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"The Other America"

Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. - Grosse Pointe High School - March 14, 1968

Dr. Meserve, Bishop Emrich, my dear friend Congressman Conyers, ladies and gentlemen.

I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here tonight and to have the great privilege of discussing with you some of the vital issues confronting our nation and confronting the world. It is always a very rich and rewarding experience when I can take a brief break from the day-to-day demands of our struggle for freedom and human dignity and discuss the issues involved in that struggle with concerned people of good will all over our nation and all over the world, and I certainly want to express my deep personal appreciation to you for inviting me to occupy this significant platform.

I want to discuss the race problem tonight and I want to discuss it very honestly. I still believe that freedom is the bonus you receive for telling the truth. Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free. And I do not see how we will ever solve the turbulent problem of race confronting our nation until there is an honest confrontation with it and a willing search for the truth and a willingness to admit the truth when we discover it. And so I want to use as a title for my lecture tonight, "The Other America." And I use this title because there are literally two Americas. Every city in our country has this kind of dualism, this schizophrenia, split at so many parts, and so every city ends up being two cities rather than one. There are two Americas. One America is beautiful for situation. In this America, millions of people have the milk of prosperity and the honey of equality flowing before them. This America is the habitat of millions of people who have food and material necessities for their bodies, culture and education for their minds, freedom and human dignity for their spirits. In this America children grow up in the sunlight of opportunity. But there is another America. This other America has a daily ugliness about it that transforms the buoyancy of hope into the fatigue of despair. In this other America, thousands and thousands of people, men in particular walk the streets in search for jobs that do not exist. In this other America, millions of people are forced to live in vermin-filled, distressing housing conditions where they do not have the privilege of having wall-to-wall carpeting, but all too often, they end up with wall-to-wall rats and roaches. Almost forty percent of the Negro families of America live in sub-standard housing conditions. In this other America, thousands of young people are deprived of an opportunity to get an adequate education. Every year thousands finish high school reading at a seventh, eighth and sometimes ninth grade level. Not because they're dumb, not because they don't have the native intelligence, but because the schools are so inadequate, so over-crowded, so devoid of quality, so segregated if you will, that the best in these minds can never come out. Probably the most critical problem in the other America is the economic problem. There are so many other people in the other America who can never make ends meet because their incomes are far too low if they have incomes, and their jobs are so devoid of quality. And so in this other America, unemployment is a reality and under-employment is a reality. (I'll just wait until our friend can have her say) (applause). I'll just wait until things are restored and... everybody talks about law and order. (applause)

Now before I was so rudely interrupted... (applause), and I might say that it was my understanding that we're going to have a question and answer period, and if anybody disagrees with me, you will have the privilege, the opportunity to raise a question if you think I'm a traitor, then you'll have an opportunity to ask me about my traitoriness and we will give you that opportunity.

Now let me get back to the point that I was trying to bring out about the economic problem. And that is one of the most critical problems that we face in America today. We find in the other America unemployment constantly rising to astronomical proportions and black people generally find themselves living in a literal depression. All too often when there is mass unemployment in the black community, it's referred to as a social problem and when there is mass unemployment in the white community, it's referred to as a depression. But there is no basic difference. The fact is, that the negro faces a literal depression all over the U.S. The unemployment rate on the basis of statistics from the labor department is about 8.8 per cent in the black community. But these statistics only take under consideration individuals who were once in the labor market, or individuals who go to employment offices to seek employment. But they do not take under consideration the thousands of people who have given up, who have lost motivation, the thousands of people who have had so many doors closed in their faces that they feel defeated and they no longer go out and look for jobs, the thousands who've come to feel that life is a long and desolate corridor with no exit signs. These people are considered the discouraged and when you add the discouraged to the individuals who can't be calculated through statistics in the unemployment category, the unemployment rate in the negro community probably goes to 16 or 17 percent. And among black youth, it is in some communities as high as 40 and 45 percent. But the problem of unemployment is not the only problem. There is the problem of under-employment, and there are thousands and thousand, I would say millions of people in the negro community who are poverty stricken - not because they are not working but because they receive wages so low that they cannot begin to function in the main stream of the economic life of our nation. Most of the poverty stricken people of America are persons who are working every day and they end up getting part-time wages for full-time work. So the vast majority of negroes in America find themselves perishing on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. This has caused a great deal of bitterness. It has caused a great deal of agony. It has caused ache and anguish. It has caused great despair, and we have seen the angered expressions of this despair and this bitterness in the violent rebellions that have taken place in cities all over our country. Now I think my views on non-violence are pretty generally known. I still believe that non-violence is the most potent weapon available to the negro in his struggle for justice and freedom in the U.S.

Now let me relieve you a bit. I've been in the struggle a long time now, (applause) and I've conditioned myself to some things that are much more painful than discourteous people not allowing you to speak, so if they feel that they can discourage me, they'll be up here all night.

Now I wanted to say something about the fact that we have lived over these last two or three summers with agony and we have seen our cities going up in flames. And I would be the first to say that I am still committed to militant, powerful, massive, non-violence as the most potent weapon in grappling with the problem from a direct action point of view. I'm absolutely convinced that a riot merely intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving the guilt. And I feel that we must always work with an effective, powerful weapon and method that brings about tangible results. But it is not enough for me to stand before you tonight and condemn riots. It would be morally irresponsible for me to do that without, at the same time, condemning the contingent, intolerable conditions that exist in our society. These conditions are the things that cause individuals to feel that they have no other alternative than to engage in violent rebellions to get attention. And I must say tonight that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it America has failed to hear? It has failed to hear that the plight of the negro poor has worsened over the last twelve or fifteen years. It has failed to hear that the

promises of freedom and justice have not been met. And it has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice and humanity.

Now every year about this time, our newspapers and our televisions and people generally start talking about the long hot summer ahead. What always bothers me is that the long hot summer has always been preceded by a long cold winter. And the great problem is that the nation has not used its winters creatively enough to develop the program, to develop the kind of massive acts of concern that will bring about a solution to the problem. And so we must still face the fact that our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. As long as justice is postponed we always stand on the verge of these darker nights of social disruption. The question now, is whether America is prepared to do something massively, affirmatively and forthrightly about the great problem we face in the area of race and the problem which can bring the curtain of doom down on American civilization if it is not solved. And I would like to talk for the next few minutes about some of the things that must be done if we are to solve this problem.

The first thing I would like to mention is that there must be a recognition on the part of everybody in this nation that America is still a racist country. Now however unpleasant that sounds, it is the truth. And we will never solve the problem of racism until there is a recognition of the fact that racism still stands at the center of so much of our nation and we must see racism for what it is. It is the nymph of an inferior people. It is the notion that one group has all of the knowledge, all of the insights, all of the purity, all of the work, all of the dignity. And another group is worthless, on a lower level of humanity, inferior. To put it in philosophical language, racism is not based on some empirical generalization which, after some studies, would come to conclusion that these people are behind because of environmental conditions. Racism is based on an ontological affirmation. It is the notion that the very being of a people is inferior. And their ultimate logic of racism is genocide. Hitler was a very sick man. He was one of the great tragedies of history. But he was very honest. He took his racism to its logical conclusion. The minute his racism caused him to sickly feel and go about saying that there was something innately inferior about the Jew he ended up killing six million Jews. The ultimate logic of racism is genocide, and if one says that one is not good enough to have a job that is a solid quality job, if one is not good enough to have access to public accommodations, if one is not good enough to have the right to vote, if one is not good enough to live next door to him, if one is not good enough to marry his daughter because of his race. Then at that moment that person is saying that that person who is not good to do all of this is not fit to exist or to live. And that is the ultimate logic of racism. And we've got to see that this still exists in American society. And until it is removed, there will be people walking the streets of live and living in their humble dwellings feeling that they are nobody, feeling that they have no dignity and feeling that they are not respected. The first thing that must be on the agenda of our nation is to get rid of racism.

Secondly, we've got to get rid of two or three myths that still pervade our nation. One is the myth of time. I'm sure you've heard this notion. It is the notion that only time can solve the problem of racial injustice. And I've heard it from many sincere people. They've said to the negro and/to his allies in the white community you should slow up, you're pushing things too fast, only time can solve the problem. And if you'll just be nice and patient and continue to pray, in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out. There is an answer to that myth. It is the time is neutral. It can be used either constructively or destructively. And I'm sad to say to you tonight I'm absolutely convinced that the forces of ill will in our nation, the forces on the wrong side in our nation, the extreme righteous of our nation have often used time much more effectively than the forces of good will and it may well be that we may have to repent in this generation not merely for the vitriolic words of the bad people who will say bad things in a meeting like this or who will bomb a church in Birmingham, Alabama, but for the appalling silence and indifference of the good people who sit around and say wait on time. Somewhere we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability, it comes

through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God and without this hard work time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation. And so we must always help time and realize that the time is always right to do right.

Now there is another myth and that is the notion that legislation can't solve the problem that you've got to change the heart and naturally I believe in changing the heart. I happen to be a Baptist preacher and that puts me in the heart changing business and Sunday after Sunday I'm preaching about conversion and the need for the new birth and re-generation. I believe that there's something wrong with human nature. I believe in original sin not in terms of the historical event but as the mythological category to explain the universality of evil, so I'm honest enough to see the gone-wrongness of human nature so naturally I'm not against changing the heart and I do feel that that is the half truth involved here, that there is some truth in the whole question of changing the heart. We are not going to have the kind of society that we should have until the white person treats the negro right - not because the law says it but because it's natural because it's right and because the black man is the white man's brother. I'll be the first to say that we will never have a truly integrated society, a truly colorless society until men and women are obedient to the unenforceable. But after saying that, let me point out the other side. It may be true that morality cannot be legislated, but behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart but it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law can't make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that's pretty important also.

And so while legislation may not change the hearts of men, it does change the habits of men when it's vigorously enforced and when you change the habits of people pretty soon attitudes begin to be changed and people begin to see that they can do things that fears caused them to feel that they could never do. And I say that there's a need still for strong civil rights legislation in various areas. There's legislation in Congress right now dealing with the whole question of housing and equal administration of justice and these things are very important for I submit to you tonight that there is no more dangerous development in our nation than the constant building up of predominantly negro central cities ringed by white suburbs. This will do nothing but invite social disaster. And this problem has to be dealt with - some through legislation, some through education, but it has to be dealt with in a very concrete and meaningful manner.

Now let me get back to my point. I'm going to finish my speech. I've been trying to think about what I'm going to preach about tomorrow down to Central Methodist Church in the Lenten series and I think I'll use as the text, "Father forgive them for they know not what they do."

I want to deal with another myth briefly which concerns me and I want to talk about it very honestly and that is over-reliance on the bootstrap philosophy. Now certainly it's very important for people to engage in self-help programs and do all they can to lift themselves by their own bootstraps. Now I'm not talking against that at all. I think there is a great deal that the black people of this country must do for themselves and that nobody else can do for them. And we must see the other side of this question. I remember the other day I was on a plane and a man starting talking with me and he said I'm sympathetic toward what you're trying to do, but I just feel that you people don't do enough for yourself and then he went on to say that my problem is, my concern is, that I know of other ethnic groups, many of the ethnic groups that came to this country and they had problems just as negroes and yet they did the job for themselves, they lifted themselves by their own bootstraps. Why is it that negroes can't do that? And I looked at him and I tried to talk as understanding as possible but I said to him, it does not help the negro for unfeeling, sensitive white people to say that other ethnic groups that came to the country maybe a hundred or a hundred and fifty years voluntarily have gotten ahead of them and he was brought here in chains involuntarily almost three hundred and fifty years ago. I said it doesn't help him to be told that and then I went on to say to this gentlemen that he failed to recognize that no other ethnic group has

been enslaved on American soil. Then I had to go on to say to him that you failed to realize that America made the black man's color a stigma. Something that he couldn't change. Not only was the color a stigma, but even linguistic then stigmatic conspired against the black man so that his color was thought of as something very evil. If you open Roget's Thesaurus and notice the synonym for black you'll find about a hundred and twenty and most of them represent something dirty, smut, degrading, low, and when you turn to the synonym for white, about one hundred and thirty, all of them represent something high, pure, chaste. You go right down that list. And so in the language a white life is a little better than a black life. Just follow. If somebody goes wrong in the family, we don't call him a white sheep we call him a black sheep. And then if you block somebody from getting somewhere you don't say they've been whiteballed, you say they've been blackballed. And just go down the line. It's not whitemail it's blackmail. I tell you this to seriously say that the nation made the black man's color a stigma and then I had to say to my friend on the plane another thing that is often forgotten in this country. That nobody, no ethnic group has completely lifted itself by its own bootstraps. I can never forget that the black man was free from the bondage of physical slavery in 1863. He wasn't given any land to make that freedom meaningful after being held in slavery 244 years. And it was like keeping a man in prison for many many years and then coming to see that he is not guilty of the crime for which he was convicted. Alright good night and God bless you.

And I was about to say that to free, to have freed the negro from slavery without doing anything to get him started in life on a sound economic footing, it was almost like freeing a man who had been in prison many years and you had discovered that he was unjustly convicted of, that he was innocent of the crime for which he was convicted and you go up to him and say now you're free, but you don't give him any bus fare to get to town or you don't give him any money to buy some clothes to put on his back or to get started in life again. Every code of jurisprudence would rise up against it. This is the very thing that happened to the black man in America. And then when we look at it even deeper than this, it becomes more ironic. We're reaping the harvest of this failure today. While America refused to do anything for the black man at that point, during that very period, the nation, through an act of Congress, was giving away millions of acres of land in the west and the mid-west, which meant that it was willing to under gird its white peasants from Europe with an economic floor. Not only did they give the land, they built land grant colleges for them to learn how to farm. Not only that it provided county agents to further their expertise in farming and went beyond this and came to the point of providing low interest rates for these persons so that they could mechanize their farms, and today many of these persons are being paid millions of dollars a year in federal subsidies not to farm and these are so often the very people saying to the black man that he must lift himself by his own bootstraps. I can never think ... Senator Eastland, incidentally, who says this all the time gets a hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars a year, not to farm on various areas of his plantation down in Mississippi. And yet he feels that we must do everything for ourselves. Well that appears to me to be a kind of socialism for the rich and rugged hard individualistic capitalism for the poor.

Now let me say two other things and I'm going to rush on. One, I want to say that if we're to move ahead and solve this problem we must re-order our national priorities. Today we're spending almost thirty-five billion dollars a year to fight what I consider an unjust, ill-considered, evil, costly, unwinnable war at Viet Nam. I wish I had time to go into the dimensions of this. But I must say that the war in Viet Nam is playing havoc with our Domestic destinies. That war has torn up the Geneva accord, it has strengthened, it has substituted.. . (interruption)... alright if you want to speak, I'll let you come down and speak and I'll wait. You can give your Viet Nam speech now listen to mine. Come right on.

Speaker: Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Joseph McLawtern, communications technician, U.S. Navy, United States of America and I fought for freedom I didn't fight for communism, traitors and I didn't fight to be sold down the drain. Not by Romney, Cavanagh, Johnson - nobody, nobody's going to sell me down the drain.

Alright, thank you very much. I just want to say in response to that, that there are those of us who oppose the war in Viet Nam. I feel like opposing it for many reasons. Many of them are moral reasons but one basic reason is that we love our boys who are fighting there and we just want them to come back home. But I don't have time to go into the history and the development of the war in Viet Nam. I happen to be a pacifist but if I had had to make a decision about fighting a war against Hitler, I may have temporarily given up my pacifism and taken up arms. But nobody is to compare what is happening in Viet Nam today with that. I'm convinced that it is clearly an unjust war and it's doing so many things - not only on the domestic scene, it is carrying the whole world closer to nuclear annihilation. And so I've found it necessary to take a stand against the war in Viet Nam and I appreciate Bishop Emrich's question and I must answer it by saying that for me the tuitus? cannot be divided. It's nice for me to talk about ... it's alright to talk about integrated schools and in integrated lunch counters which I will continue to work for, but I think it would be rather absurd for me to work for integrated schools and not be concerned about the survival of the world in which to integrate.

The other thing is, that I have been working too long and too hard now against segregated public accommodations to end up at this stage of my life segregating my moral concern. I must make it clear. For me justice is indivisible. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.

Now for the question of hurting civil rights. I think the war in Viet Nam hurt civil rights much more than my taking a stand against the war. And I could point out so many things to say that... a reporter asked me sometime ago when I first took a strong stand against the war didn't I feel that I would have to reverse my position because so many people disagreed, and people who once had respect for me wouldn't have respect, and he went on to say that I hear that it's hurt the budget of your organization and don't you think that you have to get in line more with the administration's policy ... and of course those were very lonely days when I first started speaking out and not many people were speaking out but now I have a lot of company and it's not as lonesome now. But anyway, I had to say to the reporter, I'm sorry sir but you don't know me. I'm not a consensus leader and I do not determine what is right and wrong by looking at the budget of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or by kind of taking a look at a gallop poll and getting the expression of the majority opinion. Ultimately, a genuine leader is not a succor for consensus but a mold of consensus. And on some positions cowardice ask the question is it safe? Expediency asks the question is it politics? Vanity asks the question is it popular? The conscience asks the question is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe nor politics nor popular but he must do it because conscience tells him it is right.

Now the time is passing and I'm not going to... I was going into the need for direct action to dramatize and call attention to the gulf between promise and fulfillment. I've been searching for a long time for an alternative to riots on the one hand and timid supplication for justice on the other and I think that alternative is found in militant massive non-violence. I'll wait until the question period before going into the Washington campaign. But let me say that it has been my experience in these years that I've been in the struggle for justice, that things just don't happen until the issue is dramatized in a massive direct-action way. I never will forget when we came through Washington in 1964, in December coming from Oslo. I stopped by to see President Johnson. We talked about a lot of things and we finally got to the point of talking about voting rights. The President was concerned about voting, but he said Martin, I can't get this through in this session of Congress. We can't get a voting rights bill, he said because there are two or three other things that I feel that we've got to get through and they're going to benefit negroes as much as anything. One was the education bill and something else. And then he went on to

say that if I push a voting rights bill now, I'll lose the support of seven congressmen that I sorely need for the particular things that I had and we just can't get it. Well, I went on to say to the President that I felt that we had to do something about it and two weeks later we started a movement in Selma, Alabama. We started dramatizing the issue of the denial of the right to vote and I submit to you that three months later as a result of that Selma movement, the same President who said to me that we could not get a voting rights bill in that session of Congress was on the television singing through a speaking voice "we shall overcome" and calling for the passage of a voting rights bill and I could go on and on to show. . .and we did get a voting rights bill in that session of Congress. Now, I could go on to give many other examples to show that it just doesn't come about without pressure and this is what we plan to do in Washington. We aren't planning to close down Washington, we aren't planning to close down Congress. This isn't anywhere in our plans. We are planning to dramatize the issue to the point that poor people in this nation will have to be seen and will not be invisible.

Now let me finally say something in the realm of the spirit and then I'm going to take my seat. Let me say finally, that in the midst of the hollering and in the midst of the discourtesy tonight, we got to come to see that however much we dislike it, the destinies of white and black America are tied together. Now the races don't understand this apparently. But our destinies are tied together. And somehow, we must all learn to live together as brothers in this country or we're all going to perish together as fools. Our destinies are tied together. Whether we like it or not culturally and otherwise, every white person is a little bit negro and every negro is a little bit white. Our language, our music, our material prosperity and even our food are an amalgam of black and white, so there can be no separate black path to power and fulfillment that does not intersect white routes and there can ultimately be no separate white path to power and fulfillment short of social disaster without recognizing the necessity of sharing that power with black aspirations for freedom and human dignity. We must come to see. . .yes we do need each other, the black man needs the white man to save him from his fear and the white man needs the black man to free him from his guilt.

John Dunn was right. No man is an island and the tide that fills every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. And he goes on toward the end to say, "any man's death diminishes me because I'm involved in mankind. Therefore, it's not to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee." Somehow we must come to see that in this pluralistic, interrelated society we are all tied together in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. And by working with determination and realizing that power must be shared, I think we can solve this problem, and may I say in conclusion that our goal is freedom and I believe that we're going to get there. It's going to be more difficult from here on in but I believe we're going to get there because however much she strays away from it, the goal of America is freedom and Our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. Before the Pilgrim fathers landed at Plymouth we were here. Before Jefferson etched across the pages of history the majestic words of the Declaration of Independence we were here. Before the beautiful words of the Star Spangled Banner were written we were here. And for more than two centuries our forbearers labored here without wages. They made cotton King, they built the homes of their masters in the midst of the most humiliating and oppressive conditions and yet out of a bottomless vitality they continued to grow and develop and if the inexpressible cruelties of slavery couldn't stop us, the opposition that we now face including the white backlash will surely fail.

We are going to win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of the Almighty God are embodied in our echoing demands. So however difficult it is during this period, however difficult it is to continue to live with the agony and the continued existence of racism, however difficult it is to live amidst the constant hurt, the constant insult and the constant disrespect, I can still sing we shall overcome. We shall overcome because the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends towards justice.

We shall overcome because Carlisle is right. "No lie can live forever." We shall overcome because William Cullen Bryant is right. "Truth crushed to earth will rise again." We shall overcome because James Russell Lowell is right. "Truth forever on the scaffold, wrong forever on the throne." Yet that scaffold sways the future. We shall overcome because the Bible is right. "You shall reap what you sow." With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children all over this nation - black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old negro spiritual, "Free at Last, Free at Last, Thank God Almighty, We are Free At Last."



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