TRACING THE ROOTS OF "THE DREAM:"

KING'S HIGH SCHOOL ORATION "THE NEGRO AND THE CONSTITUTION"

William Murphy & John Llewellyn

Department of Communication

Wake Forest University

llewelly@wfu.edu

PO Box 7347

Winston-Salem, NC 27109

TRACING THE ROOTS OF "THE DREAM:"

KING'S HIGH SCHOOL ORATION "THE NEGRO AND THE CONSTITUTION"

Abstract

This paper examines the connections between these two King's speeches: his first chronicled speech and the one recognized as the most significant speech by an American in the twentieth century. The 1944 speech seems to be precursor and a portent for the 1963 event. The two share values, images, and references to sacred cultural texts. The 1944 mentions Marian Anderson's 1939 performance on the Mall; the 1963 speech echoes her symbolic triumph in Lincoln's shadow.

On December 5, 1955, the newly-elected president of the Montgomery Improvement Association, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., a great orator with a political vision, steps to the podium of the Holt Street Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He gives a heavily improvised speech which was scratched down the night before. This speech sets him on the path to leadership in the Civil Rights Movement, and throws him from the shadows into the spotlight. While this particular instance suggests Dr. King might have been an overnight sensation, it is a common misconception that his leadership role was forced on him by the black community. The truth: King was groomed from an early age to be a civil rights leader. The legacy of his effort is clear: America praises Dr. King and honors his memory with a public holiday; his 1963 speech, "I Have Dream," (IHAD) is acknowledged as the most significant American speech of the twentieth century.

This paper examines the roots of King's philosophy and his rhetoric as expressed in IHAD as previewed in remarks given in 1944. King's first published speech occurred in his junior year of high school. This speech has some remarkable similarities to IHAD and can be envisioned as its precursor and prototype.

There are many instances in King's life that underscored his contempt for southern segregation. His best friend at the age of six was a white boy. One day the boy told Martin that his father would no longer permit them to play together. Although King claims in his autobiography that he was aware of the injustice in the South because of the conversations he had overheard between his parents, this was his first hard lesson in the ways of racial injustice. Martin Luther King, Sr. also did much to instill a hatred of the system as well as provide the tools for his son to beat it by making sure he got a good education. Martin Luther King, Sr. had a deep contempt for the system and he did not hide his disgust

from his son, even at an earlier age. In his autobiography, King, Jr. recounts a story in which his father storms out of a shoe store because the clerk would not serve him in the front of the store. As they are leaving the store, Martin recounts his father saying "I don't care how long I have to live with this system, I will never accept it" (King, 1992).

The first time King publicly shows his talent and desires to challenge the system occurs during his junior year in high school, when he enters an oratory contest sponsored by the Black Elks. His speech was deemed good enough to represent Booker T. Washington High School in the statewide competition in Dublin, Georgia. King travelled along with his teacher, Sarah Grace Bradley, and fellow student, Hiram Kendall. King won the competition with a speech entitled "The Negro and the Constitution," which focuses on the inconsistencies between American values on paper and the lived reality of American life. Ironically, on the bus ride home the three companions are told to give up their seats to a white couple who had just boarded the bus. The driver did not believe they were vacating the seats quickly enough and began cursing at them. Martin and Hiram became defiantly determined to remain in the seats, but they were persuaded by Mrs. Bradley to vacate them. Perhaps the anonymous bus driver who covered the shift from Dublin to Atlanta that night inadvertently helped to spark the American Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr. would later describe that moment as "The angriest I have ever been" (Carson 7).

What is truly remarkable about Martin Luther King's "The Negro and the Constitution Speech" is that at the tender age of fifteen he outlines all the characteristics that the civil rights movement of the Sixties led by him would adopt. The March on Washington and the "I Have a Dream" speech are often seen as the pinnacle of the civil rights movement. A critical analysis of the two speeches shows striking parallels in their values, arguments, and imagery.

The values that MLK extols in his speeches hardly fluctuate. The two values that can be traced through these two speeches are non-violence and brotherly love. Even as a young man, King recognizes the importance of a non-violent revolution. He argues that it is one thing to "conquer southern armies by the sword, but it is another thing to conquer hate" (King, 1944). Even in his youth, King is able to realize that the wounds of a civil rights revolution would only be able heal if it was carried out by viewing hatred, and not southerners, as the enemy. Nineteen years later King would make a similar argument that the movement could not turn violent: "We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline" (King, 1963).

The other major theme that King preaches to both audiences is the necessity for brotherly love. Early in IHAD King claims that racial injustice is "quicksand," and that brotherhood is "the solid rock" (King, 1963). He also attacks the idea of a militant movement by asserting that Whites are the Blacks' brothers. He goes on to use the idea again in one of the most famous lines in speech history: "I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down at the table of brotherhood" (King, 1963). In his earlier speech, King claims that the two central teachings of Jesus are "brotherly love and the Golden Rule" (King, 1944).

The most memorable image that King paints in both speeches is similar. Arguably the most famous line in the "I Have a Dream" speech is the one with the image of children being free from the consequences of racial hatred: "I have a dream that one day. . . one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers" (King, 1963). The fact is that this image was not one created by an adult, but rather by a teenager. King closes his speech "The Negro and the Constitution" in a remarkably similar manner: "And I with my brother of blackest hue. . . may stand beside the Saxon, a Negro, and yet a man" (King, 1944).

In both speeches King argues for the rights of black Americans, and in both speeches his argument is consistent. King's first argument in both speeches for the rights of Blacks is that these rights are promised in the great documents of America. In both speeches he names the Emancipation Proclamation, as well as the Constitution. In addition, King's famous blank check metaphor from IHAD has roots in "The Negro and the Constitution." In both speeches he sets up the situation up by comparing the Emancipation Proclamation to a beacon of light. In the earlier speech, he refers to it as "a rising sun of a new day begun" (King, 1944). In the latter, he refers to it as "a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity" (King, 1963). Then, in both speeches, King goes on to compare this ideology to the reality of the time. In the "Negro and the Constitution" he claims, "Black America still wears chains" (King, 1944). In "I Have a Dream" King compares this promise to a bad check "marked insufficient funds" (King, 1963).

Even the famous "I Have a Dream" concluding segment has an antecedent in "The Negro and the Constitution." Both speeches end on an uplifting note. In "The Negro and the Constitution" MLK ends the speech stating that he has hope "inspired by the example of Lincoln, imbued with the spirit of Christ, they will cast down the last barrier to perfect freedom" (King, 1944). He ends the speech with the image of a black man and a white man standing side by side, as equals. The "I Have a Dream" speech closes in much the same manner. King talks about his dream for equality, by presenting many images of a future with racial harmony: "to speed up that day when all of God's children, 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!'" While both speeches list the grievances of the black community, they share the same uplifting message of hope as they close.

Though the speeches compare favorably in content and ideology, the way in which they are most inextricably bound is not as obvious. That binding narrative thread is the story of Marian Anderson, which King outlines in "The Negro and the Constitution." The tale lends more to both speeches than the mere words of the speech would suggest. Marian Anderson is considered to have one of the greatest contralto voices in history; however, in 1939 she was barred from singing at Constitution Hall by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) because of the color of her skin. Eleanor Roosevelt realized the injustice of this action and resigned from the DAR. She also found Ms. Anderson a new performance venue, the Washington Mall. This is the very venue King would electrify 24 years later.

Martin Luther King Jr. was only ten years of age at the time of the DAR's snub, but he took note. In "The Negro and the Constitution" he talks about the important politicians that surrounded Ms. Anderson and the fact that it was fitting that she sang before the Lincoln Memorial. One cannot say with absolute certainty whether this "historic moment" inspired King to recapture that sentiment a quarter century later; however, the impression that Marian Anderson had on Martin Luther King Jr. is obvious (King, 1944). In 1939, Anderson was introduced by a speaker who talked of an America without racial prejudice. She then approached the microphone and sang "My Country 'tis of Thee" in the same drawn out phrasing that King would repeat on August 28, 1963 in the symbolic shadow of Lincoln. Anderson closed her performance by singing old Negro spirituals; King, who had been preceded on the stage by the great singer Mahalia Jackson, fashioned his closing to revisit Anderson's theme.

While King the speaker continued to develop and refine his craft throughout his life, it is clear that "The Negro and the Constitution" and the "I Have a Dream" are cut from the same philosophical and rhetorical cloth. At the age of fifteen, Martin Luther King, Jr. had already developed the central

ideas, metaphors, and arguments he would use to write the greatest American speech of the twentieth century.

Works Cited

Carson, Clayborne. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Warner Books, 1998. *Google Books*. Web. 9 Nov. 2009.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "I Have a Dream." *American Rhetoric*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Nov. 2009.

King, Martin Luther, Jr, and Clayborne Carson. *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr: Symbol of the Movement*. London: University of California Press, 1992. *Google Books*. Web. 9 Nov. 2009.

Ross, Alex. "Marian Anderson at Lincoln Memorial on Easter Sunday." *The Harlem Eye*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Nov. 2009.

Stanford University. "The Negro and the Constitution." *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Struggle for World Freedom*. N.p., n.d. Web. 9 Nov. 2009.