

# Response to Award of American Liberties Medallion

*By Martin Luther King, Jr.*

I want to thank you for honoring me in this most significant way with the American Liberties Medallion. I can assure you that this award will go a long, long way in giving me renewed courage and vigor to carry on, for this warm expression of support is of inestimable value for the continuance of my humble efforts. I am sure you can understand that I cannot accept this award, or any award, merely as an honor to me personally. I hope never to become so arrogant or so egotistic as to feel that this great struggle taking place in our nation is guided by any one individual. I think of the hundreds and thousands and millions of people of good will who are working on a day-to-day basis to establish a reign of justice and a rule of love throughout this land. Many of these people will never make "Who's Who." Their names will never appear in the headlines. But in a real sense they are the heroes of this struggle. I am sure that in presenting this award tonight, you presented it to me as a trustee for all of those people who are working to make justice and freedom a reality all over America. I know that your support for our movement will mean so much as the days and the weeks and the years unfold.

I particularly cherish the opportunity to address so distinguished an organization as the American Jewish Committee, whose founding statement declared many years ago what is a fundamental truth, that "Jews cannot ensure equality for themselves unless it is assured for all."

Because of your basic allegiance to this principle, the American Jewish Committee stated in 1963 that “. . . the crisis resulting from a century of denial, by the white majority of the Negro American's basic human rights, is not a Negro problem. It is a challenge calling for a moral commitment by Americans of every race and religion, and of every section of the country.”

In this spirit, your organization as early as 1911 — when few men dared to speak out — launched a campaign in New York State to end the advertisement of discrimination in public accommodations, in recreational resorts and amusement parks. This campaign resulted in the passage in 1913 of a state law which has served as a model for many other states and has thus made possible the extension of dignity for Negroes, Puerto Ricans and other minorities. Dr. Kenneth Clark's research on the damaging psychological effect of prejudice, which was a major part of the evidence put before the Supreme Court and led to the now famous decision of 1954 outlawing racial segregation in public schools, was originally done for the American Jewish Committee.

These deeds demonstrate for all Americans that the struggle for equal rights is not the Negro's alone — but is, as you early disclosed, part of the fulfillment of this country's highest and most cherished ideals. By recognizing this, you are honoring the truth that all life is interrelated and all men are interdependent. You are recognizing in the true spirit of our Judeo-Christian heritage that the agony of the poor diminishes the rich and that the salvation of the weak enriches the strong; and that we are inevitably our brother's keeper.

John Donne interpreted this noble truth in graphic terms when he affirmed: “No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.”

Because of your unswerving devotion to human rights, I feel spiritually very much at home in this fellowship with you tonight.

In the past several years it has become clear that the technique of mass nonviolent direct action has not only become the accepted method of the civil rights movement but, beyond that, the vast majority of all Americans now support and approve it. What began as a limited expression of protest ten years ago in Montgomery, Alabama, to integrate a bus line has grown into a national phenomenon. As history spiraled over a decade, the movement returned to Montgomery and involved, in direct action, nuns and priests, rabbis and ministers and laity of every race, social class and age.

Many observers have been surprised and even shocked by these methods. The enemies of the civil rights movement have been quick and vocal to denounce them as undemocratic pressure tactics, and even un-American in philosophy. Yet the truth is that no one can scorn nonviolent direct action or civil disobedience without canceling out American history. The first nonviolent direct action did not occur in Montgomery; its roots go back to the American Revolution and the boycott against British tea, culminating in the Boston Tea Party. It was the favorite weapon of the suffragette movement when women had to fight for their right to vote, and it was the technique the trade unions employed to organize the mass-production industries.

If there is some confusion about the origins of nonviolent direct action, there is even more about civil disobedience. The two methods are not synonymous. Civil disobedience in its true sense has not been employed by Negroes in their struggle. To utilize civil disobedience in its authentic historical form involves defiance of fundamental national law. For example, when Antigone insisted upon her right to follow her individual conscience and religious convictions to bury her brother, she was defying the King and the unqualified majesty of his law. When the Quakers refused to return runaway slaves, they were defying the Supreme Court and the Dred Scott decision. When Thoreau refused to pay taxes in protest against the Mexican War, he was breaking a fundamental legislative enactment and opposing the declaration of war of the Congress.

Certainly we all understand this and heartily approve of

creative civil disobedience in many instances. But we must also understand that the Negro today, when he marches in the streets, is not practicing civil disobedience because he is not challenging the Constitution, the Supreme Court or the enactments of Congress. Instead, he seeks to uphold them. He may be violating local municipal ordinances or state laws but it is these laws which contradict basic national law; and Negroes, by their direct action, are exposing the contradiction. Thus, the civil disobedience in the situation is that of the segregationists. Negroes have not willfully and frivolously violated the law. Many goodhearted people believe they do exactly that, and forgive them on grounds that they endure appalling grievances. Yet these people forgive them for misdeeds they are not committing. The truly unsocial lawbreaker disregards law because he, as an individual, is seeking a personal advantage. Negroes have never forgotten, even under the crushing burdens of injustice, that they are connected with the larger society; that the roads they may obstruct and the public buildings they may picket are used in common by all citizens. For that reason, before a protest can be approved by responsible leadership, they must answer the following questions:

1. Do we have a just grievance, or is our purpose merely to create confusion for its own sake, as a form of revenge?
2. Have we first attempted to eliminate the problem by negotiation, petition and appropriate appeals to authority?
3. Having found these channels useless or forcibly closed to us when we embark upon any type of lawbreaking, are we prepared to accept the consequences society will inflict and to maintain, even under punishment, a sense of brotherhood?
4. Do we have a clear program to relieve injustice to ourselves without inflicting injustice upon others, and is that program reasonable and grounded in the ethics and best traditions of our society?

In establishing these prerequisites for direct action, the civil rights movement meets its responsibility to society and fulfills its obligations to democratic principle.

Even after the movement embarks upon a program of non-violent direct action or civil disobedience, its purposes are not narrowly confined to benefit the Negro exclusively. It is an axiom of nonviolent action and democracy that when any group struggles properly and justly to achieve its own rights, it enlarges the rights of all. It is this element that makes both democracy and nonviolent action self-renewing and creative.

What advantages have all Americans derived from the growth of nonviolent direct action in civil rights?

First, the struggle dissolves the deceptive facade and reveals basic evils and contradictions in the society. Tens of millions of Americans a decade ago were ignorant of the actual conditions of the life of the Negro, both in the North and the South. Until there was awareness, there could be no consensus to make corrections. The long list of Federal legislative enactments and Supreme Court decisions illustrate how extensive were the wrongs that blighted our society.

Second, programs for remedying evils are not confined in their effects to Negroes. When Negroes took to the streets to demand job opportunities for themselves, they helped to stimulate a broad war-on-poverty concept which ultimately will benefit more whites than Negroes. When Negroes by direct action seek to participate in the electoral process, they awaken the apathetic white who so took his rights for granted that he neglected to use them. When Negroes boycotted schools, they did more than reveal classroom discrimination. They brought to the fore such criticisms as those of Dr. Conant, former president of Harvard University, who had long charged we were seeking to utilize 19th century educational methods in conditions of 20th century urbanization. And there emerged a new and startling question — transcending the issue of desegregation — of paramount importance to the whole population. What is quality education and how is it attained for all under conditions of population growth, automation and redistribution of population in sprawling cities?

Sociologists will find much to ponder in the striking fact that after the futile efforts to achieve ecumenicity by discussion and con-

ferences, in the streets of Selma and Montgomery and at the Lincoln Memorial there was the greatest and warmest expression of religious unity of Catholic, Protestant and Jew in the nation's history.

One of the most profound of all the results of the Negro upsurge has been its effect upon the youth of the nation. From the student-led sit-ins of 1960, an awakening of social thought and action has swept the campuses of the nation. In addition to overcoming the stultifying effects of McCarthyism, the movement has in a few years changed the total description of American youth. From the silent generation they have become the morally and socially concerned generation. From the single issue of civil rights, interest has broadened to questions of peace and poverty. From exclusively student involvement, the issues now have become the concern of faculty and scholars of every description. It is noteworthy that the vibrant movement to re-examine our foreign policy, which the government now respects and welcomes, borrowed its title, "Teach-Ins," from the civil rights movement. The student awakening and the student mass action rests upon no specific political tendency but affects the whole democratic political spectrum.

I have discussed the social effects of nonviolent mass direct action at length because I believe it is too often limited in its application merely to the civil rights movement. Perhaps if there had been a broader understanding of the uses of nonviolent direct action in Germany when Hitler was rising and consolidating his power, the brutal extermination of six million Jews and millions of other war dead might have been averted and Germany might never have become totalitarian. If Protestants and Catholics had engaged in nonviolent direct action and had made the oppression of the Jews their very own oppression and had come into the streets beside the Jew to scrub the sidewalks, and had Gentiles worn the stigmatizing yellow arm bands by the millions, a unique form of mass resistance to the Nazi regime might have developed. I am fully aware of the terror, the intimidation, the brutality and the force the Fascists were so quick to use, but I am also aware that in the South today some racists of the same mentality have

been curbed in their resistance to nonviolent action when practiced on a mass scale.

Today people all over the world should be engaging in mass action to protest anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. There is a danger of silence today which unintentionally encourages evil to flourish. Albert Einstein was right when he said, "The world is in greater peril from those who tolerate evil than from those who actively commit it." Did not President Kennedy warn that those who do nothing are inviting shame as well as violence? Will the nation ever forget the searing impact of Rabbi Prinz' demonstration as he spoke at the March on Washington in 1963: "When I was the rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime, I learned many things. The most important thing that I learned in my life and under those tragic circumstances is that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problem. The most urgent, the most disgraceful, the most shameful and the most tragic problem is silence." A great people which created a great civilization became a nation of silent onlookers who remained silent in the face of hate, in the face of brutality and in the face of mass murder.

America must not become a nation of onlookers. America must not remain silent — not merely black America but all of America. It must speak up and act — from the President down to the humblest of us — and not for the sake of the Negro, but for the sake of the image, the idea and the aspiration of America itself.

The stirring lesson of this age is that mass nonviolent direct action is not a peculiar device for Negro agitation. Rather, it is a historically validated method for defending freedom and democracy and for enlarging these values to the ultimate benefit of the whole society.

I have tried to show that in our struggle, the civil rights forces — both black and white — have contributed not only to revealing the contradictions of this society but, acting as a catalyst, have also set in motion forces to effect creative change. If this be so, it is also clear that the progress we have made has depended on the support we have received from vocal and well-organized allies —

the major religious groups, the trade-union movement and various elements of the liberal community.

It is my fervent hope that in the long and stormy road ahead this coalition will be strengthened. For in this great force lies the consensus of American power capable not only of removing injustice and fear but of establishing freedom and social peace.

Let me conclude by saying exactly what we are seeking in the Freedom Movement. We come to the day when a piece of freedom is not enough for us as human beings nor for the nation of which we are a part. We have been given pieces — but, unlike bread, a slice of which does diminish hunger, a piece of liberty no longer suffices. Freedom is like life. You cannot be given life in installments. You cannot be given breath without body, nor heart without blood vessels. Freedom is one thing. You have it all or you are not free. Our goal is freedom.

May I say to you that I have no despair about the future. I still have profound faith in America. I believe we, as Negroes, will gain our freedom because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with the destiny of America. For more than two centuries our forebears labored here without wages. They made cotton king; they built the homes of their masters amidst the most depressing conditions — and yet, out of a bottomless vitality, they continued to grow and develop.

If the inexpressible cruelties of slavery could not stop us, the opposition that we now face will surely fail. We will win our freedom because both the sacred heritage of our nation and God's will are embodied in our echoing demands. So we can still sing with fervor and power and great conviction, "We shall overcome, we are not afraid. The Lord will see us through."

Before victory is won for brotherhood and justice, some more will have to get scarred up a bit. Before the victory is won, some more will face agonizing and frustrating jail cells. Before the victory is won, somebody else will lose a job. Before the victory is won, maybe someone else, like a Medgar Evers, a Mrs. Liuzzo, a Reverend James Reeb or a Jimmy Jackson will have to face physical death. But if physical death is the price that some must

pay to free their children and their white brothers from a permanent death of the spirit, then nothing can be more redemptive. Yes, we shall overcome and we shall overcome because the arc of a moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice. We shall overcome because Carlyle is right: "No lie can live forever." We shall overcome because there is something in the very structure of the cosmos which justified William Cullen Bryant in saying "Truth, crushed to earth, shall 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 a future. Behind the dim unknown standeth God within the shadow, keeping watch above His own."

With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair, the 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, in the words of the Prophet Isaiah, "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the rugged shall be made level and the rough places a plain; and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

This is our hope. Certainly we have a long, long way to go before this problem is solved in our nation. But we can gain consolation from the fact that we have made some strides. We are not what we ought to be as a nation, but we have made some significant steps forward.

So I close by quoting the words of an old Negro preacher who did not quite have his grammar right but who uttered words of great symbolic profundity, in the form of a prayer: "Lord, we ain't what we want to be; we ain't what we ought to be; we ain't what we gonna be, but, thank God, we ain't what we was."