

162. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955)

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In December 1955, Rosa Parks, a veteran of local black politics who worked as a tailor's assistant in a Montgomery, Alabama, department store, refused to surrender her seat on a city bus to a white rider, as required by local law. Her arrest sparked a year-long bus boycott. Finally, the Supreme Court ruled segregation in public transportation unconstitutional.

The Montgomery bus boycott launched the movement for racial justice as a nonviolent crusade based in the black churches of the South. It marked the emergence of 26-year-old Martin Luther King Jr., who had recently arrived in the city to become pastor of a Baptist church, as the movement's national symbol. On the night of the first protest meeting, King's speech electrified his audience: "We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality."

MY FRIENDS, WE are certainly very happy to see each of you out this evening. We are here this evening for serious business. (Audience: Yes) We are here in a general sense because first and foremost we are American citizens (That's right) and we are determined to apply our citizenship to the fullness of its meaning. (Yeah, That's right) We are here also because of our love for democracy, (Yes) because of our deep-seated belief that democracy transformed from thin paper to thick action (Yes) is the greatest form of government on earth. (That's right).

But we are here in a specific sense, because of the bus situation in Montgomery. (Yes) We are here because we are to get the situation corrected. This situation is not at all new. The problem has existed over endless years. (That's right) For many years now Negroes in Montgomery and so many other areas have been inflicted with the paralysis of crippling fears (Yes) on buses in our community. (That's right) On so many occasions, Negroes have been intimidated and humiliated and impressed—oppressed—because of the sheer fact that they were Negroes. (That's right) I don't have time this evening to go into the history of these numerous cases. Many of them now are lost in the thick fog of oblivion, (Yes) but at least one stands before us now with glaring dimensions. (Yes)

Just the other day, just last Thursday to be exact, one of the finest citizens in Montgomery (Amen)—not one of the finest Negro citizens (That's right) but one of the finest citizens in Montgomery—was taken from a bus (Yes) and carried to jail and arrested (Yes) because she refused to get up to give her seat to a white person.

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Mrs. Rosa Parks is a fine person. (Well, well said) And since it had to happen I'm happy that it happened to a person like Mrs. Parks, for nobody can doubt the boundless outreach of her integrity! (Sure enough) Nobody can doubt the height of her character, (Yes) nobody can doubt the depth of her Christian commitment and devotion to the teachings of Jesus. (All right) And I'm happy since it had to happen, it happened to a person that nobody can call a disturbing factor in the community. (All right) Mrs. Parks is a fine Christian person, unassuming, and yet there is integrity and character there. And just because she refused to get up, she was arrested.

And you know, my friends, there comes a time when people get tired of being trampled over by the iron feet of oppression. [Thundering applause] There comes a time, my friends, when people get tired of being plunged across the abyss of humiliation where they experience the bleakness of nagging despair. (Keep talking) There comes a time when people get tired of being pushed out of the glittering sunlight of life's July, and left standing amid the piercing chill of an alpine November. (That's right) [Applause] There comes a time. (Yes sir, Teach) [Applause continues]

We are here, we are here this evening because we're tired now. (Yes) [Applause] And I want to say, that we are not here advocating violence. (No) We have never done that. (Repeat that, Repeat that) [Applause] I want it to be known throughout Montgomery and throughout this nation (Well) that we are Christian people. (Yes) [Applause] We believe in the Christian religion. We believe in the teachings of Jesus. (Well) The only weapon that we have in our hands this evening is the weapon of protest. (Yes) [Applause] That's all.

And certainly, certainly, this is the glory of America, with all of its faults. (Yeah) This is the glory of our democracy. If we were incarcerated behind the iron curtains of a Communistic nation we couldn't do this. If we were dropped in the dungeon of a totalitarian regime we couldn't do this. (All right) But the great glory of American democracy is the right to protest for right. (That's right) [Applause] My friends, don't let anybody make us feel that we to be compared in our actions with the Ku Klux Klan or with the White Citizens Council.

[Applause] There will be no crosses burned at any bus stops in Montgomery. (Well, that's right) There will be no white persons pulled out of their homes and taken out on some distant road and lynched for not cooperating. [Applause] There will be nobody amid, among us who will stand up and defy the Constitution of this nation. [Applause] We only assemble here because of our desire to see right exist. [Applause] My friends, I want it to be known that we're going to work with grim and bold determination to gain justice on the buses in this city. [Applause]

And we are not wrong, we are not wrong in what we are doing. (Well) If we are wrong, the Supreme Court of this nation is wrong. (Yes sir) [Applause] If we are wrong, the Constitution of the United States is wrong. (Yes) [Applause] If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong. (That's right) [Applause] If we are wrong, Jesus of Nazareth was merely a utopian dreamer that never came down to earth. (Yes) [Applause] If we are wrong, justice is a lie: (Yes) love has no meaning. [Applause] And we are determined here in Montgomery to work and fight until justice runs down like water (Yes) [Applause] and righteousness like a mighty stream. (Keep talking) [Applause]

We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality. [Applause] May I say to you my friends, as I come to a close, and just giving some idea of why we are assembled here, that we must keep—and I want to stress this, in all of our doings, in all of our deliberations here this evening and all of the week and while—whatever we do, we must keep God in the forefront. (Yeah) Let us be Christian in all of our actions. (That's right) But I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough for us to talk about love, love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian face, faith. There is another side called justice. And justice is really love in calculation. (All right) Justice is love correcting that which revolts against love. (Well)

The Almighty God himself is not . . . only, . . . the God just standing out saying through Hosea, "I love you, Israel." He's also the God that stands up before the nations and said: "Be still and know that I'm God, (Yeah) that if you don't obey me I will break the backbone of your power, (Yeah) and slap you out of the orbits of your international and national relationships." (That's right) Standing beside love is always justice (Yeah) and we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion but we've come to see that we've got to use the tools of coercion. Not only is this thing a process of education but it is also a process of legislation. [Applause]

2

As we stand and sit here this evening and as we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead, let us go out with a grim and bold determination

We see, in the sanctity of private property, the only durable foundation for constitutional government in a free society. (Applause) And beyond that, we see, in cherished diversity of ways, diversity of thoughts, of motives and accomplishments. We do not seek to lead anyone's life for him—we seek only to secure his rights and to guarantee him opportunity to strive, with government performing only those needed and constitutionally-sanctioned tasks which cannot otherwise be performed. (Prolonged Applause)

We Republicans seek a government that attends to its inherent responsibilities of maintaining a stable monetary and fiscal climate, encouraging a free and a competitive economy and enforcing law and order.

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The task of preserving and enlarging freedom at home and of safeguarding it from the forces of tyranny abroad is great enough to challenge all our resources and to refire all our strength. (Cheers and Applause) Anyone who joins us in all sincerity, we welcome. (Applause) Those who do not care for our cause, we don't expect to enter our ranks in any case. (Applause) And let our Republicanism, so focused and so dedicated, not be made fuzzy and futile by unthinking and stupid labels.

I would remind you that extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice. (Loud Applause and Cheers) And let me remind you also that moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue. (Applause and Cheers)

(3)

166. Lyndon B. Johnson, Commencement Address at Howard University (1965)

Source: "Commencement Address at Howard University, June 4, 1965," Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, 1965 (Washington, D.C., 1966), pp. 635-40.

By 1965, the civil rights movement had achieved many of its goals, including national laws mandating equal access to all public facilities, banning discrimination in employment, and restoring the right to vote to black southerners. Yet violent outbreaks in black ghettos, beginning in Watts, the black ghetto of Los Angeles, in 1964, drew attention to the national scope of racial injustice and inequalities in jobs, education, and housing that the dismantling of legal segregation left intact.

Lyndon B. Johnson identified himself more fully with the civil rights movement than any president in American history. He believed that special efforts must be made to counteract the heritage of slavery and segregation. In a speech at all-black Howard University in 1965, Johnson sought to redefine the relationship between freedom and equality.

OUR EARTH IS the home of revolution. In every corner of every continent men charged with hope contend with ancient ways in the pursuit of justice. They reach for the newest of weapons to realize the oldest of dreams, that each may walk in freedom and pride, stretching his talents, enjoying the fruits of the earth.

Our enemies may occasionally seize the day of change, but it is the banner of our revolution they take. And our own future is linked to this process of swift and turbulent change in many lands in the world. But nothing in any country touches us more profoundly, and nothing is more freighted with meaning for our own destiny than the revolution of the Negro American.

In far too many ways American Negroes have been another nation: deprived of freedom, crippled by hatred, the doors of opportunity closed to hope.

In our time change has come to this Nation, too. The American Negro, acting with impressive restraint, has peacefully protested and marched, entered the courtrooms and the seats of government, demanding a justice that has long been denied. The voice of the Negro was the call to action. But it is a tribute to America that, once aroused, the courts and the Congress, the President and most of the people, have been the allies of progress.

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That beginning is freedom; and the barriers to that freedom are tumbling down. Freedom is the right to share, share fully and equally, in American society—to vote, to hold a job, to enter a public place, to go to school. It is the right to be treated in every part of our national life as a person equal in dignity and promise to all others.

But freedom is not enough. You do not wipe away the scars of centuries by saying: Now you are free to go where you want, and do as you desire, and choose the leaders you please.

You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, “you are free to compete with all the others,” and still justly believe that you have been completely fair.

Thus it is not enough just to open the gates of opportunity. All our citizens must have the ability to walk through those gates.

This is the next and the more profound stage of the battle for civil rights. We seek not just freedom but opportunity. We seek not just legal equity but human ability, not just equality as a right and a theory but equality as a fact and equality as a result.

For the task is to give 20 million Negroes the same chance as every other American to learn and grow, to work and share in society, to develop their abilities—physical, mental and spiritual, and to pursue their individual happiness.

To this end equal opportunity is essential, but not enough, not enough. Men and women of all races are born with the same range of abilities. But ability is not just the product of birth. Ability is stretched or stunted by the family that you live with, and the neigh-

4

borhood you live in—by the school you go to and the poverty or the richness of your surroundings. It is the product of a hundred unseen forces playing upon the little infant, the child, and finally the man.

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For the great majority of Negro Americans—the poor, the unemployed, the uprooted, and the dispossessed—there is a much grimmer story. They still, as we meet here tonight, are another nation. Despite the court orders and the laws, despite the legislative victories and the speeches, for them the walls are rising and the gulf is widening.

Here are some of the facts of this American failure.

Thirty-five years ago the rate of unemployment for Negroes and whites was about the same. Tonight the Negro rate is twice as high.

In 1948 the 8 percent unemployment rate for Negro teenage boys was actually less than that of whites. By last year that rate had grown to 23 percent, as against 13 percent for whites unemployed.

Between 1949 and 1959, the income of Negro men relative to white men declined in every section of this country. From 1952 to 1963 the median income of Negro families compared to white actually dropped from 57 percent to 53 percent.

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This is the devastating heritage of long years of slavery; and a century of oppression, hatred, and injustice.

For Negro poverty is not white poverty. Many of its causes and many of its cures are the same. But there are differences—deep, corrosive, obstinate differences—radiating painful roots into the community, and into the family, and the nature of the individual.

These differences are not racial differences. They are solely and simply the consequence of ancient brutality, past injustice, and present prejudice. They are anguishing to observe. For the Negro they are a constant reminder of oppression. For the white they are a constant reminder of guilt. But they must be faced and they must be dealt with and they must be overcome, if we are ever to reach the time when the only difference between Negroes and whites is the color of their skin.

Nor can we find a complete answer in the experience of other American minorities.

Perhaps most important—its influence radiating to every part of life—is the breakdown of the Negro family structure. For this, most of all, white America must accept responsibility. It flows from centuries of oppression and persecution of the Negro man. It flows from the long years of degradation and discrimination, which have attacked his dignity and assaulted his ability to produce for his family.

This, too, is not pleasant to look upon. But it must be faced by those whose serious intent is to improve the life of all Americans.

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The family is the cornerstone of our society. More than any other force it shapes the attitude, the hopes, the ambitions, and the values of the child. And when the family collapses it is the children that are usually damaged. When it happens on a massive scale the community itself is crippled.

So, unless we work to strengthen the family, to create conditions under which most parents will stay together—all the rest: schools, and playgrounds, and public assistance, and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the circle of despair and deprivation.

167. The Port Huron Statement (1962)

Source: *Students for a Democratic Society: The Port Huron Statement*, 1964, pp. 3–8. Reprinted by permission of Tom Hayden.

5

One of the most influential documents of the 1960s emerged in 1962 from a meeting sponsored by the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), then a small offshoot of the socialist League for Industrial Democracy. Meeting at Port Huron, Michigan, some sixty college students adopted a document that captured the mood and summarized the beliefs of this generation of student protesters.

But what made the document the guiding spirit of what would soon be called the New Left was its new vision of social change. It spoke of participatory democracy, an idea that suggested a rejection of the elitist strain that had marked liberal thinkers from the Progressives to postwar advocates of economic planning, in which government experts would establish national priorities in the name of the people. Although rarely defined with precision, participatory democracy became a standard by which students judged existing social arrangements—work places, schools, government—and found them wanting. By the mid-1960s, fueled by growing opposition among the young to the country's war in Vietnam, SDS would become the most important vehicle for what was rapidly becoming a full-fledged generational rebellion.

WE ARE PEOPLE of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit.

When we were kids the United States was the wealthiest and strongest country in the world; the only one with the atom bomb, the least scarred by modern war, an initiator of the United Nations that we thought would distribute Western influence throughout the world. Freedom and equality for each individual, government of, by, and for the people—these American values we found good, principles by which we could live as men. Many of us began maturing in complacency.

As we grew, however, our comfort was penetrated by events too troubling to dismiss. First, the permeating and victimizing fact of human degradation, symbolized by the Southern struggle against racial bigotry, compelled most of us from silence to activism. Second, the

enclosing fact of the Cold War, symbolized by the presence of the Bomb, brought awareness that we ourselves, and our friends, and millions of abstract "others" we knew more directly because of our common peril, might die at any time. We might deliberately ignore, or avoid, or fail to feel all other human problems, but not these two, for these were too immediate and crushing in their impact, too challenging in the demand that we as individuals take the responsibility for encounter and resolution.

While these and other problems either directly oppressed us or rankled our consciences and became our own subjective concerns, we began to see complicated and disturbing paradoxes in our surrounding America. The declaration "all men are created equal..." rang hollow before the facts of Negro life in the South and the big cities of the North. The proclaimed peaceful intentions of the United States contradicted its economic and military investments in the Cold War status quo.

We witnessed, and continue to witness, other paradoxes. With nuclear energy whole cities can easily be powered, yet the dominant nation-states seem more likely to unleash destruction greater than that incurred in all wars of human history. Although our own technology is destroying old and creating new forms of social organization, men still tolerate meaningless work and idleness. While two-thirds of mankind suffers undernourishment, our own upper classes revel amidst superfluous abundance. Although world population is expected to double in forty years, the nations still tolerate anarchy as a major principle of international conduct and uncontrolled exploitation governs the sapping of the earth's physical resources. Although mankind desperately needs revolutionary leadership, America rests in national stalemate, its goals ambiguous and tradition-bound instead of informed and clear, its democratic system apathetic and manipulated rather than "of, by, and for the people."

Not only did tarnish appear on our image of American virtue, not only did disillusion occur when the hypocrisy of American ideals

was discovered, but we began to sense that what we had originally seen as the American Golden Age was actually the decline of an era. The worldwide outbreak of revolution against colonialism and imperialism, the entrenchment of totalitarian states, the menace of war, overpopulation, international disorder, supertechnology—these trends were testing the tenacity of our own commitment to democracy and freedom and our abilities to visualize their application to a world in upheaval.

Our work is guided by the sense that we may be the last generation in the experiment with living. But we are a minority—the vast majority of our people regard the temporary equilibriums of our society and world as eternally functional parts. In this is perhaps the outstanding paradox: we ourselves are imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is that there is no viable alternative to the present. Beneath the reassuring tones of the politicians, beneath the common opinion that America will "muddle through," beneath the stagnation of those who have closed their minds to the future, is the pervading feeling that there simply are no alternatives, that our times have witnessed the exhaustion not only of Utopias, but of any new departures as well. Feeling the press of complexity upon the emptiness of life, people are fearful of the thought that at any moment things might be thrust out of control. They fear change itself, since change might smash whatever invisible framework seems to hold back chaos for them now. For most Americans, all crusades are suspect, threatening. The fact that each individual sees apathy in his fellows perpetuates the common reluctance to organize for change. The dominant institutions are complex enough to blunt the minds of their potential critics, and entrenched enough to swiftly dissipate or entirely repel the energies of protest and reform, thus limiting human expectancies. Then, too, we are a materially improved society, and by our own improvements we seem to have weakened the case for further change.

Some would have us believe that Americans feel contentment amidst prosperity—but might it not better be called a glaze above

deeply felt anxieties about their role in the new world? And if these anxieties produce a developed indifference to human affairs, do they not as well produce a yearning to believe there is an alternative to the present, that something *can* be done to change circumstances in the school, the workplaces, the bureaucracies, the government? It is to this latter yearning, at once the spark and engine of change, that we direct our present appeal. The search for truly democratic alternatives to the present, and a commitment to social experimentation with them, is a worthy and fulfilling human enterprise, one which moves us and, we hope, others today. On such a basis do we offer this document of our convictions and analysis: as an effort in understanding and changing the conditions of humanity in the late twentieth century, an effort rooted in the ancient, still unfulfilled conception of man attaining determining influence over his circumstances of life.

Making values explicit—an initial task in establishing alternatives—is an activity that has been devalued and corrupted. The conventional moral terms of the age, the politician moralities—“free world,” “people’s democracies”—reflect realities poorly, if at all, and seem to function more as ruling myths than as descriptive principles. But neither has our experience in the universities brought us moral enlightenment. Our professors and administrators sacrifice controversy to public relations; their curriculums change more slowly than the living events of the world; their skills and silence are purchased by investors in the arms race; passion is called unscholastic. The questions we might want raised—what is really important? can we live in a different and better way? if we wanted to change society, how would we do it?—are not thought to be questions of a “fruitful, empirical nature,” and thus are brushed aside.

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We regard *men* as infinitely precious and possessed of unfulfilled capacities for reason, freedom, and love. In affirming these principles we are aware of countering perhaps the dominant conceptions of man in the twentieth century: that he is a thing to be manipulated,

and that he is inherently incapable of directing his own affairs. We oppose the depersonalization that reduces human beings to the status of things—if anything, the brutalities of the twentieth century teach that means and ends are intimately related, that vague appeals to “posterity” cannot justify the mutilations of the present. We oppose, too, the doctrine of human incompetence because it rests essentially on the modern fact that men have been “competently” manipulated into incompetence—we see little reason why men cannot meet with increasing skill the complexities and responsibilities of their situation, if society is organized not for minority, but for majority, participation in decision-making.

Men have unrealized potential for self-cultivation, self-direction, self-understanding, and creativity. It is this potential that we regard as crucial and to which we appeal, not to the human potentiality for violence, unreason, and submission to authority. The goal of man and society should be human independence: a concern not with image or popularity but with finding a meaning in life that is personally authentic; a quality of mind not compulsively driven by a sense of powerlessness, nor one which unthinkingly adopts status values, nor one which represses all threats to its habits, but one which has full, spontaneous access to present and past experiences, one which easily unites the fragmented parts of personal history, one which openly faces problems which are troubling and unresolved; one with an intuitive awareness of possibilities, an active sense of curiosity, an ability and willingness to learn.

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We would replace power rooted in possession, privilege, or circumstance by power and uniqueness rooted in love, reflectiveness, reason, and creativity. As a *social system* we seek the establishment of a democracy of individual participation, governed by two central aims: that the individual share in those social decisions determining the quality and direction of his life; that society be organized to encourage independence in men and provide the media for their common participation.

(7)

In a participatory democracy, the political life would be based in several root principles:

that decision-making of basic social consequence be carried on by public groupings;

that politics be seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations;

that politics has the function of bringing people out of isolation and into community, thus being a necessary, though not sufficient, means of finding meaning in personal life;

that the political order should serve to clarify problems in a way instrumental to their solution; it should provide outlets for the expression of personal grievance and aspiration; opposing views should be organized so as to illuminate choices and facilitate the attainment of goals; channels should be commonly available to relate men to knowledge and to power so that private problems—from bad recreation facilities to personal alienation—are formulated as general issues.

The economic sphere would have as its basis the principles:

that work should involve incentives worthier than money or survival: It should be educative, not stultifying; creative, not mechanical; self-directed, not manipulated, encouraging independence; a respect for others, a sense of dignity, and a willingness to accept social responsibility, since it is this experience that has crucial influence on habits, perceptions, and individual ethics;

that the economic experience is so personally decisive that the individual must share in its full determination;

that the economy itself is of such social importance that its major resources and means of production should be open to democratic participation and subject to democratic social regulation.

Like the political and economic ones, major social institutions—cultural, educational, rehabilitative, and others—should be generally organized with the well-being and dignity of man as the essential measure of success.

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