

Give Us The Ballot

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The following passage is excerpted from a speech that Dr. King delivered before the Lincoln Memorial at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom, on May 17, 1957, three years after Brown v. Board of Education and eight years before the enactment of the Voting Rights Act.



But, even more, all types of conniving methods are still being used to prevent Negroes from becoming registered voters. The denial of this sacred right is a tragic betrayal of the highest mandates of our democratic traditions and its is democracy turned upside down.

So long as I do not firmly and irrevocably possess the right to vote I do not possess myself. I cannot make up my mind — it is made up for me. I cannot live as a democratic citizen, observing the laws I have helped to enact — I can only submit to the edict of others.

So our most urgent request to the president of the United States and every member of Congress is to give us the right to vote.

Give us the ballot and we will no longer have to worry the federal government about our basic rights.

Give us the ballot and we will no longer plead to the federal government for passage of an anti-lynching law; we will by the power of our vote write the law on the statute books of the southern states and bring an end to the dastardly acts of the hooded perpetrators of violence.

Give us the ballot and we will transform the salient misdeeds of blood-thirsty mobs into calculated good deeds of orderly citizens.

Give us the ballot and we will fill our legislative halls with men of good will, and send to the sacred halls of Congressmen who will not sign a Southern Manifesto, because of their devotion to the manifesto of justice.

Give us the ballot and we will place judges on the benches of the South who will "do justly and love mercy," and we will place at the head of the southern states governors who have felt not only the tang of the human, but the glow of the divine.

Give us the ballot and we will quietly and nonviolently, without rancor or bitterness, implement the Supreme Court's decision of May 17, 1954.