

**DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR., “HOW LONG? NOT LONG” (25 MARCH 1965)**

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**Abstract:** It has been more than a half-century since the Selma-to-Montgomery march for voting rights. At its conclusion, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his “How Long? Not Long” speech. Unlike his “I Have a Dream” speech, this speech has not garnered much attention or analysis. This analysis includes a biographical sketch of Dr. King, a brief history of the civil rights movement, and a closer look at the Selma-to-Montgomery march. It describes the events leading up to the “How Long? Not Long” speech, and it offers a rhetorical analysis of the speech itself. Finally, this essay reflects on King’s legacy as a prophetic optimist who recounted a shared history and offered an inspirational vision of the future

**Key Words:** Dr. Martin Luther King, civil rights, Selma March

They had been beaten and bloodied. They had crossed the bridge. They had prayed and turned around. They started again. They marched in the rain and cold. After five days and fifty-four miles, the Selma-to-Montgomery marchers arrived at the Alabama Capitol. Their feet were tired, but their souls were rested. While their resolve was unshakeable, many in the movement and the march needed a message of hope, a word of encouragement, and reassurance that their cause would be victorious. On Thursday afternoon, March 25, 1965, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood on a flatbed truck and delivered that message in his “How Long? Not Long” speech.<sup>1</sup> This phrase occurs five times near the climactic end of the speech, providing the answer to a question that framed the central message of the speech. Some refer to this speech by a different title, “Our God is Marching On.” That phrase occurred just once at the end of the speech, where King recited the lyrics of a well-known hymn. Regardless of its title, the speech has rarely been the subject of critical analysis. It has been more than a half-century since Dr. King delivered it. The purpose of this paper is to describe and analyze this historic and pivotal speech.

This essay offers a close analysis of King’s “How Long? Not Long” speech delivered at the conclusion of the Selma-to-Montgomery march. I begin with a brief biography of Dr. King and recall some of the history of the civil rights movement. The events leading to the speech are then described, followed by a rhetorical analysis of the speech itself. Finally, the paper assesses the legacy of King as prophetic optimist who helped shape a shared history of the movement and offered a vision for the future.

**Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.**

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born Michael Luther on January 15, 1929 in Atlanta, Georgia. Around the age of five, Martin’s father changed his name from Michael to Martin in honor of the German theologian. Like Martin Luther, King was an activist and a reformer. Like his father

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and grandfather, King earned a bachelor's degree from Morehouse College and became a pastor. King married Coretta Scott in 1953. He became pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama the next year. In 1955 King earned his doctorate degree from Boston University.<sup>2</sup> On December 1 of that same year, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white person. Four days later King was elected president of the newly formed Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA). The purpose of this organization was to focus national attention on racial segregation in the South.<sup>3</sup>

It was in his capacity as president of the MIA that King became the leader of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the *de facto* spokesperson for the civil rights movement. In November 1956 the Supreme Court ruled that Alabama's bus segregation laws were unconstitutional. In 1957 King made the cover of *Time* magazine. In 1963 King penned his "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" and he was named *Time's* Man of the Year. In August he delivered his now-famous "I Have a Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C. In 1964, at age 35, King became the youngest man to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. In 1965 he participated in the Selma-to-Montgomery March. In April 1968, during an evening rally of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, King delivered his final speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."<sup>4</sup> Less than 24 hours later he was assassinated.

This brief biography does not include the birth of King's four children, the instances in which King's life was threatened and his home was bombed, the other times he marched and peacefully protested, or the times he met with the President of the United States. But each of these events is a part of his life and legacy. King had a tumultuous yet significant life. However, all of these experiences and events shaped his reputation as a movement leader as well as his rhetorical philosophy and style.

### **The Civil Rights Movement and the Selma-to-Montgomery March**

When people think of voices of democracy, freedom, and equal rights, Dr. King most surely comes to mind. For many, his life and his speeches are synonymous with the civil rights movement. While the movement itself is not the focus of this essay, a brief timeline is useful for providing some context for Dr. King's "How Long? Not Long" speech.<sup>5</sup>

1955 – Rosa Parks' arrest sparks the Montgomery Bus Boycott

1957 – Martin Luther King, Jr., Charles K. Steele, and Fred L. Shuttlesworth establish the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and elect King is its first president

1960 – The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) is founded at Shaw University, providing young African Americans with a place within the civil rights movement

1961 – "Freedom Riders" take bus trips through the South to test out new laws that prohibit segregation in interstate travel facilities

1963 – During civil rights protests in Birmingham, Alabama, Commissioner of Public Safety, Eugene "Bull" Connor, uses fire hoses and police dogs on black demonstrators

– About 200,000 people join the March on Washington, congregating at the Lincoln Memorial to hear Dr. King share his "I have a dream" speech

1964 – The Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a network of civil rights groups, launches a massive effort to register black voters during what becomes known as the Freedom Summer.

White resistance to African American voter registration throughout the South had frustrated efforts by Alabama's Dallas County Voters League (DCVL), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC).<sup>6</sup> In February 1965, Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot and killed by a State Trooper as he tried to protect his mother and grandfather in a café to which they had fled while being attacked by troopers during a nighttime civil rights demonstration in Marion, Alabama. In response, Reverend James Bevel called for a march from Selma to Montgomery to present the governor with their demands for voting rights. The Selma-to-Montgomery march consisted of three marches—Bloody Sunday, Turn around Tuesday, and the third and final march. On Sunday, March 7, 1965, mostly black civil rights marchers were attacked by white state and local police with billy clubs and tear gas as they crossed the Edmond Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. On March 9, marchers again crossed the bridge. This time they intentionally stopped, prayed, then turned around and ended their march.<sup>7</sup> On March 21, after receiving a federal judge's ruling that the march could proceed, the five-day march from Selma to Montgomery began.

### **Events Leading to the "How Long? Not Long" speech<sup>8</sup>**

On March 25, 1965, Dr. King was 36 years old. He had begun preaching at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery eleven years earlier. The church was in clear view, just about 400 feet away, from where Dr. King spoke on March 25, 1965. He had led the Bus Boycott a decade earlier. Seven years previously he had been stabbed and nearly died, and the year after that he had visited Gandhi's birthplace. Four years earlier, buses with the Freedom Riders rolled across the South. Three years previously, he delivered the eulogy at the funeral for four little girls who had been killed in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Less than two years previously he had written a letter from a Birmingham jail, led a freedom walk in Detroit, and shared with a watching world his dream that one day his four little children would "live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."<sup>9</sup> Just three months before he delivered his "How Long? Not Long" speech, King had become the youngest person to win the Nobel Peace Prize. In accepting the prize, King affirmed his belief that "unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."<sup>10</sup> In the few days before the speech, he had led the march from Selma to Montgomery to protest voting rights violations and other forms of discrimination and atrocities committed against African Americans in Selma and across the country. The night before the speech, he and the marchers had been entertained by Sammy Davis, Jr., Harry Belafonte, Mahalia Jackson, and other celebrities as they camped at the City of St. Jude.<sup>11</sup> Only a few hours before the speech, King had led the final march up Dexter Avenue toward the Capitol. Now he was ready to speak. King's weapons were his passion, his commitment to the cause, and his ability to effectively use the spoken and written word. He embraced and promoted a philosophy of nonviolent peaceful protest, but he did so with piercing pronouncements, searing statements, and moving emotional appeals. He knew the Scriptures that said "the tongue of the righteous is as choice silver: and the "lips of the righteous feed many" (Proverbs 10:20). He knew that "the words of a man's mouth are deep waters" (Proverbs 18:4). And he knew that "death and life are in the power of the tongue" (Proverbs 18:21). Now he was prepared to speak.

There were several speakers that Thursday, March 25, 1965.<sup>12</sup> In order they were: Rev. T.Y. Rogers, from Tuscaloosa; Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, the Birmingham civil rights leader; Rev. James Bevel, Director of Nonviolent Education of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC); Ralph Bunche, Undersecretary to the United Nations; James Forman, Executive Secretary of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC); Amelia Boynton, from Selma; Jimmy Hicks, a freedom rider; John Lewis, leader of the SNCC; Whitney Young, director of the National Urban League; Don Slayman, from the civil rights department of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); Rev. Ralph Abernathy; Hosea Williams; Rosa Parks; and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>13</sup>

It is no accident that Dr. King was the last speaker. At this time Dr. King was the unmistakable leader of the civil rights movement. A leader must know the way, show the way, and go the way. That's what Dr. King did. A leader must first have and then effectively articulate a vision. That's what Dr. King did. A leader must encourage and rally the faithful, to help them see that they have made measurable progress toward the goal. That's what Dr. King did.

The brief biography of Dr. King, key highlights of the civil rights movement, and the events leading to the "How Long? Not Long" speech provide the context. What follows is a rhetorical analysis of the speech—vocal characteristics and stylistic devices. This close analysis reveals King's strategic mastery and use of the English language to convey a message of hope, a word of encouragement, and a reassurance that the cause would be victorious.

### **Rhetorical Aspects of the Speech**

#### *Vocal Characteristics*

Dr. King's speech contained 3,252 words; 348 spoken phrases which Dr. King separated by 1- to 3-second pauses. The longest phrase is a 41-word anecdote about Sister Pollard which occurred early in the speech. Only one tenth of the 348 phrases are longer than 14 words and most of those occurred near the middle of the speech. The vast majority of the phrases are 4-10 words long, with many of the shorter phrases coming at the end of the speech, as his speaking pace became faster. Dr. King delivered the speech in 29 minutes and 43 seconds. Accounting for pauses, King's speech rate was about 154 words per minute. This rate is considered the average, normal, conversational speech rate. His speech rate was deliberate and slow at first with a slightly faster pace toward the end of the speech when he began to describe the "normalcy" (29-32)<sup>14</sup>.

King's speaking intensity or loudness was strong and deliberate and was often just below the threshold of a shout. This was in stark contrast to Rosa Parks, the speaker who immediately preceded King and who eyewitnesses claimed was barely audible. King's pitch was in the tenor range. His voice seemed to be a bit higher pitched in the speech compared to his regular conversational voice. Regardless, his voice was warm, rich and full of resonance. King's speaking style was very deliberate, with an almost over-enunciation of middle and final consonants. These vocal characteristics of intensity, frequency, and enunciation enabled his voice to be easily heard and understood.

#### *Stylistic Devices*

King created rich imagery throughout the speech by using a variety of stylistic devices. Specifically, he used descriptive language, contrast, comparison, personification, repetition, and

stories, poems, and songs. These devices were used to advance the civil rights message of equality.

### *Descriptive Language*

King described the march as a “mighty walk” (1). He then described the conditions of the march in which they traversed “desolate valleys,” “trying hills,” “meandering highways,” and “rocky byways” (1). They also dealt with the “sweltering sun” (1) – a simple alliteration. King described the nature of the conflict as one against “forces of power” (3) and a “confrontation of good and evil” (7). He described the conflict as a series of “epic battles,” (4) “climactic conflicts,” and “heroic confrontations” (5). The enemy was described as a “colossus of segregation” which they had met with “heroic courage” to preserve their “rightful dignity” (5). King described their response as coming from the “wells of this democratic spirit” (5) and their nonviolent resistance as “unsheathed from its scabbard” (6). The irony here is that King described nonviolence in terms of a weapon—a sword. For King, the sword was the spirit of the civil rights movement. King described the roots of racial segregation as a flagrant evil perpetrated by the “southern aristocracy” (11 and 12). He claimed that this evil was now “choking to death” (8). He stated that racial segregation began when the “poor white masses working for near-starvation wages” (9) were lost in a “psychological oblivion” (12) and “ate Jim Crow” (12). That is, they believed that as bad as things may get for a white person, at least it was still better than being African American. This thinking, King claimed, planted the “roots of racism” (11) and led to the “travesty of justice” (14). King listed the conditions they sought to eradicate: “segregated housing,” (17) “social and economic depression,” (17) “inferior education,” (17) “idle industries,” (18) “wrinkled stomachs,” (12 and 18) and “broken lives” (18). King declared his determination and aspiration that, like the Israelites in the Biblical Battle of Jericho, the “marching of mighty armies” (16) of the civil rights movement would overcome the “race-baiters” (19) and the “bloodthirsty mobs” (20) and lead a “triumphant march” (17) to the “land of freedom” (16).

King took every opportunity to qualify and define simple nouns. It was not enough for him to use the words “education” (17) or “industries” (18) or even “lives” (18). He qualified each as “inferior,” “idle,” or “broken.” Thus, almost every noun was emphasized with positive or negative connotations. These descriptors shaped what would have been neutral nouns into images of good or evil, right or wrong, truth or lie. In so doing, King aligned his position, concepts, and goals with good, right, and truth. Those who opposed civil rights were evil, wrong, and a part of a lie.

Several times throughout the speech King used alliteration as the descriptive tool. When citing an African American poet, King referred to the poem as something the “black bard bequeathed” (26). King described the period of oppression and discrimination endured by African Americans as a “season of suffering” that has been “dark and difficult” (33). These instances of alliteration made the remarks more memorable. It is to the ear what a flashing neon sign is to the eye. It demands that the listener give attention and take note.

### *Contrast/Antithesis*

The use of contrast brings in to sharp focus the disparity between segregation and integration, between injustice and equality, poverty and prosperity. King stated that the status quo, or “normalcy,” led the Negro to a place where he is “perishing on a lonely island of poverty” in a “vast ocean of material prosperity” (31). King claimed that the power of

nonviolent protest could transform “dark yesterdays” into “bright tomorrows” (33). Perhaps the strongest contrast was the verbal tug-of-war between the question, “how long?” and the answer, “not long.” This sermon call-response style is typical of many churches and especially in black churches throughout the South. King provided specific reasons that “it”—the realization of justice and equality—would not take long. He supported his claim with moral imperatives: “because truth crushed to earth will rise again” (36), “because no lie can live forever,” (37) “because you shall reap what you sow,” (38) “because the arc of the moral universe . . . bends toward justice,”<sup>15</sup> (40) “because Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord,” because “He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat,” and because “His truth is marching on” (41). These imperatives were powerful, immutable, and irrefutable truths. To deny them or argue against them was akin to a futile fight against a whirlwind or a tidal wave. Anyone foolish enough to try this would lose.

#### *Comparison/Metaphor*

Metaphor is a stylistic device based on comparison. It is a way of relating or associating two normally disassociated things. The effect is to attribute to one thing the characteristics of the other. The effect of metaphor is to paint a word picture that is both rich and relatable. Two prominent metaphors in Dr. King’s “How Long? Not Long” speech are “eating Jim Crow” (12) and the Battle of Jericho (25). The former was used to explain the origins of segregation and discrimination in the South. The latter was used to explain why segregation and discrimination would fall and the cause of justice and civil rights would prevail.

When King described poor whites as “eating” Jim Crow, he was suggesting that, like eating food, they swallowed it and digested it. The term “eating crow” is a distasteful experience equated to the mental anguish of being forced to admit one’s fallibility.<sup>16</sup> The “crow” the poor whites “ate” was the idea of superiority and separation. When they “ate” it, this notion permeated every cell of their body; it became a part of the poor Southern white person’s life and growth. When they became parents, they fed the same notion to their children (12) who grew up and did the same. One could argue that the waste products from “eating” Jim Crow were segregation, discrimination, and an intolerant hatred born out of fear and ignorance of their own “malnutrition.”

The Biblical story of Joshua and the Battle of Jericho (Joshua Chapter 6) provides another rich word picture. This battle was one of faith and obedience to God. The children of Israel were instructed by God to march around the walled city. At Joshua’s command, the Israelites gave a great shout and the walls came tumbling down. By referencing this story, Dr. King is stating that their march is also one of faith and obedience to God. God will bring the victory by causing the walls of injustice to come tumbling down. What Dr. King did *not* mention is that when the walls of Jericho fell, God had instructed the Israelites to destroy every living thing within the city except for the family who was sympathetic to and supportive of their cause (See Joshua 6:21-25). Clearly this part of the story does *not* translate to the nonviolent, law-abiding civil rights movement that King was leading. Thus, the omission of the end of the Jericho story was both intentional and necessary.

#### *Personification*

This rhetorical device casts an inanimate object or concept as having life-like and/or human characteristics. King “animated” America, Alabama, conscience, discrimination, segregation, evil, justice, and truth. In so doing King forced his listeners to confront a living (or

perhaps dying) thing that had both motives and action. Most instances of personification were in the present tense; only two were in past tense: lurked and cried. The effect was a description of a currently active entity or event. Examples of personification in the speech are: America bleeds, (5) the nation lurked, (6) Alabama nurtures and defends, (8) conscience is awakening, (7) a dying order shrieks, (6) segregation is on its deathbed, (8) evil is choking, (8) a stomach cried, (12) justice is wounded and lying prostrate and continuing to be crucified, (35) and truth is marching (41 and 42). King's personifications almost exclusively described physical states of health. The marchers and the civil rights movement had endured bleeding, shrieking, choking, crying, wounds and even deaths.

### *Repetition*

King used repetition for emphasis and to build momentum. This rhetorical device is called anaphora, which refers to repeating words at the beginning of neighboring clauses. Repeating the phrase twice sets the pattern and further repetitions emphasize the pattern and increase the rhetorical effect. Use of this device typically represents a strategic and deliberate decision by the speaker. To effectively employ anaphora, speakers must carefully select the anchoring words and phrases that produce the greatest rhetorical effect.

King repeated 12 different phrases in this speech. Four of them were repeated three times, two were repeated four times, four were repeated five times, and two were repeated six times. King did not repeat any phrases until about half-way through the speech. Seven of the repeated phrases described current conditions and five described future conditions. The repeated phrases in order are: "Jim Crow" (5x), "the segregated southern" (4x), "a society of" (3x), "we are on the move now" (5x), "let us march on" (5x), "let us march on ballot boxes" (6x), "the battle is in our hands" (3x), "it was normalcy" (6x), "the only normalcy that we will settle for" (3x), "somebody's asking" (3x), "how long? not long because" (5x), and "glory, hallelujah" (4x).

The most frequently occurring words in the speech were "Alabama," "I" and "long" (19x); "white" and "with" (17x); "normalcy" (16x); and "let," "Negro," and "march" (14x). These frequently occurring words painted a picture of the main message of the speech. One could construct a hypothetical story line from these words that reads: I long for white Alabama with [its] normalcy [to] let [the] Negro march. Emphasis through repeated words and phrases makes them more memorable and, by extension, made King's message more memorable.

### *Story/Poems/Songs*

Dr. King's speech incorporated one story (about Sister Pollard), three poems, and two songs. The Sister Pollard story includes the phrase "my feet is tired, but my soul is rested" (2). This enabled King to restate using corrected grammar: "our feet are tired, but our souls are rested" (2). This story reinforced a recurring theme throughout the speech—that, despite enduring many hardships, the Civil Rights Movement would persevere and be victorious.

The first poem referenced in the speech is William Cullen Bryant's "The Battlefield."<sup>17</sup> In his poem, Bryant proclaimed that "truth crushed to earth will rise again" (36). The next line referenced in the speech is James Weldon Johnson's "out of the gloomy past 'till now we stand at last."<sup>18</sup> These words are also found in the lyrics to "Lift Every Voice and Sing,"—a song often referred to as the Black National Anthem. These lyrics advanced the theme of perseverance and overcoming adversity. The speech's third poem is from James Russell Lowell's "The Present Crises."<sup>19</sup> "Truth forever on the scaffold," King recites, "yet that scaffold sways the future" (39).

The words of this poem compare the lifelong struggle for truth to the struggle for survival in war. The broader context is an association of truth with victory and error with defeat.

King also used lyrics from two songs: the Negro spiritual “Joshua fit the battle of Jericho” and the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” To “fit” the battle is another way of saying “fought” the battle. By using these lyrics, King emphasized Joshua’s claim that the battle was in his hand and that they would be victorious. King ended the speech with the words from the “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” He added emphasis (indicated here by italicized words) to the line, “He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall *never* call retreat” and “Oh, be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be *jubilant*, my feet” (41). These words fit the theme of the march, as they spoke of advancing the cause of freedom and justice. The first stanza of the song twice uses the phrase “His truth is marching on.” But King borrowed this line and made it the last line of his speech. In so doing, King was identifying himself, the marchers, and the civil rights movement with God. That is, they were doing what God was doing – marching on. And His truth was their truth; their truth was His truth. To deny them was tantamount to denying God. They would not stop, and they would not be stopped.

### Shared History and a Vision for the Future

This speech was, among other things, an explanation about how African-Americans had come to this point and why their movement would succeed. King spoke as a prophetic optimist as he recounted a shared history and offered a vision of the future by contrasting the unsatisfactory present with a hopeful future.

The chronological middle of the speech (14 minutes, 51 seconds) occurs at the end of paragraph 13: “a society of brotherhood where every man would respect the dignity and worth of human personality.” The textual middle of the 348-phrase speech occurs at the end of paragraph 17: “until every vestige of segregated and inferior education becomes a thing of the past.” Each of these two “central” phrases fittingly encapsulated what King and the civil rights movement sought—respect, dignity, integration, and equality.

Dr. King began the speech with a description of the conditions endured during the march. He retraced some of the recent struggles of the civil rights movement. He then gave a rather detailed history lesson explaining the origins of racial segregation. King shifted to prophetic optimist when he declared that they were not finished yet, that they were on the move now, that they would not allow Alabama to return to normalcy, and that it would not be long before prejudice and segregation were defeated, and justice and equality fully realized.

King recounted a shared history when he explained the root cause of segregation in the South—a political strategy employed by the Bourbon interests. Bourbon refers to wealthy, white, and politically conservative southern elite including government leaders, plantation owners, mining and manufacturing kingpins, major bank financiers, and large cotton merchants. Economically and politically, this group dominated the South before the Civil War and quickly regained power after Reconstruction ended in 1877. Their goal was to keep southerners divided and to keep southern labor costs low. King described how the threat of hiring Negro slaves for even lower wages than poor whites kept poor whites from complaining. This gave rise to the Populist Movement, a movement to unite poor whites and Negroes into a voting bloc to drive out the Bourbon interests in the South. The southern aristocracy responded

with a strategy of divide to conquer—a strategy of segregation. The two-fold strategy of the southern aristocracy was to revise the doctrine of white supremacy and to pass laws that made it a crime for whites and Negroes to come together as equals at any level. Just as Africans had sold fellow Africans in to slavery, aristocratic southern whites sold other whites on the idea of segregation. King suggested that the poor white man was given Jim Crow—a sense of superior separation. King described a number of things that were segregated: southern money from poor whites, southern customs and practices from rich whites, southern churches from Christianity, southern minds from honest thinking, and the Negro from everything. King contrasted these separations with the great society that the Negro and white masses “threatened” to build: a society of justice, plenty, and brotherhood. By providing this shared history, King educated some and reminded others that these injustices were man-made schemes that had duped both blacks and whites.

King also offered a vision of the future. In a TED talk about the secret structure of great talks, presentation design expert Dr. Nancy Duarte claims that every hero, every leader, every idea that challenges the status quo is inevitably met with resistance.<sup>20</sup> Because there is bound to be resistance, one must tack back-and-forth, as in sailing, from what is to what could be. The captain has to capture and strategically use the wind to sail the ship. Likewise, the leader has to capture and use the resistance to the idea to advance the idea. This creates a contrasting tension. It exposes an embarrassing and shameful present reality standing in stark contrast with a desirable, noble, and just future. The speaker’s task, then, is one of painting a word picture of this contrast between the past and the future.

Dr. King did this in every one of his speeches, and his “How Long? Not Long” speech is no exception. Nearly half of the speech phrases refer to the past, with the rest of the speech divided almost equally between references to the present and his vision of the future. The beginning of the speech is spent mostly in the past. At the midpoint and beyond (especially the last quarter of the speech) there are frequent shifts contrasting the shameful present with the desirable future. People cannot appreciate the light if they have never experienced darkness. The contrast of tacking back-and-forth from past and present to future has the same effect. Marchers are renewed and motivated to continue the fight, to stay the course, and to advance the cause of civil rights.

### Conclusion

Dr. King’s “How Long? Not Long” speech skillfully demonstrated his understanding of the audience and the occasion and his ability to craft a message that was appropriate to both. He knew experientially what the marchers had been through during the march and in the days and years before. He was keenly aware of their need for a message of hope, a word of encouragement, and reassurance that their cause would be victorious. King provided all three when he first asked and then answered the question, *how long?* This speech was one of many steps along the way of Dr. King’s march for civil rights. It was a pivotal and important speech.

King articulated his dream, he inspired commitment to civil rights, he peacefully championed a noble cause, and he pronounced a prophetic prediction about reaching the Promised Land. King’s last public utterance, from the “Battle Hymn of the Republic,” reflected

his optimistic and authoritative claim of ultimate victory: “Mine eyes have seen the coming of the glory of the Lord.”

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**Author’s Note:** Richard Emanuel is a professor of communication at the Alabama State University. The campus is less than one mile from where Dr. King delivered the “How Long? Not Long” speech. This analysis was originally presented at a conference observing the 50th anniversary of the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act held at the National Center for the Study of Civil Rights and African American Culture, Alabama State University, August 2015.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to Dr. Clayborne Carson, the Martin Luther King, Jr., Centennial Professor of History at Stanford University’s Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Dr. King did not title his speeches; history has done that. The King Research and Education Institute titles this speech as “Address at the Conclusion of the Selma to Montgomery March.” Some sources refer to this speech as the “Our God is Marching On.” This phrase occurs only once at the end of the speech. The phrase “how long, not long” occurs 5 times and the shorter phrase “how long” occurs 10 times. A Google search (November 7, 2017) of “Our God is Marching On” yielded 7,340 hits. A Google search of “How long, not long” yielded 119,000 hits. “How long, not long” occurs more often in the speech than does “our God is marching on” and it also seems to be the most generally used title for this speech. Thus, “How long, not long” is the title used here.

<sup>2</sup> “Martin Luther King, Jr. – Biography,” *Nobel Prizes and Laureates*, accessed June 10, 2017, [http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel\\_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html](http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/laureates/1964/king-bio.html)

<sup>3</sup> “Montgomery Improvement Association, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Global Freedom Struggle,” *King Encyclopedia*, accessed June 20, 2017, [http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc\\_montgomery\\_improvement\\_association/](http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_montgomery_improvement_association/)

<sup>4</sup> “Major King Events Chronology: 1929-1968,” *Stanford University, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, accessed June 12, 2017, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/king-resources/major-king-events-chronology-1929-1968>

<sup>5</sup> Borgna Brunner and Elissa Haney, “Civil Rights Timeline, Milestones in the modern civil rights movement,” *Infoplease*, accessed June 15, 2017, <https://www.infoplease.com/spot/civil-rights-timeline>

<sup>6</sup> “Selma Movement,” National Voting Rights Museum and Institute, accessed July 1, 2017, [http://nvrmi.com/?page\\_id=43](http://nvrmi.com/?page_id=43).

<sup>7</sup> Turnaround Tuesday, Selma to Montgomery National Historic Trail, National Park Service, accessed July 1, 2017, <https://www.nps.gov/semo/learn/historyculture/turnaround-tuesday.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> “Martin Luther King Timeline,” accessed January 12, 2015, <http://www.datesandevents.org/people/timelines/28-martin-luther-king-timeline.htm>

<sup>9</sup> “Address delivered at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom,” *Stanford University, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, accessed January 20, 2015, [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/address\\_at\\_march\\_on\\_washington.pdf](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/kingweb/publications/speeches/address_at_march_on_washington.pdf), page 3 of 4.

<sup>10</sup> “Acceptance Speech at Nobel Peace Prize Ceremony,” *Stanford University, The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the global freedom struggle*, accessed January 15, 2015, [http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc\\_acceptance\\_speech\\_at\\_nobel\\_peace\\_prize\\_ceremony/](http://mlk-kpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_acceptance_speech_at_nobel_peace_prize_ceremony/)

<sup>11</sup> “The Selma to Montgomery March - Montgomery, AL - Alabama Historical Markers,” *Groundspeak, Inc.*, accessed January 8, 2015, [http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMJVK4\\_The\\_Selma\\_to\\_Montgomery\\_March\\_Montgomery\\_AL](http://www.waymarking.com/waymarks/WMJVK4_The_Selma_to_Montgomery_March_Montgomery_AL)

<sup>12</sup> “Speeches on the steps of the Alabama State Capitol at the conclusion of the Selma-to-Montgomery March, March 25, 1965,” *Pennsylvania State University libraries, Jack Rabin Collection on Alabama Civil Rights and*

*Southern Activists, 1941-2004*, accessed January 8, 2015, <http://collection1.libraries.psu.edu/cdm/ref/collection/rabin/id/2350>

<sup>13</sup> Photographic evidence obtained from the Archives and Special Collections at Alabama State University's Levi Watkins Learning Center shows that these speeches were not delivered from the *steps* of the Capitol, but from a flatbed truck positioned in front of the Capitol on Dexter Avenue. Governor Wallace had ordered State Troopers and other law enforcement personnel to surround the Capitol property preventing the marchers from ever reaching the Capitol *steps*.

<sup>14</sup> All passages from Dr. King's speech are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the authenticated text on the *Voices of Democracy* website.

<sup>15</sup> This statement is often attributed to Dr. King. However, it is rightly attributed to Rev. Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister (1810-1860) who called for the abolition of slavery. In a book of his sermons published in 1857, he used figurative language about the arc of the moral universe. King first used this phrase in a 1958 article in *The Gospel Messenger*. In it King used quotation marks indicating that he knew it was a pre-existing aphorism and not original to him (See Quote Investigator article about this phrase, posted online Nov. 15, 2012, <http://quoteinvestigator.com/2012/11/15/arc-of-universe/>).

<sup>16</sup> "Eating Crow, World Wide Words: Investigating the English language across the globe" accessed June 15, 2017, <http://www.worldwidewords.org/articles/eatcrow.htm>

<sup>17</sup> William Cullen Bryant, "The Battle-Field," in *Yale Book of American Verse*, ed., Thomas R. Lounsbury (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912), *Bartleby.com Great Books Online*, 1999, accessed January 21, 2015, [www.bartleby.com/102/23.html](http://www.bartleby.com/102/23.html)

<sup>18</sup> James Weldon Johnson, "Lift Every Voice and Sing," in *Complete Poems: Johnson*, ed. Sondra K. Wilson, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 109-110.

<sup>19</sup> James Russell Lowell, "The Present Crises" in *Yale Book of American Verse*, ed. Thomas R. Lounsbury (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1912), *Bartleby.com Great Books Online*, 1999, accessed January 21, 2015, <http://www.bartleby.com/102/128.html>

<sup>20</sup> Nancy Duarte, "The secret structure of great talks," *TEDxEast*, last modified November 2011, [http://www.ted.com/talks/nancy\\_duarte\\_the\\_secret\\_structure\\_of\\_great\\_talks](http://www.ted.com/talks/nancy_duarte_the_secret_structure_of_great_talks)