

'We Shall Overcome'

Following are excerpts from President Johnson's message to a joint session of Congress, urging passage of legislation to protect voting rights of all citizens:

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

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.

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 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.

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

. . . dignity cannot be found in a man's possessions. It can not be found in his power. 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.

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 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 provision 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 that we now have on the books, and I have helped to put three of them there, can insure the right to vote when local officials are determined to deny it.

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

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LBJ Backs Voting Rights

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Constitution. We must now act in obedience to that oath.

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.

We cannot, we must not, refuse to protect the right of every American to vote in every election he may desire to participate in.

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.

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 too shall be overcome.

I have not the slightest doubt that good men from everywhere in this country . . . 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 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.

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.