

Dr. King, Non-Violence, And U.S. Policy Today

Moderator, Dennis Speed: Our next speaker was in charge, as Deputy Attorney General, of the security in 1965, fifty years ago, for the Selma-to-Montgomery March, the third march, which actually got to Montgomery. And I understand that he got a call from Dr. Martin Luther King after [King] gave his speech here [at Riverside Church], in 1967, because Dr. King was very concerned that the press would try to distort what he had to say, and he wanted to say. And he wanted to make sure that he had at least one reliable legal representative who would not *misrepresent* what his intent that day was.

Besides those particular distinctions, he's always stood for justice; matter of fact, he stood for justice in the case of Lyndon LaRouche, as many of you here know. And he stood for justice over and over, all over the world. It's always an honor to have him speak, and he can only be here for a few minutes with us today, so I'd like to introduce the former Attorney General of the United States, Ramsey Clark.

Ramsey Clark: In his speech in this church in 1967, I guess it was—and I'll correct myself if I search and find otherwise—Dr. King said some words that hurt him deeply and personally, but he felt had to be said, and they were these: “The greatest purveyor of violence on Earth, is my own country.” It hurt him palpably to say it, but it was a truth he felt deeply, and he said it.

The next day a couple of lawyer friends of his showed up, and they'd got a copy of the speech. And they said, “Dr. King, I want to be sure I have an accurate copy” of what he really said, that “the greatest purveyor of violence on Earth, is my own country.”

Conditions haven't changed globally in that particular, I'm afraid. We remain the greatest purveyor of violence on Earth. We glorify its power and ignore its pity. Just look at our entertainment, our war films, and our crime films, and it's like we've got a love affair with violence. And yet, the words he spoke here will win the struggle, if human life is to endure on this planet. And I'm an optimist: I'm sure it will, at least from our own hand, which is the cruelest fate of all.

On-Site in Alabama

The first night out, I was sent down to Montgomery, Ala., about four days before the march started. I was Deputy Attorney General at the time, which is, on the organization chart, the second highest-ranking officer in the [Justice] Department; it requires Presidential nomination and Senate confirmation. And my assignment was to protect the order of a U.S. Federal judge who prescribed the fashion in which people could march from Selma to Montgomery, along a public highway. It was litigated for quite a while and came up with the solution that 50 people could be chosen and march two abreast. If you see the movie *Selma*, which I recommend, it's about the courage and beauty of the people there who were tired of the sheriff who liked to walk his horses over their bodies—a man named [Jim] Clark. No relation that I'm aware of! If there is, I disclaim it now. Not that had I been in his shoes, I might not have been the same.

But the march was an interesting occasion, a study in the character, the moral character, of our society. The FBI, which always requires someone who wants to know the truth to be carefully observed in his statements, told me that there were 1,200 men who had served lengthy convictions in prison for white racist crime against African-Americans, who had come to this Selma-Montgomery area—1,200. They were out of prison now, and they had rifles on the rack on the back of the cabin of their pickup trucks. And the Bureau,



Former Attorney General Ramsey Clark, who was tasked with ensuring the safety of the march from Selma to Montgomery, Ala., in 1965: "We have to resurrect the spirit that pervaded those who imagined and led what was really a wonderful march."

whose assumptions I don't usually follow, was saying they intended to use those rifles if they got a chance.

We brought a diversity of law enforcement into that area that was certainly unprecedented in this country, in terms of its diversity, in terms of its magnitude—we had 10,000 standing by in reserve. It'd taken them maybe 48 hours to get into action. But we had Border Patrol and U.S. Marshals, and to the extent we could rely on them, some state and local agents and Army standing by—for 50 people to do under court order, which was litigated for about a year and a half, before you could undertake the project in a free society, to do something no one in his right mind would want to do, unless someone

dared them to, and that is, walk from Selma to Montgomery!

I remember John Doar [Justice Department Civil Rights Division] got so sunburned, I thought he was going to lose his nose! Even though it was in March, the Sun was really hot down there. I got the top of my ears blistered and my nose is bigger than his, and it got more blistered than his, but I couldn't see mine as well as I could see his.

A Beautiful Sight

And the fear was palpable. The first night, we got across the bridge. I nearly lost my job, because I was standing on the far side of the Edmund Pettus Bridge, by a Border Patrol car. I always liked Border Patrolmen, because they're kinda cowboys, and they work independently and they don't have a director of the FBI who's making them dress like they're on Wall Street, or someplace, and they go in pairs, because they're afraid.

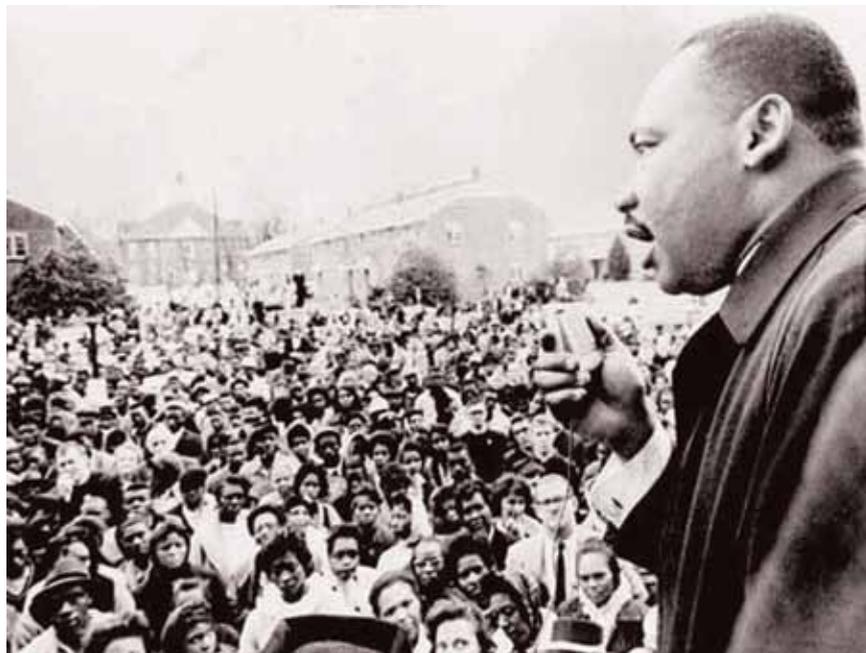
I was standing by this Border Patrol car, with an open mic; there were about six other Border Patrol cars that were stationed all around so we could talk to each other immediately.

And they started to cross the bridge, and I made the enforcement error of saying, “Here they come, isn’t it beautiful?” This was Sunday [March 21]—Monday morning the *New York Times* headline is: Deputy Attorney General down there to be neutral—ha-ha—and protect the marchers from the public and the public from the marchers, at the point at which the marchers started over the bridge, said, “Look at that, isn’t it beautiful?”—for which some of my superiors were uncomplimentary about my verbiage. But it *was* beautiful.

The idea that it would take a force of that magnitude—and it wouldn’t, really, but it would take a pretty good force—to make it safe, to do something that no one in his right mind would want to do anyway, and that is march from Selma to Montgomery, even though it was the month of March, as well as the marching month, in the broiling Sun.

And the first night, we got out—I talked to the farmer myself; we’d leased some land. We’d pay him some money so we could stay on his land, because we didn’t want to have some conflict about, “Hey, get off my property.” There weren’t other places that were as convenient. I forgot what I paid him, but maybe \$500, for 50 people to spend the night on his land, on the ground; most of them had sleeping bags and something like that. We got there, and he said, “Can’t do it. You can’t come on my land. I’ve been threatened.” But it was getting to be dark, and I’d been up and down that road so many times, I knew every foot of it, and there was a state park—it wasn’t a mile and a half or two miles further down the road, so we just went on down there. And I set up sentries to march around the camp as we set up some four-foot side-wall Army tents, and had sleeping bags for the 50.

So about 11 o’clock Dr. King grabbed me and we walked away from the crowd; we were sitting around fires and we had these sentries—it looked like a Civil War scene to me. And he said, “I think you’ve been told, I’ve got to fly to Chicago in the morning.” I said, “No, I haven’t been told.” He said, “Yeah, I’m going to leave



Library of Congress

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King addresses an earlier (aborted) march in Selma. King told Ramsey Clark, on the night before the 1965 march, “You know, you can never be afraid.”

here about 3:00 in the morning, so I’m going to sleep now.” I kinda fussed at him, and said, “You’ve got to tell me if you’re going to do those things, because I want to be sure you’re safe, man. You can’t be driving yourself or having somebody drive you down that road by yourself without protection.”

We were by this tent, we were looking down; it looked like a Civil War scene here in the United States of America, 1965, with campfires and sentries marching around the 50 people. And [he] was the only one of the 50 that slept any that night, as far as I could tell—I didn’t. I wasn’t one of the 50, but I was supposed to be in charge of their safety. Which was kind of ridiculous in itself; I’d been a Marine corporal and a Boy Scout, but I wasn’t a professional in the field of protection.

He got up and left, and got back Monday night. But the other marchers didn’t really sleep that night. They sat around the campfire and they talked, and thought, and some of came up and got in the tents for a while.

And we marched on.

It’s hard to believe, the palpable fear of violence and the actuality of risk. I have no idea of whether there were really 1,200 men with felony convictions for racist violence, all white, all the men that were

there with their guns on racks behind them, most of them in pickups. They were there and had the will to shoot. But I was flying a plane back that Friday, after we'd gotten to Montgomery, and all the speechifying had gone on in front the Capitol. It was a little Army plane, about a 12-passenger plane, and the pilot came back and said, "I got a phone message for you." So I went up to the cockpit and listened. They said that a woman had been killed on the way back to Selma; she was taking some of the people who had come over for the march from Selma, that lived in Selma, wanted to go home, back; and was shot and killed. So we turned the plane around, flew back to Montgomery, and tried to see what we could do to show our sorrow and prevent further violence, under a pretty tense situation, still.

There were about 25,000 people who came from outside of Alabama, to participate, or just stand there and watch, a big crowd out in front of the Capitol, watching the speeches and all, after the end of the march.

Dr. King's Spirit Will Prevail

You wonder how much has really changed. You hope for the best, but you go into our prisons, and you see they're overwhelming, disproportionately, African-American, African-American males, young—young, very young. Lives of freedom for them are terminated, at least temporarily—the length of their prison sentence. And probably, at least, freedom of will and mind and spirit badly damaged for the rest of their lives. Because we haven't found the capacity to love each other yet, and particularly when we have different colors of skin. Which in my view doesn't tell you anything about what's underneath, except another human spirit. And we know of so many who were so great.

Dr. King's spirit will prevail for societies, not just ours, in the spirits of many, many people, for as long as our form of communication endures. We can hardly say that we've purged, or even meaningfully addressed, the capacity for violence that remains in our character. All you got to do is, look at the military budget. We call it "defense," but it's all pointing guns against other people in other places! So we're "defending" on foreign shores, about as far away as you can get sometimes, and be on the same globe.

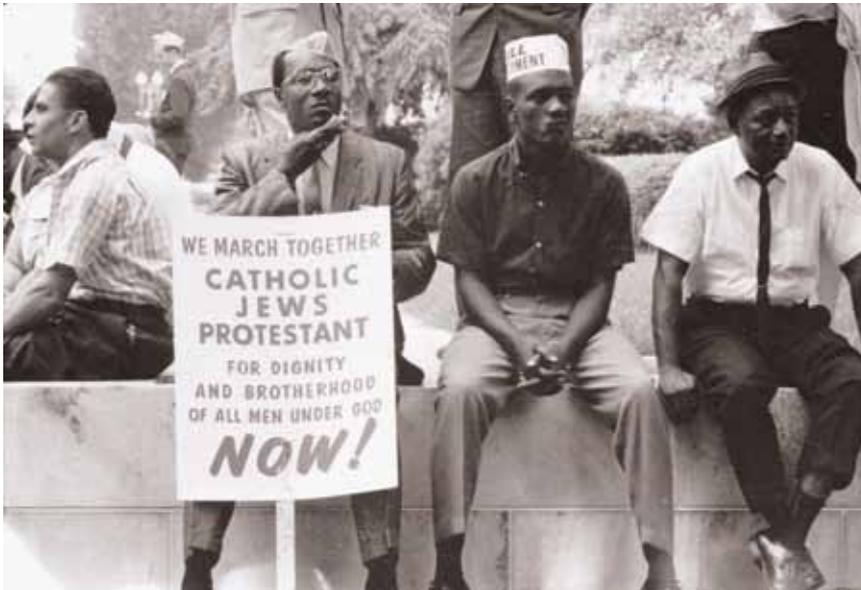


Norris McNamara

Sheriff Jim Clark orders Civil Rights leader James Forman to move on, in Selma, 1964.

Our military budget's a major measure of the spirit of our character, and it shows a spirit of fear. And a spirit of willing, if not wanting, to destroy others if it comes to our mind that they're some kind of threat to us, or just in the way. And that's not the way of peace or the road to love for each other, that alone can bring peace to the planet.

But I hope that the symbol of the Selma-Montgomery march will permeate our character, because it really believed that we could overcome; it desired it passionately, and it was committed to lives without violence. As the greatest character-failure of our species, and one that threatens it—just look at our military budgets; look at the research and development of weaponry—that's to me the most painful and keenest measure of, if not where we are, where we're going. Because it's what we want to have, and so much of it is so beyond



Library of Congress/Peter Pettus

Protesters in Selma in 1965. "I hope that the symbol of the Selma-Montgomery march will permeate our character," said Ramsey Clark, "because it really believed that we could overcome; it desired it passionately, and it was committed to lives without violence."

imagination, in terms of its capacity for the destruction of life.

So we have to resurrect the spirit that pervaded those who imagined and led what was really a wonderful march.

'You Can Never Be Afraid'

I think I've already said that the fear was palpable. That wasn't true of Dr. King. I remember we were standing by this tent where he was going to sleep for little bit, looking down at this "Civil War" scene. And he said, "You know, you can never be afraid." Because you could almost smell the fear. I mean, that's a pretty serious thing, but that was the environment. That was not an irrational state of mind.

The presence of all the guns, and all the military. The provost marshal general of the United States, who heads the Military Police for Army, Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guards—I guess they must have some guards too—he was down there, and he was a gun man. He was later indicted for stealing guns; he'd stolen about 2,000 guns that had been seized by the military, but when they are seized they become U.S. property, and he just loved guns. Which I guess was suitable for his calling, which shows why we have to change the calling. And he had about 2,000 of them that had been seized from people, and legally seized, from people, be-

cause they were held illegally by all branches of the U.S. Military Police, of which he was in charge.

And he'd taken about 2,000 of them back home to Oklahoma with him when he retired. He was opening a gun museum. And the U.S. started looking at it, and said, "Where'd you get all these guns?" And he said, "Oh, they were seized." "Who seized them?" He said, "The Military Police around the world seized them." And they said, "How'd you seize 'em?" And I think his answer was, "Well, they were there." What do you do?

We're still a gun-loving country. But guns aren't good for children, or for life, and it may be about as good a thermometer of our violent potential, as anything.

I was raised in Texas, and I had a .22 rifle by the time I was nine; a .410 shotgun before I was 11. And loved the blue steel and the sheen of the wood stock.

But now, I've seen too much about what they do, and I never really wanted to shoot those doves anyway! We're big dove hunters down in Texas; doves are a sign of peace. There may be some meaning there, too. But they taste good. There are lot of dove hunters just shooting doves, they're not thinking about dinner.

We've "got miles to go before we sleep."

Our military budget is still a danger to life on the planet. It's a measure of the moral worth of our people; our research and development for better ways of killing is as high as it ever was, as if we don't have enough ways now, to destroy life on the planet. We obviously do. We're just looking for keener ones. And spend a lot of money for it.

But if we want peace on Earth, we, the people, have to stand up and say, "Enough!" We want to demilitarize our country and demilitarize the world. And yet, as it was when Dr. King spoke those words, in this church, we remain the "greatest purveyors of violence on Earth." And we can overcome that. It's a matter of will: Until we address it, we may be singing good songs, but we're not marching the road toward disarmament. And the world daily becomes more dangerous.

Good to see you all here, and honored to be here with you in this great church. Thank you.