

MR. PRESIDENT, MR. SPEAKER, MEMBERS OF THE CONGRESS,  
MY FELLOW AMERICANS:

3/6/65  
Vice President  
Judiciary

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy.

I urge members of both parties -- Americans of all religions and colors -- from every section -- to join me in that cause.

At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.

There, long-suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many were brutally assaulted. One good man -- a man of God -- was killed.

There is no cause for pride in what happened in Selma.

There is no cause for self-satisfaction in the long denial of equal rights of millions of Americans.

But there is cause for hope and for faith in our democracy in what is happening here tonight.

For the cries of pain, the hymns and protests of oppressed people, have summoned into convocation all the majesty of the government of the greatest nation on earth.

Our mission is at once the oldest and most basic of this country: to right wrong, to do justice, to serve man.

In our time we have come to live with moments of great crisis. Our lives have been marked with debate about great issues -- issues of war and peace, of prosperity and depression. But rarely, in any time, does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. Rarely are we met with a challenge, not to our growth or abundance, our welfare or security -- but to the values and the purpose and meaning of our nation.

The issue of equal rights for American Negroes is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, double our wealth, conquer the stars and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and a nation.

For with a country as with a person, "What is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

There is no Negro problem. There is no Southern problem or Northern problem. There is only an American problem.

And we are met as Americans to solve it.

This was the first nation in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose. The great phrases of that purpose still sound in every American heart, North and South: "All men are created equal" -- "government by consent of the governed" -- "give me liberty or give me death." Those are not just clever words or empty theories. In their name Americans have fought and died for two centuries and today are risking their lives.

Those words are a promise to every citizen that he shall share in the dignity of man. This dignity cannot be found in a man's possessions or his power or his position. It rests on his right to be treated as a man equal in opportunity to all others. It says that he shall share in freedom, choose his leaders, educate his children, provide for his family according to his ability and merits as a human being.

To apply any other test -- to deny a man his hopes because of his color or race, his religion or the place of his birth -- is not only to do injustice, it is to deny America and to dishonor the dead who gave their lives for freedom.

Our fathers believed that if this noble view of the rights of man was to flourish, it must be rooted in democracy. The most basic right of all was the right to choose your own leaders. The history of this

country is, in large measure, the history of the expansion of that right to all our people.

Many of the issues of civil rights are complex and difficult. But about this there can be no argument. Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote. There is no reason which can excuse the denial of that right. There is no duty which weighs more heavily on us than the duty to ensure that right.

Yet the harsh fact is that in many places in this country men and women are kept from voting because they are Negroes.

Every device of which human ingenuity is capable has been used to deny this right. The Negro citizen may go to register only to be told that the day is wrong, the hour is late, or the official in charge is absent.

If he persists, and manages to present himself to the registrar, he may be disqualified because he did not spell out his middle name or because he abbreviated a word on the application.

If he manages to fill out an application he is given a test. The registrar is the sole judge of whether he passes this test. He may be asked to recite the entire constitution, or explain the most complex provisions of state law. Even a college degree cannot be used to prove that he can read or write.

For the fact is that the only way to pass these barriers is to show a white skin.

Experience has clearly shown that the existing process of law cannot overcome systematic and ingenious discrimination. No law we now have on the books can ensure the right to vote when local officials are determined to deny it.

In such a case our duty is clear. The Constitution says no person shall be kept from voting because of his race or color. We have all sworn an oath before God to support and defend that Constitution. We must now act in obedience to that oath.

Wednesday I will send to Congress a law designed to eliminate illegal barriers to the right to vote.

This bill will strike down restrictions to voting in all elections -- Federal, State, and local -- which have been used to deny Negroes the right to vote.

It will establish a simple, uniform standard which cannot be used however ingenious the effort to flout our Constitution.

It will provide for citizens to be registered by officials of the United States government if State officials refuse to cooperate.

It will eliminate tedious, unnecessary lawsuits which delay the right to vote.

Finally, this legislation will ensure that properly registered individuals are not prohibited from voting.

I will welcome suggestions from the Congress on ways to strengthen this law and make it more effective. But experience has plainly shown that this is the only path to carry out the command of the Constitution.

To those who seek to avoid action by their national government in their communities -- who seek to maintain purely local control over elections -- the answer is simple.

Open your polling places to all your people.

Allow men and women to register and vote whatever the color of their skin.

Extend the rights of citizenship to every citizen.

There is no constitutional issue here. The command of the Constitution is plain.

There is no moral issue. It is wrong to deny any American the right to vote.

There is no issue of states rights or national rights. There is only the struggle for human rights.

I have no doubt what will be your answer.

Last time a President sent a civil rights bill to Congress it contained a provision to protect voting rights. That bill was passed after eight long months of debate. And when that bill came to my desk for signature, the heart of the voting provision had been eliminated.

This time, on this issue, there must be no delay, no hesitation, no compromise with our purpose.

We cannot refuse to protect the right of Americans to vote.

We cannot wait another eight months. We have already waited a hundred years and more. The time for waiting is gone.

I ask you to work long hours, nights, and weekends to pass this bill. For outside this chamber is the outraged conscience of a nation -- the grave concern of many nations -- and the harsh judgment of history on our acts.

But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and state of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life.

Their cause must be our cause too. It is not just Negroes, but all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we shall overcome.

As a man whose roots go deeply into Southern soil I know how agonizing racial feelings are. I know how difficult it is to reshape attitudes and the structure of society.

But a century has passed since the Negro was freed. And he is not fully free.

A century has passed since equality was promised. And he is not equal.

A century has passed since the day of promise. And the promise is unkept.

The time of justice has now come. No force can hold it back. It is right -- in the eyes of man and God -- that it should come. And when it does, that day will brighten the lives of every American.

For Negroes are not the only victims. How many white children have gone uneducated -- how many white families have lived in poverty -- how many white lives have been scarred by fear because we have wasted our energy and substance to maintain the barriers of hatred and terror.

Those who ask you to hold on to the past do so at the cost of denying you your future.

This great, rich, restless country can offer opportunity and education and hope to all -- black and white, North and South, sharecropper, and city dweller. These are the enemies -- poverty and ignorance -- and not our fellow man. And these two shall be overcome.

Let no one, in any section, look with prideful righteousness on the troubles of his neighbors. There is no part of America where the promise of equality has been fully kept. In Buffalo as well as Birmingham, in Philadelphia as well as Selma, Americans are struggling for the fruits of freedom.

This is one nation. What happens in Selma or in Cincinnati is a matter of legitimate concern to every citizen. But let each of us look within our own communities, and our own hearts, and root out injustice there.

Tonight, men from the South as well as the North, men from the East as well as from the West, are all Americans all fighting together in Vietnam. Men from every region fought for us across the world twenty years ago.

In these common dangers and these common sacrifices the South made its contribution of honor and gallantry no less than any other region of the Great Republic. I have not the slightest doubt that good men from everywhere in this country -- from the Great Lakes down to the Gulf of Mexico, from the Golden Gate to the harbors along the Atlantic -- will rally now together in this cause to vindicate the freedom of us all. For all of us owe this duty; all of us will respond to it.

The real hero of this struggle is the American Negro. His actions and protests -- his courage to risk safety and even life -- have awakened the conscience of the nation. His demonstrations have been designed to call attention to injustice, to provoke change and stir reform. He has called upon us to make good the promise of America. And who among us can say we would have made the same progress were it not for his persistent bravery, and his faith in American democracy.

For at the heart of battle for equality is a belief in the democratic process. Equality depends not on the force of arms but the force of moral right -- not on recourse to violence but on respect for law.

We intend to fight this battle where it should be fought -- in the courts, in the Congress, and in the hearts of men.

We must preserve the right of free speech and the right of free assembly. But the right of free speech does not carry with it the right to endanger the safety of others on a public highway.

We do have a right to protest -- and a right to march under conditions that do not infringe the Constitutional rights of our neighbors. I intend to protect all those rights as long as I am permitted to serve in this Office.

We will guard against violence, knowing it strikes from our hands the very weapons with which we seek progress -- obedience to law, and belief in American values.

In Selma as elsewhere we seek peace. We seek order. We seek unity.

But we will not accept the peace of stifled rights, the order imposed by fear, the unity that stifles protest. For peace cannot be purchased at the cost of liberty.

In Selma, as in every city, we are working for just and peaceful settlement. We must remember that after this speech -- after the police and the marshals have gone -- after this bill is passed, the people of Selma must still live and work together. When the attention of the nation has gone elsewhere they must try to heal the wounds and build a new community. This cannot easily be done on a battleground of violence as the history of the South itself shows. It is in recognition of this that men of both races have shown such impressive responsibility in recent days.

The bill I am presenting will be known as a civil rights bill. But, in a larger sense, most of the program I am recommending is a civil rights program. Its object is to open the city of hope to all our people.

All Americans must have the right to vote. And we are going to give them that right.

All Americans must have the privileges of citizenship regardless of race. And they are going to have those privileges.

But to exercise that privilege takes more than legal right. It requires a trained mind and a healthy body. It requires a decent home, and the chance to find a job, and the opportunity to escape from poverty.



Of course people cannot contribute to the nation if they are never taught to read or write, if their bodies are stunted from hunger, if their sickness goes untended, if their life is spent in hopeless poverty.

We want to open the gates to opportunity. But we are also going to give all our people -- black and white -- the help they need to walk through those gates.

My first job after college was as a teacher in a small Mexican-American school. My students were poor, and often hungry, and they knew, even in their youth, the pain of prejudice. They didn't understand why people disliked them. But they knew it was so. You could see it in their eyes.

I often walked home after classes wishing there was more I could do. But all I knew was to teach them the little I knew -- hoping it might help them against the hardships that lay ahead.

Somehow you never forget what poverty and hatred can do when you see its scars on the hopeful face of a child.

I never thought then that I might be standing here. It never occurred to me that I might have the chance to help the sons of those students -- and people like them all over this country.

But now that I have this chance, I mean to take it.

And I hope that you will take it with me.

This is the richest and most powerful country which ever occupied the globe. The might of past empires is little compared to ours.

But I do not want to be the President who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended dominion.

I want to be the President who educated young children to the wonders of their world -- the President who fed the hungry --

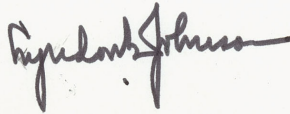
and helped the poor to find their own way -- and enriched the simple, daily lives of every family. And I want to be the President who helped to end hatred among his fellow men, and war among the brothers of this earth.

And I want to share this task with you, and with the people we serve. I want this to be the Congress -- Democrats and Republicans alike -- which did all these things.

Beyond this great chamber are the people we serve. Who can tell what deep and unspoken hopes are in their hearts tonight? We all can guess, from our own lives, how difficult they often find their own pursuit of happiness. They look most of all to themselves for their future. But they also look to us.

Above the pyramid on the great seal of the United States it says -- in Latin -- "He has favored our undertaking."

God will not favor everything we do. It is rather our duty to divine His will. But I cannot help believing He truly favors the undertaking we begin tonight.



THE WHITE HOUSE,

March 15, 1965.