states governors who will, who have felt not only the tang of the human, but the glow of the Divine.

Give us the ballot, and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's decision of May seventeenth, 1954.

In this juncture of our nation's history, there is an urgent need for dedicated and courageous leadership...

Go back to your homes in the Southland...Go back to Philadelphia, to New York, to 1957 Detroit and Chicago...Stand up for justice...

I realize that it will cause restless nights sometime. It might cause losing a job; it will cause suffering and sacrifice. It might even cause physical death for some. But if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from a permanent life of psychological death, then nothing can be more Christian. Keep going today. Keep moving amid every obstacle. Keep moving amid every mountain of opposition. If you will do that with dignity, when the history books are written in the future, the historians will have to look back and say, "There lived a great people..."

Dr. Martin Luther King
May 17, 1957
Washington, DC

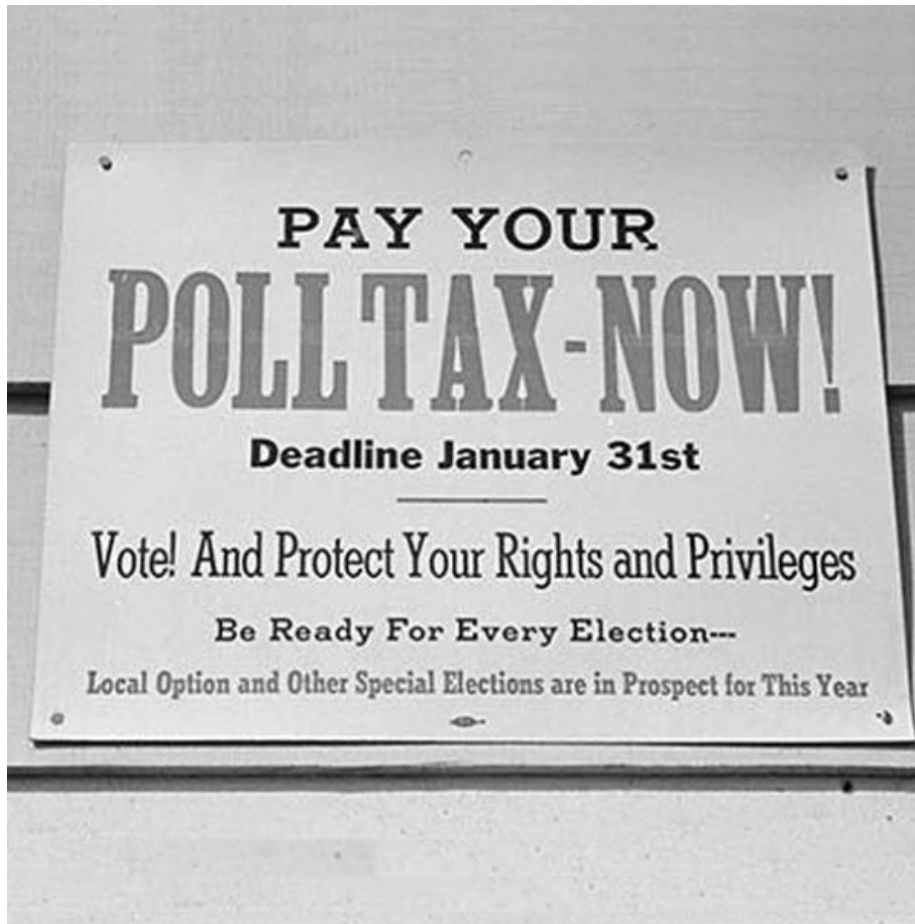
Accessed at

http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_give_us_the_ballot_address_at_the_prayer_pilgrimage_for_freedom/

Questions

1. What is the central idea of the text? Where in the text do you find support for your conclusion?
2. What is the purpose of Dr. King's speech? What strategy does he use to make sure that the audience understands his purpose?
3. Delaware standards suggest that civil rights are necessary protections for American citizens. Use details from Dr. King's speech to explain how the "sacred" civil right that he highlights can protect American citizens?
4. Freedom can be thought about in two ways, that is, (a) the *freedom to* do things that promote our happiness and (b) *freedom from* things that hurt us or cause us to be unhappy. Delaware standards expect that we understand that civil rights secure our freedom. Which detail from Source 1 helps to show how civil rights secure our freedom? Be sure to explain your answer.

Source 2: Voting Information in North Carolina (1900)



Accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/29/magazine/voting-rights-act-dream-undone.html?_r=0

5. Dr. King stated that “conniving methods are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters.” How might Source 2 offer evidence in support of Dr. King’s claim?

Sample Responses (there may be other credible responses)

1. (a) black Americans need to be able to exercise their right to vote in order to protect themselves and enjoy the benefits of freedom (b) “Give us the ballot, and we will no longer plead to the federal government for passage of an anti-lynching law;” or “Give us the ballot, and we will fill our legislative halls with men of goodwill”
2. a) call on Americans to end voting restrictions b) repetition – “Give us the ballot”
3. if black Americans could vote they could elect representatives who would pass anti-lynching laws
4. Voting is a civil right. In this speech, Dr. King is asking the government to “Give us the ballot” as a tool for freeing blacks from crimes such as lynching (paragraph 5) while also providing them with the freedom to elect legislators who will pass just laws (paragraph 7).
5. states imposed poll taxes to prevent poor blacks from voting