

Robert F. Kennedy's Speech on Occasion of Martin Luther King's Assassination, Indianapolis, April 4th, 1968

Robert F. Kennedy was campaigning in 1968 for the nomination of the Democratic Party to be the candidate for the Presidency of the United States. He was scheduled to be on a campaign rally in Indianapolis, Indiana on April 4th, 1968. He learnt of the assassination of the civil rights advocate, the Rev. Martin Luther King, on that evening in Memphis, Alabama while he was on his way to the event.

Situation

After disembarking from the plane in Indianapolis, Kennedy learnt that Martin Luther King had died (he had been notified of his shooting before getting on the plane). After making a few comments to the press gathered at the airport, he cancelled his stop at his campaign headquarters and got into a car that would take him to the campaign rally, making some notes on the back of an envelope. Once he arrived, Kennedy climbed on the back of a flatbed truck, his podium for the rally speech. Just before he began speaking, he was informed that the people waiting to hear him did not yet know of King's murder. He glances at his notes once at the beginning of his speech and afterwards continues to speak looking into the crowd, shuffling the envelope in his hands.

The available details about this event suggest that Kennedy had little time to prepare for what he was going to do and say to the waiting public who had not been told of King's murder.

The Speech: Sequence Summary

1. Kennedy opens by delivering the awful news about King's death (the recording captures the shocked reaction of the people).
2. Continuing, Kennedy reflects on the life of Martin Luther King, his work, and that he died in his efforts for that work.
3. Acknowledging the loss felt by his audience and the American people that day, Kennedy asks what kind of nation does he himself, his audience and the people of

America constitute, and what kind of nation do they want to be.

4. Addressing African-Americans (whom he also addresses as "we, as a country"), and the fact that the perpetrators of the crime were white, Kennedy raises the decision that African-Americans have to make: to react with anger and bitterness which would create a greater division between African-Americans and white people, or, to adopt the position that Martin Luther King promoted, that of understanding and love.
5. Kennedy addresses feelings of anger of African-Americans and relates the story of his own brother being shot by a white man, saying that he knows the feelings of anger that follow such loss.
6. Kennedy urges his audience to make an effort to proceed responsibly.
7. Kennedy mentions that his favourite poet is the Greek Aeschylus and, after a pause, chooses a fragment about wisdom to recite:

Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget
falls drop by drop upon the heart,
until, in our own despair,
against our will,
comes wisdom
through the awful grace of God.

8. Kennedy connects these lines of the poem to the occurrences of the day and refers to the values that the United States needs: love, wisdom, compassion and justice.
9. Kennedy admits that there will be more hardships and violence, but also credits the majority of people with wanting to live peacefully.
10. Kennedy calls for a resolution by the people of the United States to dedicate themselves, using a Greek quote: "to tame the savageness of man, and make gentle the life of this world".
11. Kennedy ends by asking that his immediate audience and the people of the United States say a prayer for "our

country and our people". He walks away from the microphone.

Outcome

Although there were riots across the United Nations on this night, Indianapolis stayed calm.

This speech is considered by many to be one of the greatest political speeches of all time.

Transcript of Robert F. Kennedy Speech

Statement on Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Indianapolis, Indiana, April 4, 1968

[Addressing someone personally beside him] Do they know about Martin Luther King?

[Reply inaudible]

Could you lower those signs, please?

I'm only going to talk to you for a minute or two this evening because I have some very sad news for all of you, and I think sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight.

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort.

In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black--considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible--you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization--black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.

Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of

bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but he was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poet was Aeschylus. He wrote: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black.

[Crowd applauds]

So I shall ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King, that's true, but more importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love--a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which I spoke.

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times; we've had difficult times in the past; we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; it is not the end of disorder.

But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land.

[Crowd applauds again]

Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.

Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

[Final applause]

Kennedy, R. F. (1968) 'Statement on Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Indianapolis, Indiana, April 4, 1968', transcript, *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*, viewed 23 Jan. 2018 <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Statement-on-the-Assassination-of-Martin-Luther-King.aspx>

-----Material drawn on for this case: two video recordings,¹ an audio recording and the text of a speech² available at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library,³ and Ray E. Boomhower's *Robert F. Kennedy and the 1968 Indiana Primary*.⁴

¹ Warren, F. Robert F. *Kennedy's Martin Luther King Jr. Assassination Speech*, video recording, YouTube, viewed 16 January 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BCrx_u3825g&t=12s>.

M. Azzam, *The Greatest Speech Ever - Robert F Kennedy Announcing The Death of Martin Luther King*, YouTube, viewed 18 January 2018, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GoKzCff8Zbs&t=239s>>.

² Kennedy, R.F. *Statement on the Death of Martin Luther King, Jr., April 4, 1968*, [audio recording and transcript] Available at: <https://www.jfklibrary.org/Research/Research-Aids/Ready-Reference/RFK-Speeches/Statement-on-the-Assassination-of-Martin-Luther-King.aspx> [Accessed at 16 Jan. 2018].

³ *John F. Kennedy: Presidential Library and Museum*. [Online] <https://www.jfklibrary.org/> [Accessed 16 Jan. 2018].

⁴ Boomhower, R. E. *Robert F. Kennedy and the 1968 Indiana Primary*, 2008, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indianapolis.

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