
From the Instructor

You, the reader of this anthology, hopefully glance at the introductory comments that precede each work. Curious but skeptical, you may ask, can the writer justify stealing your time, bending your ear, insisting on being heard? An introductory paragraph can be difficult to compose, but an entire essay that is devoted to introducing another set of texts offers a host of particular challenges to a writer. In Rob Pressel's extraordinary essay, introducing a series of 1960s Civil Rights speeches, he confronted his own specific challenges in his final paper for our WR 100 seminar, "Oratory in America."

Rob's biggest question concerned the use of first person and the inclusion of autobiographical details. We looked at several models, and the example of Gore Vidal's insistent, swaggering first person introduction to a collection of Lincoln speeches forced the class to ask if we, as collegiate, academic writers, could take such risks?

Rob initially hesitated to include any personal details in his introduction. However, he recognized that his motivation for writing about sacrifice during the Civil Rights Movement arose due to the 1964 murder of his great uncle Michael Schwerner. Rob came to see that readers might well find this personal and real-life tragedy as something more than simply a compelling detail. Writers must always make difficult choices, and the decision to include sensitive personal details needs to be carefully considered. In this case, Rob came to believe that writing about his uncle's sacrifice had the potential—if presented in a non-exploitative manner—to help readers understand the real-life relevance of writing and speaking about the profound sacrifices that marked the Civil Rights Movement.

Rob was much more confident about including the anecdote relating his meeting with Civil Rights leader, John Lewis. This incident linked the 1960s to the present in a way that helped drive home the relevance of Rob's essay. The rest of the essay is free of personal details; however, by bookending the introductory essay with events that personally touched him, Rob shows his readers how historical personages and events can touch us and teach us.

— David Shawn

WR 100: Oratory in America

From the Writer

Even half a century after the fact, the ideas of the Civil Rights Movement still resonate throughout the American consciousness. Race is in some ways still a dominant part of American political discourse, and the goals of the time are still being debated, in Congress and in the courts. Much of the rhetoric of the time has been co-opted by other movements in our own era, primarily supporters of marriage equality.

However, in the past, supporters of civil rights for African Americans often suffered psychological and physical harm, and even death, to a vastly greater extent than today. These constant threats left an indelible mark on the oratory of the time, and particularly in famous speeches we have heard our whole lives. In this paper, I analyze how this idea of sacrifice influenced and weighed on these speakers, from those directly affected, such as the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., to those looking on, such as President Lyndon Johnson.

For this essay, I struggled to find a way to focus on a multitude of speeches, from a variety of speakers, and to emphasize the unique perspective and ideas underpinning each one, while still addressing the main theme. Additionally, I found it difficult to incorporate my personal connection and interest in the topic. In the end though, I of course let the decades old words speak for themselves. The ideas they convey, and the people who spoke them, still can, and should, be meaningful to this day.

— Robert Pressel

ROBERT PRESSEL

THE COSTS OF JUSTICE: AN INTRODUCTION TO A COLLECTION OF SPEECHES FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

On June 21, 1964, my great uncle, Michael Schwerner, along with two other men, James Chaney and Andrew Goodman, traveled to Philadelphia, Mississippi to register disenfranchised African Americans to vote. There, they were murdered by the Ku Klux Klan, paying the ultimate price for their ideals. However, they were not the only ones. In the decades-long struggle for equality and justice, hundreds more were arrested, beaten, and killed. At Birmingham and Selma, marchers were beaten by police, gassed, and attacked with firehouses and dogs. Well-known figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr. and Medgar Evers were assassinated for their actions. How could the leaders at the time, including those within the movement, such as Dr. King, as well as political leaders, such as President Lyndon Johnson and Senator Robert Kennedy, address these costs when speaking in support of justice? How did their portrayals of these costs differ from each other, and how did differing perspectives affect their rhetoric? What did these leaders intend when discussing these personal sacrifices? Gradually, as the movement evolved, the speakers began to address these sacrifices in a more direct way, rather than abstractly or through allusion. Additionally, those more directly involved, such as King, addressed the costs in a more personal manner than those outside, especially Johnson. These leaders sought to garner public support through addressing their own costs, and comparing those to past American sacrifices in support of the same values.

This anthology will primarily focus on the works of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., President Lyndon Baines Johnson, and Senator Robert F. Kennedy. From Dr. King, I chose his “Address to the March on

Washington,” arguably his most famous speech, especially for its well-known phrase “I have a Dream,” as well as his “Speech at the Mason Temple,” delivered after the Civil Rights movement had, at least for the most part, achieved its main goals and largest contributions, and delivered the day before his assassination. From President Johnson, I exclusively focus on his “Address to Congress on the Voting Rights Act,” delivered, naturally, in support of the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Finally, from Senator Kennedy, I examine his “Address at the University of Cape Town,” delivered at the height of the Civil Rights movement, and his “Remarks on the Assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., a highly emotional appeal after the death of Dr. King. My reasons for choosing these sources shall be elaborated on more deeply as the speeches themselves are discussed, but primarily I chose them for their differing portrayals of sacrifice, and for their characterizations of those bearing this heavy burden. Frequently throughout these addresses, the speakers allude to other, earlier speeches, especially President Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address; however, I have chosen to leave this out, so that the primary focus of this anthology could be on the Civil Rights movement itself, rather than a complete history of African Americans in the United States. Rather, I see Lincoln’s importance to the movement as primarily symbolic, and in the ways they adapt his rhetoric as their own.

While the main focus of this essay will be on the personal and social costs that resulted from violence and hatred, it is important to address first the political costs inherent in support for the Civil Rights movement. For this, we must focus on President Lyndon Johnson, a white Democrat from Texas, who succeeded to the Oval Office after President John Kennedy’s assassination, and was subsequently re-elected the next year. Even as a white Southerner, Johnson was an ardent supporter of equal rights for blacks, as shown by his “Address on the Voting Rights Act.” However, he knew that this support was not universally popular, and there could be a political backlash. Given the opposition to Civil Rights within Congress and among the public, this support could cost Johnson large amounts of political capital, possibly negating any potential future initiatives. After signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Johnson famously said, “We [Democrats] have lost the South for a generation.” He knew that his support for the movement could cost Southern Democrats their elected

positions, and potentially could cost him his own presidency. However, he was willing to take these risks. Johnson knew that when he stated “And we shall overcome,” in his address, he would unequivocally tie himself to the movement (265). While the potential *political* costs are not fully elaborated on by Johnson, unlike the *physical and personal* costs paid by others, they form an underlying tone throughout the whole address. In a clear reference to those who oppose this bill and his support for it, Johnson addresses “those who seek to avoid action by their National Government in their own communities” (264). He declares that “there is no constitutional issue here” nor an “issue of States or national rights.” He aims to address the common refrain that support for equality was a violation of states rights (264). It is fairly clear throughout this speech that Johnson does not expect to mitigate these political costs, hence he does not fully address them. Instead, he accepts them in the name of “the struggle for human rights” (264). Rather than be the President who bows to popular Southern opinion, he wants “to be the President who helped to end hatred among his fellow men,” regardless of politics (269).

During the early stages of the movement, at least as evidenced by these speeches, leaders seemed to be hesitant to cite specific examples of violence and discrimination against proponents of Civil Rights, but rather chose to rely on general descriptions of a backlash against marchers. During his “Address to the March on Washington,” Dr. King frequently cites examples of discrimination, such as his reference to “Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of ‘interposition’ and ‘nullification’” (255). However, the reader would be hard pressed to find any specific examples in the rhetoric that highlight any violent backlash against marchers. Instead, Dr. King prefers general terms to highlight the heavy toll being paid, thanking those in the audience who “have come fresh from narrow jail cells” and have “[been] battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality” (254). By the time the March on Washington took place, multiple incidents had occurred where supporters of civil rights paid the heavy price of being arrested, beaten, or even killed: for example, Bull Connor’s attacks on marchers in Birmingham and the murder of Medgar Evers. Since King surely would have known of these events, their exclusion from his address must have been deliberate. According to historian David Garrow, in the

buildup to the March on Washington, “in both his public and private comments, King focused on how Birmingham had made clear the pressing need for unilateral executive action on civil rights” (267). In his book *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, Garrow discusses King and the SCLC’s preparations for the March, and how they could address the President and Congress on initiating change, particularly given Robert Kennedy’s “growing emotional involvement.” It is somewhat surprising that King does not seem to use this direct emotional appeal on the Kennedys. Most likely, King chose to mention the common practice of arrests and beatings of supporters in order to drum up public sympathy for those affected and the movement itself. However, he chose not to focus on specific incidents, possibly either to avoid disturbing those who were directly affected, or, more likely, so as not to effectively scare away potential supporters through concrete and controversial examples of sacrifice. Additionally, according to Garrow, in the wake of Medgar Evers’ assassination, King “wanted to take some action in response to [the killing],” such as “a national day of mourning and establish[ing] a memorial fund,” to draw attention to the cause and drum up public support (269). Unfortunately, according to Garrow, this only had the effect of creating a schism within the movement, splitting the SCLC from the NAACP, so for future speeches, King chose to focus on these generic examples of costs paid by the movement’s supporters. However, soon, King and other civil rights leaders were to realize that this tactic was not as effective as it could be, and would soon transition to a more direct approach.

As the Civil Rights movement continued, with some successes and some failures, we can see more examples of straightforward and blunt discussion of specific instances of costs paid by supporters of the movement. The primary examples, among others, which are most significant, are the marches from Selma, one of which later came to be known as “Bloody Sunday.” President Johnson first refers to Bloody Sunday in his “Address on Voting Rights,” calling out the city and explaining how “long-suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many were brutally assaulted. One good man, a man of God, was killed” (261). He concludes that “there is no cause for pride in what has happened in Selma” (261). It is interesting to note that it was Johnson, a

white Southerner, who first discusses the tragic events at Selma, a major instance of violence perpetuated against civil rights supporters and a key turning point in public opinion. For the first time, large Northern white audiences had witnessed the sacrifices paid by these advocates, and as such, Selma became a symbol of the injustice of Jim Crow laws and the brutality of the anti-civil rights backlash. According to historian Garth Pauley, in his article on Johnson's voting rights address, the primary impetus behind the timing and rationale of Johnson's support for the Act was the violent events at Selma. Johnson needed to use a "rhetoric appeal" to the masses, because "active public support could fade quickly," after memories of violence faded. Pauley argues that the violence at Selma serves as a "pivotal term in Johnson's speech: it is the term that marks the movement from the immediate present to a more mythic time" (40). He says that Johnson used allusions to the sacrifices at Selma not only to press the public and Congress for rapid change, but in order to provide a segue to a more idealistic nation without discrimination, and without the necessity of sacrifice. In addition to Johnson, King himself shifts to this style of rhetoric in later years. For example, when referring to the events in Birmingham, Alabama during his "Speech at the Mason Temple," he tells how he and the other marchers "went on before the dogs and we would look at them, and we'd go on before the water hoses and we would look at it. And we'd just go on singing" (284). King describes how regardless of what Bull Connor and the police did, the marchers kept going, and even if they would be "thrown into paddy wagons [and] stacked in there like sardines in a can" they "would just go on in the paddy wagon singing" (284). King describes to the public how no matter what was thrown at them, supporters of the Civil Rights movement could continue their non-violent tactics, even in the face of violence.

Given the desire of the heads of the Civil Rights movement to appeal to the American public and garner sympathy for their cause, it is natural that they should compare the costs they face with those faced by past Americans who fought for freedom, justice, and equality. Once again, Johnson is the first to transition to this rhetorical tactic. He appeals to turning points in American history and the fight for freedom when he says "at times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at

Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama” (261). Johnson seeks to connect the specific events pertaining to the Civil Rights movement to specific struggles for American values in the past. He is not the only one. Robert Kennedy, when speaking to students at the University of Cape Town, called them to serve by citing the “thousands of unknown men and women in Europe [who] resisted the occupation of the Nazis and many died, but all added to the ultimate strength and freedom of their countries” (278). It is Kennedy now who not only cites examples of service and sacrifice, but also calls upon his audience directly to make those sacrifices, saying that “each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, [and] those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance” (278). While we have seen other leaders of the movement who have appealed to broad audiences and the general public, Kennedy seeks primarily to appeal to students and youth, those who are the most likely to support his cause, but least likely to act. Others may say Kennedy was, like Johnson, speaking to a much larger audience, given his stature and influence. However, given that he was speaking at a university, and that throughout his speech he constantly calls to “young people” or “students,” it is likely this group that is whom he primarily spoke to. Unfortunately, the next time Kennedy was called upon to speak, on the death of Dr. King, he spoke to a much larger audience.

Inarguably the most high-profile leader of the Civil Rights movement, Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in April of 1968, sparking riots in the streets of American cities. How could King himself address threats to his life, and more importantly, how could others address his sacrifice after he was gone? In his “Speech at the Mason Temple,” delivered in Memphis, Tennessee, the day before his death, King first begins to address some of these concerns, telling the audience of when he was stabbed by a woman in New York. He tells them that “had [he] sneezed, [he] would have died” (290). He begins to articulate how happy he was to have participated in the movement, and that his sacrifice and pain were worth the gains for his community. He repeats the phrase “if I had sneezed” (290–1) and cites different events during his history with the movement and how he would not have seen them. It is an eerie reverie of his role

within the movement, and the community. After this, however, King has a very uncanny foreshadowing of his own death. He tells the crowd, “We’ve got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn’t really matter with me now, because I’ve been to the mountaintop. [. . .] I just want to do God’s will. And He’s allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I’ve looked over, and I’ve seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. [. . .] I’m not worried about anything” (291–2). King foreshadows his own death, indicating his support for the movement may cost him his life, but that its success would be worth his sacrifice. He says that his personal, and ultimate, sacrifice will be worth the gains for his community, and that equality would eventually prevail for the nation, if not for him. King, as a minister again, makes a biblical allusion in this case, citing Moses’ climb up the mountain to see Israel before his death. Though King could not know how imminent his death would be, he seeks to calm the community before it inevitably comes.

However, it ultimately falls to Kennedy to calm the nation. The day after the assassination, at a rally in Indianapolis, Kennedy announced King’s death to those in his immediate audience, yet spoke to America as a whole. He calls on the nation not to “be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge,” but to “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” (293). Kennedy tells the nation to listen to King’s message, and references his own family’s sacrifice and what he endured. “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 we have to make an effort [. . .] to go beyond these rather difficult times” (293). Kennedy reminds the audience of the assassination of his brother, President John Kennedy, to drive home the point that regardless of how awful, how violent the act or the oppressor, justice and equality can only win through “understanding and compassion” (294).

While Medgar Evers, Michael Schwerner, and Martin Luther King, Jr. may be dead, not only do their ideas live on, but so do many of the people who marched and sacrificed with them, and continue to carry on their legacy. A few years ago, I had the fortune to have an incredible

meeting with Congressman John Lewis (D-GA), a civil rights leader who spoke with Dr. King at the March on Washington, and who demonstrated with countless others in Selma on Bloody Sunday. He spoke to us of his experiences and how even if he knew what he would go through, he would have done it all over again. He told us that while full equality has not yet been reached, we, as a nation, have taken immense steps forward. He explained that had he been told as a young man that a black man would one day be President of the United States, he would have laughed, but how on the election of Barack Obama, “to the people who were beaten, put in jail, [. . .] it’s amazing.” Finally, he told us how on Inauguration Day 2009, he was embraced by President Obama, who told him his election was “because of you, John,” and all of the other brave men and women who risked and sacrificed their lives for a greater cause (2010).

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