

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Americas > USA > On the Left (USA) > Biographies, History (Left, USA) > Martin Luther King > **United States, 1968: Martin Luther King's "Taking us to the mountaintop"**

COMMENT

United States, 1968: Martin Luther King's "Taking us to the mountaintop"

Thursday 5 April 2018, by [CHRETIEN Todd](#) (Date first published: 4 April 2013).

Todd Chretien pays tribute to Martin Luther King and his visionary final speech.



King speaks in support of the Memphis sanitation workers to an overflow crowd at the Mason Temple Church

SOME YEARS ago, thanks to a feature on Amy Goodman's Democracy Now! show, I started listening each year to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have been to the mountaintop" speech [\[1\]](#), which he gave in Memphis on April 3, 1968, the night before he was assassinated. He was there to support a strike of some 1,300 African American sanitation workers.

I think it is the greatest speech ever given. If you want to know why we socialists think there is hope for our species, listen carefully to his words, absorb the atmosphere that comes through from the recordings, and find a way to watch the footage.

While King's "I Have a Dream Speech" deserves its place in our schools, his last speech is a dissertation on history, humanity, love and revolution. Each time I listen to it, I stop, I'm captivated, and I'm forced to try to come to terms with what it means to fight for a better world. My comments below are a poor substitute listening to the speech yourself, so I only hope they stir your interest enough to do so. I promise you it will be 45 minutes that will add new color to how you see life.

KING BEGINS his speech this way [\[2\]](#):

Something is happening in Memphis; something is happening in our world. And you know, if I were standing at the beginning of time, with the possibility of taking a kind of general and panoramic view of the whole of human history up to now, and the Almighty said to me, "Martin Luther King, which age would you like to live in?" I would take my mental flight by Egypt, and I would watch God's children in their magnificent trek from the dark dungeons of Egypt through, or rather across the Red Sea, through the wilderness on toward the Promised Land. And in spite of its magnificence, I wouldn't stop there.

From there, he imagines witnessing some of the great moments in human history: Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, Euripides and Aristophanes assembled around the Parthenon; Martin Luther nailing his theses to the church door in Wittenberg; Abraham Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation; and so on. Finally, King adds:

Strangely enough, I would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the 20th century, I will be happy."

Now that's a strange statement to make, because the world is all messed up. The nation is sick. Trouble is in the land; confusion all around. That's a strange statement. But I know, somehow, that only when it is dark enough can you see the stars. And I see God working in this period of the 20th century in a way that men, in some strange way, are responding.

Something is happening in our world. The masses of people are rising up. And wherever they are assembled today, whether they are in Johannesburg, South Africa; Nairobi, Kenya; Accra, Ghana; New York City; Atlanta, Georgia; Jackson, Mississippi; or Memphis, Tennessee; the cry is always the same: "We want to be free."

Of all the great moments he can imagine, King accepts his own time, his own place, with his own friends and comrades, as imperfect and troubled as they may be.

It's hard to hear King today or see the iconic photos and newsreels and not feel that he is timeless, ancient, dissolved almost into one of those long past epochs he reviews from the right hand of God. But as he speaks, standing at the podium of a church packed to the rafters, sweltering, swaying and only held upright by the hands of the assembled flock, King is 39 years old.

He was just 26 when the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which made him famous, began. He could have taken that movement into a cushy academic post or a powerful position in the Democratic Party up North. Instead, he stuck his head in the noose.

And another reason that I'm happy to live in this period is that we have been forced to a point where we are going to have to grapple with the problems that men have been trying to grapple with through history, but the demands didn't force them to do it. Survival demands that we grapple with them. Men, for years now, have been talking about war and peace. But now, no longer can they just talk about it. It is no longer a choice between violence and nonviolence in this world; it's nonviolence or nonexistence. That is where we are today.

King is saying that freedom does not consist of escaping from the world. The free development of each has as its precondition the free development of all—all of us or none. No nation that oppresses others can itself be free. The planet upon which we must all live is dying. Freedom means understanding the stakes—opening one's eyes to the tasks at hands. Freedom is not the absence of worldly awareness; it is the recognition that our very survival demands eat from the tree of knowledge.

And also in the human rights revolution, if something isn't done, and done in a hurry, to bring the colored peoples of the world out of their long years of poverty, their long years of hurt and neglect, the whole world is doomed. Now, I'm just happy that God has allowed me to live in this period to see what is unfolding. And I'm happy that He's allowed me to be in Memphis.

Doomed—think on that word very carefully. It seems to me that King's prediction is as true today as 45 years ago, if not more so.

Has there been progress? Yes and no. President Obama and the New Jim Crow go hand in hand. The

old colonial empires broke apart, but billions of people, most of them people of color, stand on the edge of starvation. Yet King says he was happy to see what was unfolding then. How could he be happy? Because he could see the way out.

Now, what does all of this mean in this great period of history? It means that we've got to stay together. We've got to stay together and maintain unity.

You know, whenever Pharaoh wanted to prolong the period of slavery in Egypt, he had a favorite, favorite formula for doing it. What was that? He kept the slaves fighting among themselves. But whenever the slaves get together, something happens in Pharaoh's court, and he cannot hold the slaves in slavery. When the slaves get together, that's the beginning of getting out of slavery. Now let us maintain unity.

KING NEXT tells the story of his near death at the hands of a mentally-disturbed woman who stabbed him in 1958, narrowly missing his heart. The doctors said that if he had sneezed, the blade fragment lodged in his chest might have severed his aorta.

While recovering, he received telegrams from the president and governor of New York, but says he soon forgot their contents. What stuck with him was a letter from a white girl in ninth grade saying, "I'm so happy you didn't sneeze."

He then recounts all the struggles, from Greensboro to Alabama he would have missed. Chance, accident, contingency. repression, exile, assassination. We are not playing on an even field. The powers that be are ruthless. The great lesson is that social movements need leaders, but must find a way to make them replaceable. "Longevity has its place," says King. But, after all, no one gets out of life alive, longevity is all the less likely during a revolution.

Up to this point, the speech is a brilliant review of the lessons of the civil rights movement and myriad freedom struggles. At this point, however, King predicts his own death. Perhaps not the exact day, but how could they let him live?

You might think this would add an element of fatalism or pessimism. King recognizes his mortality, the mortality of a great leader who had the privilege of dissolving himself in one of history's greatest people's movement, to commune with the despair and hopes of the best of three or four generations who pooled their experience and courage and collectively said, "Now!"

This allows King to transcend time and place, even such an important time and place as Memphis in April 1968, and to speak both forwards and backwards in time. Like a great work of art, this moment achieves, as Hegel might say, world historic consciousness. It is a profound human creation, borne of the individual and the mass, that we ought all treasure. Listen.

And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers? [Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind.

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!

And so I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man!

Here in the speech, the congregation's cries merges with King's words. The leader and led become one and King is no longer speaking of what he has seen for his own satisfaction. He is merely a scout, reporting on what lies ahead for all of the oppressed.

He has not been to the promised land—God only allows him a brief glimpse, a vision transmitted through King as a sort of promissory note that there is a better world a comin'. We, as a people, will get to the promised land. And the price of this image, the guarantee that there is a way to get there, was King's own sacrifice.

KING WAS a preacher. He believed our souls live on beyond the grave. Only a cynic would deny the depth of King's faith, his certainty in the ultimate justice of God and some sort of paradise for truthful souls.

But this speech, it seems to me, transcends any specific religion, and even religion itself. After all, King does not end with scripture, but with the lyrics to the Battle Hymn of the Republic, written in the darkest days of the American Civil War and sung to the tune of the abolitionist song John Brown's Body.

King virtually shouts the first line of the opening stanza to the Battle Hymn to end the speech and then collapses, exhausted, into the arms of his lieutenants: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!"

Did the rest of the lyrics linger in his mind in the hours afterward? We can never know. For all of our solidarity, we remain individuals, guardians of the bridge between our public life and our private thoughts. But think of these words as King lived his last hours:

*He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored;
He hath loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword;
His truth is marching on.*

Don't be mislead by the "He" and "His." It is our truth, it is our fateful lightning. Someday, it will be our sword—or none of us will get to the Promised Land.

We rightfully commemorate Dr. King on the occasion of his birth. But I think honoring the anniversary of his death is what guarantees we never forget what he taught us, and that we will march on together.

I too, Dr. King, am so happy you didn't sneeze.

Todd Chretien

P.S.

* April 4, 2013:

<https://socialistworker.org/2013/04/04/taking-us-to-the-mountaintop>

Footnotes

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixfwGLxRJu8>

[2] <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm>