

LYNDON B. JOHNSON, "WE SHALL OVERCOME" (15 MARCH 1965)

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**Abstract:** President Lyndon Johnson's "We Shall Overcome" address is a landmark in U.S. history. Exhibiting uncharacteristic eloquence, he made the principle of equal voting rights meaningful through a vocabulary of shared interests and aspirations (what he called "the American Promise") in order to secure passage of America's most important civil rights law—the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Moreover, the speech has had a lasting influence on the meaning of civil rights in the United States.

**Key Words:** Johnson, Lyndon B.; Voting Rights Act of 1965; Selma, Alabama; African Americans—Suffrage; American Promise.

President Lyndon Johnson's voting rights speech of March 15, 1965, is considered a landmark of U.S. oratory. It is reprinted or excerpted in nearly every anthology that chronicles the "great moments" or "great issues" of American history. Leading scholars of American oratory have ranked Johnson's speech as one of the top ten American speeches of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> Even so, it is not unreasonable to ask, "Is the speech really that outstanding?" Johnson hardly can be counted among the nation's great orators. And some consider the civil rights campaign in Selma, Alabama, to have done more to ensure the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 than Johnson's speech.<sup>2</sup>

While it is true that Johnson was not a gifted public speaker in general and that the Selma protests elicited support for voting rights legislation, the voting rights speech is indeed an exceptional instance of political oratory. In an uncharacteristically eloquent way, the president interpreted the meaning of the Selma demonstrations for a nation awakened to the problem of voter discrimination: His interpretation focused on the very meaning of the nation, what he called "the American Promise." Out of that interpretation, he crafted a compelling rationale for immediate passage of a strong federal voting rights law. His language effectively framed public and congressional deliberations. His appeals helped cement equal voting rights as a fundamental American principle. And at a moment marked by urgency and chaos, his message provided focus and clarity. In short, President Johnson's speech is remarkable because it made the principle of equal voting rights meaningful and compelling through a public vocabulary of shared interests, motives, and aspirations in order to secure quick passage of the country's most important civil rights law. Studying Johnson's address

also yields insights beyond the speech itself. It calls attention to the fact that freedom and equality are rhetorical terms whose meanings change and are redefined throughout American history and to the challenges of building moral consensus through oratory.

*Speaker*

Born and raised in the Texas Hill Country during the early twentieth century, Lyndon Johnson's childhood experiences did not predispose him to become an advocate of racial justice. Rather, his upbringing included the forms of socialization that typically lead to racial prejudice: ethnocentrism, a lack of meaningful interracial contact, and racial stereotyping. Despite his assertions to the contrary, Johnson carried some of this prejudice with him into adulthood, and even as president he sometimes referred to African Americans with derogatory terminology when speaking behind closed doors. Yet Johnson also inherited sympathy for the downtrodden from his family, and a personal identification with the disadvantaged was a distinguishing element of his personality from an early age. Although these convictions shaped his attitudes toward civil rights issues, Johnson did not possess a keen appreciation of the uniquely racial dimensions of African Americans' oppression.<sup>3</sup>

Johnson's lack of racial consciousness, as such, during his early political career hardly was inconsistent with the outlook of many white liberals. In his formative political experiences during the 1930s and 1940s, Johnson demonstrated a commitment to equal opportunity and fairness that earned him a reputation as a friend of the poor—white or black. As Texas director of the National Youth Administration, Johnson lobbied for equal access to education and vocational training, and as U.S. congressman from the tenth district of Texas, he fought for equal treatment for racial minorities in federal housing and agricultural programs. Yet Johnson also voted against every civil rights bill brought to the floor during his terms in the U.S. House of Representatives, including anti-lynching, anti-poll tax, and Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) measures. He voted against these same measures during his early career in the U.S. Senate, to which he was elected in 1948. Johnson may have opposed the proposals—as he claimed—because they stood no chance of passage, while voting for them would have cost him his political career. He also emphasized that federal legislation to end lynching and the poll tax would violate the "states' rights," though it is unclear to what extent Johnson believed this commonplace of Southern rhetoric. However, his stated opposition to an anti-lynching bill also revealed his insensitivity to uniquely racial forms of oppression, as Johnson implied that lynching was no different than any other type of murder. And he also claimed that anti-lynching, anti-poll tax, and FEPC legislation was not germane to the issue of civil rights, which he stated should be advanced through measures that would provide for better housing, better education, better health care, and better wages.<sup>4</sup>

The first civil rights bills Johnson supported were ones he helped usher in through the U.S. Congress as Senate majority leader. As he fixed his sights on the presidency, Johnson believed he needed to guide a civil rights bill to passage in order to

demonstrate to Washington powerbrokers and the American people that he was not just a parochial politician beholden to Southern interests. While he had not become an all-out civil rights advocate, Johnson's basic commitment to equal opportunity and access aligned with his personal ambition to help produce the first piece of federal civil rights legislation in ninety years. In 1957, Johnson brokered a political compromise when it seemed that powerful Southern senators and their liberal adversaries would lock horns over a comprehensive civil rights bill written by President Dwight Eisenhower's attorney general—and thus fail to accomplish anything. Although the resulting legislative compromise, the Civil Rights Act of 1957, was a relatively toothless law that focused exclusively on the right to vote, Johnson emphasized that at least Congress had passed *something* and suggested that breaking the logjam had cleared the way for more meaningful legislation in the near future. Indeed, Johnson did try to maneuver a more meaningful bill through Congress in 1960 but had to broker another compromise due to Southern legislators' influence in the Senate. Some liberal critics were skeptical and assailed Johnson for watering down both civil rights bills, but Johnson received widespread national praise for his legislative miracles and for shedding his parochialism. He accrued political capital for these accomplishments that furthered his presidential ambitions and even convinced some civil rights leaders that he was sincere in his desire to help pass meaningful civil rights legislation.<sup>5</sup>

Johnson's presidential hopes were dashed during the 1960 campaign, but this personal setback ultimately led to a deepening of his commitment to civil rights. As vice president, he was appointed chairman of a committee that investigated and attempted to rectify cases of employment discrimination. Through this position, Johnson came into regular contact with blatant forms of racial discrimination and also learned that existing laws gave the federal government little power to make things right. As a result, he developed a stronger, more immediate understanding of bigotry that led him to become a firm supporter of civil rights. He began to speak out publicly against racial prejudice and was a strong advocate of President John F. Kennedy's comprehensive civil rights bill. By the time Johnson ultimately guided the bill to passage, following Kennedy's assassination in 1963, even those civil rights leaders who were formerly skeptical praised his deep understanding and conviction on civil rights. And the liberal critics who derided Johnson for weakening civil rights measures as Senate majority leader had to admit he kept his word: The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was a meaningful law that contained the provisions excised from the 1957 bill, including ones that prohibited discrimination in places of public accommodation and created a permanent FEPC.<sup>6</sup>

Not content to wait for further action on civil rights, Johnson immediately turned to the issue of voting rights, on which he had developed a deep-seated commitment. He believed voting was the fundamental right in a democracy, one guaranteed to be free from racial discrimination by the U.S. Constitution. And he came to believe that the only way to help African Americans achieve genuine equality was through equal access to the ballot box. When voting rights demonstrations in Selma, Alabama, dramatized the problem of voter discrimination for the entire nation, Johnson seized the moment to help guide federal voting rights legislation—a law his Justice Department had been developing since 1964—to swift passage.

Like most politicians, Johnson's commitment to civil rights—including equal voting rights—was not unadulterated. Though often heralded as the greatest civil rights president in U.S. history, it is not freedom from prejudice or a life-long uncompromising commitment to racial justice that warrants such praise. Johnson's achievements on civil rights were the result of personal ambition, political calculations, duty, idealism, and personal conviction. Moreover, his ambition led him to wrangle with civil rights issues, an experience that deepened his understanding, which in turn shaped his principles. His political calculations led him to pursue realistic goals but were tempered by his sense of what his office required of him and by his idealism. His personal prejudices were moderated by his commitment to fairness and equal opportunity in public life. Johnson was a flawed but gifted politician who matured on the issue of civil rights and used his considerable political skills to help pass the first four civil rights laws since Reconstruction.

That Johnson used his legislative acumen to shape U.S. history is not surprising, whereas the fact that he motivated the nation through public speaking is remarkable. Johnson possessed considerable skill in his interpersonal communication (often referred to as "the Johnson treatment"), but he generally was a poor public speaker. In private conversations, he sought to understand his listeners—their aspirations, principles, passions, obligations, and weaknesses—and to use that understanding as a foundation for convincing, cajoling, and coercing them. In public discourse, however, he often seemed unable to connect with an audience so diverse in its makeup. And Johnson's efforts to ingratiate himself to people and, often, to dominate them interpersonally could not be transferred to public speech. Moreover, although he had taught public speaking and coached debate during his career as a schoolteacher in Texas, Johnson himself usually seemed affected and uncomfortable when speaking in public—expressing his ideas in a monotonous voice with awkward gestures and poor articulation, eyes glued to his speaking script. He appreciated eloquence but failed to study and practice the techniques of successful public orators, and he generally failed to find a speaking style that fit his nature.

Despite a general lack of skill, Johnson spoke a great deal as president, delivering more than sixteen-hundred speeches during his five years in the White House—very nearly as many as delivered by Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy combined during the previous twelve years. Many, perhaps most, of these speeches were stilted and forgettable, but Johnson was capable of delivering successful speeches. Indeed, he delivered one of the most significant presidential speeches in U.S. history when, in the spring of 1965, he urged Americans to fulfill their nation's promise by guaranteeing that all of its citizens have an equal right to vote and to share in the benefits of democracy. This speech, often referred to as the "We Shall Overcome" speech, was Johnson's greatest oratorical triumph.

### *Context*

During the mid-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African American leaders and their white allies expended significant political energy on attempting to secure

equal access to the ballot box, especially following the ratification of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution (in 1868 and 1870, respectively). The amendments declared that African Americans were citizens and forbade depriving them of the vote on account of their "race, color, or previous condition of servitude." Southern states attempted to keep them from voting, however, through methods that were not racially discriminatory at face value but that clearly aimed to keep African Americans away from the polls. Civil rights advocates won significant victories against many of these methods in the U.S. Supreme Court, but success through litigation was slow, costly, and incomplete. There was significant African American political mobilization after an especially important legal victory against a persistent method of voter discrimination in *Smith v. Allwright*: Registration, education, and get-out-the vote campaigns were organized throughout the South. But their foes quickly developed new methods to prevent African Americans from voting, including gerrymandering, literacy and understanding tests, slow processing of voter registration applications, relocation of polling places, delay tactics, threats, and physical intimidation. Exhausted, frustrated, and a little demoralized, advocates of equal voting rights came to believe that a genuine victory would come only through federal legislation, and thus focused their crusade on the Congress and—especially—the president. By 1964, civil rights advocates had achieved significant victories against discrimination in education, places of public accommodation, and employment. Because of persistent prejudice and the shortcomings of the Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1963, though, the ballot box remained inaccessible to many African Americans, especially in the South. Thus, civil rights leaders focused nearly all of their energies on one goal—the right to vote.<sup>7</sup>

At nearly the same time that African American leaders were gearing up for an assault on voter discrimination, President Johnson was directing his Justice Department to draft a new law to ensure the guarantees of the Fifteenth Amendment. During the summer of 1964, a presidential task force on civil rights identified voter discrimination as the nation's chief civil rights problem and advised the administration to advance measures "to insure the speediest possible accession of Negroes to voting rolls, especially in the South."<sup>8</sup> In the fall, partisan advisers suggested that in addition to upholding the promises of the Constitution, a new voting rights law that brought more African Americans to the polls might help compensate for the loss of support for Democrats in the South brought on by the administration's civil rights initiatives. Most of the president's advisers, however, counseled a cooling off period on civil rights legislation following the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and party politics were not a significant factor motivating the pursuit of a new voting rights law.

Rather, Johnson was motivated by his convictions, his desire to pass his own civil rights law, his vision of a "Great Society," and his aspiration to be a great presidential reformer. In mid-December 1964, he directed the attorney general to burn the midnight oil and develop a voting rights measure within a few days so that it would be ready for the 1965 legislative agenda. In his State of the Union address on January 4, 1965, President Johnson urged members of Congress to "eliminate every remaining obstacle to the right and opportunity to vote" and announced he would send them a detailed proposal on voting rights within six weeks. Aware that guiding a new voting

rights law to passage would be a significant political challenge, Johnson aimed to rally public support in addition to persuading legislators. On January 15, he called Martin Luther King, Jr. and urged him to publicize the worst cases of voting prejudice to get Americans behind a federal voting rights act, a law Johnson said was a priority for his elected term as president. He told King that if citizens were to see a dramatic example of the voter discrimination and intimidation in the South, they would demand action to make things right, to make the electoral system fair.<sup>9</sup>

Exhibiting the extreme opposition to African American voting Johnson believed would get the public's attention, Selma, Alabama, was the site of a nascent voting rights campaign that had begun with a mass meeting on January 2. Three days after talking with the president, King led the demonstrators in Selma in a mass march on the county courthouse to register to vote and to dramatize voter discrimination in Selma. Neither goal was achieved that day. But in the following days, local law enforcement officials assaulted the demonstrators in full view of journalists—who published and broadcast graphic reports and pictures of the violence across the nation. The Selma campaign became a political drama, as civil rights leaders and the president expected, but did not immediately succeed in creating an overwhelming public demand for immediate legislative action. Rather, many Americans' first reaction was that the government should provide protection for the demonstrators. And although the campaign did provide "fresh impetus" among members of Congress "to new legislation to assure Negroes the right to register and vote," legislators did not commit themselves passionately to the cause. In February, King penned a public letter that focused attention on the fact that in Selma "there are more Negroes in jail . . . than on the voting rolls," but the campaign still struggled to trigger an intense, urgent outcry among citizens or legislators. Late in the month, leaders of the Selma campaign planned for more confrontational demonstrations and acts of civil disobedience to help achieve the goal discussed by King and Johnson. Local law enforcement officials—led by Sheriff Jim Clark—indeed responded to the tactics with increased violence, killing one demonstrator and beating others brutally. But it was the plan for demonstrators to march fifty-four miles to the state capitol in Montgomery to petition for their rights on March 7 that aimed the confrontation in Selma toward a decisive, dramatic climax.<sup>10</sup>

Had Alabama law enforcement officials turned the demonstrators around by blocking the highway to Montgomery, as many of the marchers anticipated, the Selma campaign well might have failed to galvanize support for a federal voting rights act. Instead, they acted the roles civil rights leaders reluctantly hoped they might. Soon after six hundred marchers set out from a local church around 4:00 p.m. on Sunday, March 8, they encountered an intimidating force of state troopers and the local sheriff's posse on the Edmund Pettus Bridge. A large crowd of local white citizens jeered the marchers from the side of the road, while a cadre of journalists waited for the action. When the marchers came within fifty feet of the troopers, the officer in charge ordered them to stop and disperse within two minutes. March leaders John Lewis and Hosea Williams began spreading the word that demonstrators should kneel and pray before acting on the officer's orders. Only one minute after the order, while most of them still were kneeling to pray, the officer issued an astonishing order with

furor: "Troopers, advance!" The marchers quickly were overrun. State troopers clubbed them, flailed them with bullwhips, and seared them with electric cattle prods. Horsemen from the sheriff's posse then charged into the panicked crowd of demonstrators and began to thrash them, too, as local bystanders cheered, "Get the niggers!" Troopers fired tear gas into the crowd, as the vicious beatings continued. Broken, bleeding, weeping, vomiting marchers lay strewn across the highway, while those still able to move tried feebly to escape. Some assailants pursued the escapees back into Selma's African American neighborhood for further battering, as others blocked ambulances from reaching the wounded on the bridge. Eventually, the bloodbath ended. Remarkably, no one was killed. But the severely routed marchers sustained broken ribs, arms, legs, and teeth, severe lacerations, skull fractures, concussions, and damage to their eyes and lungs.<sup>11</sup>

Soon after the attack, journalists who were on the scene disseminated pictures and accounts of the brutality to a stunned nation. ABC TV even interrupted its evening movie with a special news bulletin that included fifteen minutes of video footage from the assault in Selma. The following day, the front pages of newspapers were filled with images and stories of the violence against those petitioning for equal voting rights. The confrontation, made especially salient by its vivid visual depiction, became a symbol of Southern efforts to maintain white supremacy at all costs. Writers called the day "Bloody Sunday," and the bloodshed made many Americans feel shame and disgrace. Overwhelming numbers of citizens expressed shock that such an outrage could happen in the United States: The violence stirred the nation's conscience and made a deeper impression than perhaps any demonstration during the civil rights movement. Members of Congress expressed "anger and disgust at Alabama's violent repression of the Negro marchers." Newspapers reported that the march had mobilized "formidable national sentiment behind new civil-rights legislation."<sup>12</sup>

Although Johnson had endorsed the Selma campaign implicitly in his telephone conversation with King, the unexpected bloodshed there created a political climate more complicated than the president had anticipated. The process of drafting a bill was slower than anticipated, as Justice Department attorneys found it difficult to develop a straightforward method of ensuring the guarantees of the Fifteenth Amendment (that voting should be free from racial discrimination) without stating in affirmative terms who comprised the electorate—something not provided for by the Constitution and which would require a constitutional amendment. Yet the pressure on the White House to send legislation to Congress intensified as the situation in Selma escalated. The Justice Department completed a draft of a federal voting rights bill on March 5, and Johnson solicited input from members of Congress to strengthen the bill and pave the way for passage rather than introduce it immediately. Following "Bloody Sunday," pressure on the White House to send a bill to the legislature rose sharply and continued to increase as the president still pursued the prudent, deliberate—but slower—course of shoring up the bill and support for it among congressional leaders. Widely criticized for his perceived inaction, Johnson received at least some support for his strategy: During a special report on March 12, a CBS News commentator observed, "Legislation written in the heat of emotion usually is bad legislation." On March 13, the

Justice Department finally completed its revisions to the bill, accepting mostly minor changes to its language made in the following days. And so in these exigent circumstances, Johnson planned to address the Congress and the nation on March 15 to provide them with the "information, details, explanation, and justifications" he believed they wanted to hear in regard to his voting rights measure.<sup>13</sup>

After Johnson had declared in January his intention to submit a voting rights bill, the *Washington Post* reported that passing legislation "may require all the persuasion the President can muster." Clearly, the demonstrations in Selma had made the general case for voting rights legislation an easier one to argue. But Johnson had a specific case to make, and persuading the public to support his strong voting rights bill while convincing Congress to pass it quickly without watering it down still required considerable rhetorical skill. Moreover, although the primary purpose of Johnson's speech was instrumental, it also strove for eloquence—to inspire listeners by assigning deep meaning to events in the world through compelling appeals that were both timely and timeless. When he stepped to the podium in the House chamber of the U.S. Capitol at 9:02 p.m. on March 15, President Johnson, his immediate audience, and his television audience of over seventy million, understood the significance of the words he was about to speak.<sup>14</sup>

### *Interpretation*

Initially, Johnson planned only to deliver a written message to Congress to accompany his legislative proposal but came to believe that such communication would be insufficient for advancing his legislative goal and for enacting his duties as chief spokesman for the nation. Presidents rarely deliver special messages to Congress in person to advocate for a specific bill, especially on domestic policy; Harry Truman had been the last president to do so. Such speeches are risky, as they put the president's credibility on the line and chance making members of Congress resentful, feeling they are being coerced into action and having their law-making duties usurped. Johnson did not decide for certain to make a public speech until nearly the last minute, following a meeting with members of his administration and congressional leaders on the evening of March 14. The meeting reinforced his belief that a public speech was needed to calm the public and assure them that the federal government was working to solve the problem of voter discrimination. Moreover, Johnson believed he needed to use "every ounce of moral persuasion the Presidency held" to ensure passage of the voting rights bill.<sup>15</sup>

Unlike the bill, the address was prepared in haste by White House speechwriters, as they first received the assignment during the late hours of March 14. The final text was a synthesis of multiple speech drafts, previous press conference statements, and speeches Johnson had delivered as vice president. Presidential aides finalized and edited the address throughout the day on March 15, completing their task just moments before Johnson headed over to the capitol. As was usual practice, the president was not involved directly in the speechwriting process despite his later claim that he "penciled in changes and rewrote sections" of the address. Johnson took full



credit for the speech, however, as his press secretary successfully coordinated a plan to communicate the following falsehood to the press: "The President wrote the speech. He talked out what he wanted to say—and as drafts were prepared in response to his dictation, the President personally edited and revised." In fact, Johnson's only direct contributions to the speech came during its delivery, as he personalized some of the language and inserted a few phrases and short sentences. Given his detachment from the speechwriting process, there simply was no time to make changes before speaking; President Johnson received the reading copy just prior to delivering the message, and he was forced to speak from the manuscript for the first several minutes, as it had not yet been loaded onto the TelePrompTer.<sup>16</sup>

At some point during the speechwriting process, someone at the White House titled the speech "The American Promise." And although usually known by its most memorable line ("We shall overcome"), the official title better encapsulates Johnson's message. His speech used the word "promise" in both its meanings, referring to the nation's vow and its potential. Both senses of the word imply a story. Though making a vow is a stand-alone act, it beckons further action: The vow must be kept or broken. Having potential is a state of being but also signals future action: The potential must be fulfilled or neglected. Stories are an especially significant form of communication, as they can help us make sense of the world and often contain moral lessons that point to an appropriate course of action. They contain a logic, or narrative reasoning, that frames our decision-making in situations similar to those depicted in story. They reinforce our cultural values. In the political sphere, stories shape a people's collective sense of self, their national identity, by telling and retelling their past, present, and future. Such stories invite identification among citizens and between citizens and their government. Understanding the power of narrative, Lyndon Johnson attempted to persuade his listeners to act in order to guarantee equal voting rights—and more—by depicting contemporary exigencies and decisions as part of the story of the American Promise. That story is the central rhetorical feature of his speech.

Johnson began his address in a manner that suggested his message would transcend the current exigency facing the nation: He asserted that he spoke for "the destiny of democracy" (2).<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the current crisis was critical, he claimed, because it constituted a "turning point in man's unending search for freedom" (4) and "equal rights" (6). It is an episode in the story of the American Promise, Johnson reasoned, which is a guarantee of freedom and equality—and the potential to be "the greatest nation on Earth" (7). Johnson suggested that denying equal rights to African Americans, exemplified by the violence in Selma, represented a threat to "the values and the purposes and the meaning of our beloved nation" (9). He claimed that to keep African Americans from enjoying the freedom and equality assured by the Declaration of Independence and the battle cries of the Revolution would be to break our nation's promise and neglect our potential to "fail as a people and as a nation" (10). Of course, none of the dictums quoted by the president ("All men are created equal"; "Government by consent of the governed"; "Give me liberty or give me death") constituted a direct promise to African Americans regarding political freedom or equality. Yet Johnson interpreted them to have an expansive meaning that applied to

the present problem. And since the story of the forward march of freedom and equality is perhaps the United States' "master narrative," his proposed political reform is made to seem a natural progression in American history. In short, he seized the rhetoric of democratic freedom and equality—transforming the meaning of the two principles in the process—to help guarantee equal voting rights to African Americans.<sup>18</sup>

At the same moment President Johnson argued that the issue confronting the country was of historic significance, he also emphasized the importance of time. He suggested that although the United States long had kept African Americans from enjoying the benefits of freedom and equality, it had not broken its promise—yet. But since destiny had crossed our path at this particular time, he claimed, the decisive point in time had arrived. The president asserted that as such a moment came along "rarely in any time," (9) the nation must seize the opportunity. Articulating a similar theme about midway through the speech, he described the country's promise as "unkept," (51) not broken, and urged immediate action by stressing that the "time of justice has now come" (52). Johnson claimed, "This time, on this issue, there must be no delay or no hesitation or no compromise with our purpose," (42) adding that "the time for waiting has gone" (43).

The themes of promise and urgency established in the beginning of Johnson's speech were central to the message's overall rhetorical power, as they transformed the political problem of voter discrimination into something even grander: a threat to America itself. And the effort to solve that problem took on a grand, almost religious imperative—as described by the president—since it implicated America's destiny, faith, and mission. He suggested the United States represented a chosen nation, "the first . . . in the history of the world to be founded with a purpose" (13). Invoking a passage from the Bible, Luke 9:25, he claimed the nation would lose its very soul if it failed to achieve its purpose of upholding the democratic model of government, its promise to ensure freedom and equality. President Johnson took on the role of prophet in his speech, recalling the nation to its original task. As the gift of the prophet is vision, he suggested that by taking a penetrating look at current events to see their underlying meaning, one could truly understand what was at stake: the heart and soul of the nation.

By imbuing his narrative of the American Promise with a religious dimension, Johnson tapped into the cultural tradition scholars usually refer to as civil religion—the collection of symbols, beliefs, values, and rituals that give sacred meaning to political life; the transcendent sense of reality through which a people interpret their historical experiences. His message articulated three key myths in American civil religion: that the United States has a covenant that makes its citizens a chosen people, that it has a special purpose, and that its founding was a consecrated act that defined the meaning of the nation.<sup>19</sup> In doing so, the president encouraged his audience to experience current events as part of a transcendent reality. As the nation's prophet, he called to mind its purpose, pointed out its sins and the wages of sin, and identified the path to redemption.

At the end of the first section of his speech, Johnson related the issue of voting rights to the American Promise directly. Whereas earlier he had described the issue confronting the nation in abstract terms of freedom and equal rights, he now made it

clear that ensuring African Americans equal access to the franchise was central to the nation's promise and purpose. He claimed that the nation's Founding Fathers established "the right to choose your own leaders" as "the most basic right of all," and that the history of America, at its essence, was "the history of the expansion of that right to all of our people" (16). The president made the present course of action clear: "Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote. There is no reason which [sic] can excuse the denial of that right. There is no duty that weighs more heavily on us than the duty we have to ensure that right" (17). As the central idea of Johnson's speech, he returned to this theme in his conclusion, enacting the role of the prophet unequivocally and putting a point on the nation's sacred duty: "Above the pyramid on the great seal of the United States it says . . . 'God has favored our undertaking.' God will not favor everything that we do. It is rather our duty to divine His will. But I cannot help believing that He truly understands and that He really favors the undertaking that we begin here tonight" (90). President Johnson intuited the will of God to be on the side of voting rights legislation and suggested that by enacting such legislation, the nation could keep its promise and confirm its covenant relationship with God.

To a great extent, Johnson's speech is persuasive to the extent it invested events with deep meaning for its listeners. His story of the American Promise aimed to help his audience make sense of a disturbing crisis in a particular way, to see it as part of a larger context of events. By emphasizing the idea of a promise, he provided a logic that framed his listeners' decision-making: They should act to keep their promise. His story reinforced the values to which the nation must recommit itself through action. It reaffirmed America's national identity and identified citizens with their government. When listeners found Johnson's speech compelling, it was likely because he induced them to want to guarantee voting rights in order to honor their status as a chosen people and to live out the nation's sacred purpose. He effectively appealed to their patriotic duty, infused with a religious imperative. Moreover, for those listeners who felt shame following Bloody Sunday, Johnson provided a way to purge their guilt. The violence in Selma was horrific, but the president suggested it may serve a significant purpose, since it has "summoned into convocation all the majesty of this great government" (7). The violence in Selma can be made meaningful, he implied, by enacting voting rights legislation.

It is difficult to know whether President Johnson's speech converted many opponents of equal voting rights to his side, but this was not his only persuasive aim. Even so, as evidenced by his legislative strategies during his tenure as Senate majority leader, Johnson understood that voting was a weak spot in many Southerners' opposition to civil rights. He believed that although segregationists wanted to maintain white supremacy through voter discrimination, many still felt—in spite of themselves—their actions were wrong. The president may not have converted them to active supporters of voting rights legislation, but he likely persuaded some to accept it passively. His speech helped demoralize the Southern opposition to equal voting rights by making racial discrimination at the ballot box seem fundamentally un-American, at odds with what the nation was all about. It squarely put segregationists on the losing side of an issue of principle: None could argue convincingly that voter discrimination

was consistent with American values. Cultivating even passive acceptance was a significant rhetorical accomplishment for Johnson, as it had the potential to help Congress pass his voting rights bill more quickly and to encourage compliance with its provisions once it became law. In addition to weakening his opposition, the address encouraged the uncommitted to identify themselves with a hallowed cause. Moreover, it bolstered voting rights supporters. Johnson further justified their outrage over the violence in Selma by instilling it with a grander source of indignation. He made them feel as though the weight of American history was on their side, that equal voting rights was foreordained. His claim that the "time of justice has now come" (52) made their cause feel exceptionally urgent. His heady proclamation, "We shall overcome" (46) made progress seem unstoppable.

To appreciate the rhetorical ingenuity of the voting rights address, it is helpful to consider alternate persuasive strategies Johnson might have employed. The address is impressive precisely because he and his speechwriters made discerning choices among the available means of persuasion. For example, the president could have made a strong case for equal voting rights grounded in the U.S. Constitution. Indeed, an early draft of the speech, based on the written message sent to Congress with the legislation, focused on the mandate of the Constitution. After all, the Fifteenth Amendment prohibits racial discrimination at the ballot box and gives Congress the authority to pass legislation in order to secure that guarantee. Johnson simply could have demanded that the Congress do its constitutional duty (a claim he in fact made, albeit very briefly). However, making that the centerpiece of his speech would have entered him into a tedious legal argument with Southern opponents of voting rights, who in the past had demonstrated they were game for a protracted argument of exactly that sort. A plea for Congress to do its constitutional duty also would have put the American people on the margins of the decision-making process by focusing on the responsibilities of the federal government. And though possessed of a reasonable appeal, such a plea would have been less inspiring than his appeal to the American Promise: Johnson presented a stirring definition of the meaning of America rather than the meaning of the Constitution, a significant but arcane document to many citizens.

Rather than grounding his argument in the American promise, Johnson also could have made an explicitly moral argument decrying racial prejudice, including its expression through voter discrimination. Indeed, in 1963 he had advised President Kennedy to deliver a civil rights speech that would make Southerners feel they were on the wrong side of an issue of conscience. Perhaps Johnson believed in 1965 that the violence in Selma already had accomplished that goal. Moreover, had he made a moral argument against racial prejudice, he would have risked alienating listeners who harbored personal prejudice against African Americans but still supported—or could be persuaded to support—equal voting rights. As demonstrated by the address, Johnson and his speechwriters found a way for him to speak with moral authority, as the nation's president and prophet, without preaching to his listeners about their personal transgressions.

Above all, instead of focusing his rhetoric on constitutional or moralistic appeals, President Johnson simply assumed those issues to be resolved: "There is no

constitutional issue. The command of the Constitution is plain. There is no moral issue. It is wrong—deadly wrong to deny any of your fellow Americans the right to vote" (37-39). By focusing on what he described to be the unresolved issue of America's promise, he employed a rhetorical appeal that transcended issues of state and federal rights (which Southerners always raised in debates about constitutional questions of civil rights) and issues of personal morality.

Other rhetorical features of the president's speech were important. For instance, his claim that existing civil rights laws could not solve the problem of voter discrimination helped head off a counterargument by Southerner legislators who counseled delay following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which contained worthless provisions on equal voting rights.

It was Johnson's transcendent appeal to the American Promise, however, that was most persuasive and that cultivated overwhelming support for the voting rights bill. In their coverage of his speech, many journalists lauded the president for invoking and affirming "the most sacred and deeply held convictions of a nation," which brought "the present chapter of the struggle for human rights into proper perspective."<sup>20</sup> Citizens echoed these sentiments in their letters and telegrams to the White House. And when editorialists urged swift passage of the president's bill, their appeals employed the language of Johnson's narrative: The *New York Times* even suggested passage was a foregone conclusion because a "people that has responded unflinchingly to every trial of national purpose . . . will not fail this test."<sup>21</sup> Moreover, following President Johnson's speech, members of Congress deliberated voting rights legislation using the language of America's destiny, promise, and purpose. Senators and congressmen claimed that the nation must "make good on its promise . . . [to] fulfill the revolutionary dream of freedom and equality for all Americans" by "passing a bill which [sic] fully insures that every American . . . has the right to vote"—which will represent a step "along this nation's honored march toward further fulfillment of our traditional goals of equal opportunity and equal treatment." Congress indeed passed the final voting rights bill less than five months after Johnson's speech. The president signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965 into law on August 6, emphasizing at the signing ceremony that America had righted a historical wrong, enacted its sacred principles, confirmed its promise, and now would endeavor to "fulfill the rights that we now secure."<sup>22</sup>

### *Legacy*

Political rhetoric that finds a way to transcend conflicts of belief and sentiment is uncommon, especially when it involves issues of right and wrong. Johnson's speech helped transcend those conflicts by focusing on civic virtue and civic duty. By appealing to and reinforcing a shared language of moral consensus—the narrative of the American Promise—Johnson made a lasting contribution to U.S. political and rhetorical history. As a statement of American principles that related to the issue of equal voting rights, his speech has enduring significance. Perhaps this also was part of his intent, as he wanted to be eloquent and wanted to go down in history as a great civil rights president.

Johnson's speech also has enduring significance on the issue of civil rights because it represented an effort to modify the meaning of two key ideas in American history while incorporating them into a more expansive vision of the nation's promise. His narrative of the American Promise was mainly a story of the nation's commitment to freedom and equality. The speech began by identifying these two ideas in a conventional way: Freedom is discussed in terms of political liberties, and equality is discussed in terms of equal rights or equal opportunity. The contemporary struggle for civil rights, he suggested, was about guaranteeing those principles. But as the president's speech continued, he emphasized how that struggle for civil rights was not just a struggle for freedom itself but rather for the "the fruits of freedom," (56) not just a struggle for equal rights or equal opportunity but rather to help ensure equality as an actual characteristic of American life. Johnson emphasized the exercise of freedom and equality, which he claimed "takes much more than just legal right" (75). Rather than only guaranteeing equal rights and opportunities (opening the gates of equality), he suggested that to "make good on the promise of America" (63) also meant giving all citizens "the help that they need to walk through those gates" (77). He invited citizens to think not only about political rights but also about the circumstances under which freedom and equality flourish. Whereas freedom and equality can be thought of as the protections and privileges given to all citizens by law, as principles of nondiscrimination, Johnson also defined them as goals to be achieved. Perhaps most notably, the voting rights speech was one of the first messages in which President Johnson attempted to redefine the meaning of the idea of equal opportunity to include the concept of affirmative action, the help needed to achieve what he later called "equality as a fact and a result" not "just equality as a rights and a theory." This redefinition of equal opportunity attracted little attention at the time, perhaps because it was subsumed into the story of the American Promise—which, at some level, many citizens themselves felt to mean more than just a guarantee of basic legal protections. Indeed, as the word promise denoted potential as well as guarantee, Johnson's narrative emphasized the nation's potential to become a "Great Society" (a common theme in his rhetoric during this time): a nation in which citizens are educated, healthy, housed, and employed; a nation in which the experience of freedom and democracy flows from those principles.<sup>23</sup>

Studying President Johnson's speech is significant as a reminder that the language of the American Promise has been a site of struggle throughout the nation's history. Though they are universal terms in American political rhetoric, freedom and equality are part of an ongoing process of definition and redefinition, of ongoing debates about their meaning. Neither freedom nor equality embodies a single idea; rather each symbolizes a mixture of values and meanings. For example, freedom has meant—at various times—the right to political self-determination, the right to make individual choices free from coercion, the capacity for ethical action, and more. The meanings of equality have included equal rights, equal treatment, and actual parity. Though their meanings change, freedom and equality remain authoritative terms in political discourse: To seize control of them in a political debate is to acquire significant rhetorical power. One of the very terms Johnson sought to redefine to gain support for

his civil rights program is in the process of being redefined. Participants in recent debates about affirmative action, including court cases about college and university admissions policies, seek to define and control the meaning of equality. Even the meaning of civil rights—a term whose meaning has been identified strongly with the civil rights movement—is now contested, as the advocates of state ballot proposals to outlaw affirmative action programs refer to them as "civil rights initiatives."<sup>24</sup>

Since Johnson's speech helped establish the meaning of freedom and equality as employed during the congressional deliberations over the Voting Rights Act, his message may continue to have significant influence. The law requires that the Congress must periodically review and, if deemed appropriate, renew some of the provisions of the Voting Rights Act: The most recent renewal came in 2006. Federal legislators often look to the intent of former Congresses when renewing previously enacted laws, and in 1965 the 89th Congress described its intent in the president's terms of fulfilling the American Promise of freedom and equality. Despite some wrangling during the 2006 deliberations, members of Congress ultimately seemed to agree that "the liberties and freedom embedded in the right to vote must remain sacred."<sup>25</sup>

Finally, studying Johnson's speech should encourage reflection on the nature of presidential rhetoric, especially on matters perceived to have a moral dimension. That presidents will use their office as a bully pulpit to serve as the nation's moral leader and spokesperson is a common assumption of the modern presidency. Like all orators, presidents are susceptible to misusing of the power of moral leadership: They may reduce complex problems to simple questions of right or wrong, demonize those who oppose them, assert moral consensus when none exists, appeal to listeners' base motives in the language of virtue, or enact the role of moral spokesperson with arrogance rather than humility. Even so, the nation sometimes needs its president to ascend to the bully pulpit to exhort it toward a public good that would not be realized without moving, inspiring oratory. But finding a shared moral language out of which a president can fashion a persuasive appeal is difficult. President Johnson effectively grounded his appeals in a potent narrative that focused on public morality—his listeners' civic duty to keep and fulfill the sacred American Promise. But as the citizenry continues to become more religiously and culturally diverse, less schooled in the narratives of the nation's history, more aware of how such narratives can be used to justify depraved causes as well as honorable ones, and perhaps less influenced by the moral authority of the presidency, presidents may find it especially tricky to build moral consensus through oratory. Consider this problem from a perspective afforded by studying Johnson's speech. He used oratory to help secure the significant public good of equal voting rights, primarily by appealing to the American Promise—of which the Constitution is one expression—rather than the Constitution itself. But could Johnson have crafted such a stirring, persuasive appeal on the basis of constitutional guarantees alone? Would his listeners have found it as moving, meaningful, and motivational? Would we find it as eloquent today?

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