

Dr. King presented the following speech at the New York Civil War Centennial Commission's Emancipation Proclamation Observance, New York City, September 12, 1962

Emancipation Proclamation Centennial Address

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

If our nation had done nothing more in its whole history than to create just two documents, its contribution to civilization would be imperishable. The first of these documents is the Declaration of Independence and the other is that which we are here to honor tonight, the Emancipation Proclamation. All tyrants, past, present and future, are powerless to bury the truths in these declarations, no matter how extensive their legions, how vast their power and how malignant their evil.

The Declaration of Independence proclaimed to a world, organized politically and spiritually around the concept of the inequality of man, that the dignity of human personality was inherent in man as a living being. The Emancipation Proclamation was the offspring of the Declaration of Independence. It was a constructive use of the force of law to uproot a social order which sought to separate liberty from a segment of humanity.

Our pride and progress could be unqualified if the story might end here. But history reveals that America has been a schizophrenic personality where these two documents are concerned. On the one hand she has proudly professed the basic principles inherent in both documents. On the other hand she has sadly practiced the antithesis of these principles.

If we look at our history with honesty and clarity we will be forced to admit that our Federal form of government has been, from the day of its birth, weakened in its integrity, confused and confounded in its direction, by the unresolved race question. We seldom take note or give adequate significance to the fact that Thomas Jefferson's text of the Declaration of Independence was revised by the Continental Congress to eliminate a justifiable attack on King George for encouraging slave trade...Jefferson knew that such compromises with principle struck at the heart of the nation's security and integrity. In 1820, six years before his death, he wrote these melancholy words:

"But this momentous question (slavery), like a fire bell in the night awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. I regret that I am now to die in the belief that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of 1776 to acquire self-government and happiness to their country is to be thrown away, and my only consolation is to be that I live not to weep over it."

The somber picture (of the condition of the American Negro today) may induce the sober thought that there is nothing to commemorate about the centennial of the Emancipation Proclamation. But tragic disappointments and undeserved defeats do not put an end to life, nor do they wipe out the positive, however submerged it may have become beneath floods of negative experience.

The Emancipation Proclamation had four enduring results. First, it gave force to the executive power to change conditions in the national interest on a broad and far-reaching scale. Second, it dealt a devastating blow to the system of slaveholding and an economy built upon it, which had been muscular enough to engage in warfare on the Federal government. Third, it enabled the Negro to play a significant role in his own liberation with the ability to organize and to struggle, with less of the bestial retaliation his slave status had permitted to his masters. Fourth, it resurrected and restated the principle of equality upon which the founding of the nation rested.

When Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation it was not the act of an opportunistic politician issuing a hollow pronouncement to placate a pressure group.

Our truly great presidents were tortured deep in their hearts by the race question. Jefferson with keen perception saw that the festering sore of slavery debilitated white masters as well as the Negro. He feared for the future of white children who were taught a false supremacy. His concern can be summed up in one quotation, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

Lincoln's torments are well known, his vacillations were facts. In the seething cauldron of '62 and '63 Lincoln was called the "Baboon President" in the North, and "coward", "assassin" and "savage" in the South. Yet he searched his way to the conclusions embodied in these words, "In giving freedom to the slave we assure freedom to the free, honorable alike in what we give and what we preserve." On this moral foundation he personally prepared the first draft of the Emancipation Proclamation, and to emphasize the decisiveness of his course he called his cabinet together and declared he was not seeking their advice as to its wisdom but only suggestions on subject matter. Lincoln achieved immortality because he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. His hesitation had not stayed his hand when historic necessity charted but one course. No President can be great, or even fit for office, if he attempts to accommodate to injustice to maintain his political balance.

The Emancipation Proclamation shattered in one blow the slave system, undermining the foundations of the economy of the rebellious South; and guaranteed that no slave-holding class, if permitted to exist in defeat, could prepare a new and deadlier war after resuscitation.

The Proclamation opened the door to self-liberation by the Negro upon which he immediately acted by deserting the plantations in the South and joining the Union armies in the North. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, seeing a regiment of Negroes march through Beacon Street in Boston, wrote in his diary,

“An imposing sight, with something wild and strange about it, like a dream. At last the North consents to let the Negro fight for freedom.” Beyond the war years the grim and tortured struggle of Negroes to win their own freedom is an epic of battle against frightful odds. If we have failed to do enough, it was not the will for freedom that was weak, but the forces against us which were too strong.

We have spelled out a balance sheet of the Emancipation Proclamation, its contributions and its deficiencies which our lack of zeal permitted to find expression. There is but one way to commemorate the Emancipation Proclamation. That is to make its declarations of freedom real; to reach back to the origins of our nation when our message of equality electrified an unfree world, and reaffirm democracy by deeds as bold and daring as the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation.

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