

Analyzing Primary Sources Activity

The Civil Rights Movement, 1954–1968

"I Have a Dream"

Background

On August 28, 1963, before a crowd of more than 200,000 near the Lincoln Memorial, with the fate of the civil rights legislation hanging in the balance, Dr. King gave what is arguably one of the most famous speeches in U.S. history. The speech gave momentum to the civil rights movement, and less than a year later, on July 2, 1964, President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law.

Directions: Read the following excerpt from Dr. King's *Address in Washington*. Then answer the questions that follow.

There are those who are asking the devotees of civil rights, "When will you be satisfied?"

We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality.

We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with the fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities.

We cannot be satisfied as long as the Negro's basic mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one. . . .

We cannot be satisfied as long as a Negro in Mississippi cannot vote and a Negro in New York believes he has nothing for which to vote.

No, no, we are not satisfied, and we will not be satisfied until "justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." . . .

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'

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 together at the table of brotherhood. . . .

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. I have a dream today! . . .

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white

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Activity *Cont.*

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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!"

—Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963. Reprinted by arrangement with The Heirs to the Estate of Martin Luther King, Jr., c/o Writers House as agent for the proprietor New York, NY. Copyright 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr; copyright renewed 1991 Coretta Scott King.

Critical Thinking

1. What rhetorical device does Dr. King use at the beginning of the excerpt? What is its purpose?
2. What event in U.S. history might Dr. King be referring to when he says, "the Negro's basically mobility is from a smaller ghetto to a larger one"?
3. In what way is Dr. King's dream "deeply rooted in the American dream"?
4. The spiritual Dr. King refers to at the end of his address contains the following stanza:

Way down yonder in the graveyard walk
I thank God I'm free at last
Me and my Jesus going to meet and talk
I thank God I'm free at last

—from "Free at Last," by J. W. Work

How does the speaker achieve her freedom? How does that freedom differ from Dr. King's idea of freedom?