

Honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Speech: The Story behind Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Dream

By Kam Williams
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"A great speech is both timely and timeless. First and foremost, it must touch and move its immediate audience... But it must also simultaneously reach over the heads of the assembled to posterity.

The 'I Have a Dream' speech qualified on both counts. It was delivered in a year that started with Alabama Governor George Wallace, standing on the steps of the state capitol, declaring 'Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!'

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Fifty years later, the speech endures as a defining moment in the Civil Rights Movement... This gripping book unearths the fascinating chronicle behind 'The speech' and the revealing events surrounding The March on Washington."

-- Excerpted from Introduction

On Aug. 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered his 'I Have a Dream' speech, an unapologetically poetic appeal for the elusive equal rights long denied African-Americans. Unfortunately, over the years, the late martyr's historic address has all but been reduced to his wish that "my four children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

A half-century later we find that "content of character" phrase being appropriated, quoted out of context and willfully misrepresented by arch-conservatives from Glenn Beck to Herman Cain in service of a right-

ting agenda. For this reason, it is rather refreshing to find an opus like this being published on the 50th anniversary to remind us of the true meaning of Dr. King's moving remarks.

The author of the book is Gary Younge, a Black roadcaster and columnist based in Chicago. Here, the British-born, award-winning journalist does a masterful job of not only dissecting Dr. King's words, but of filling in much of the back story to the events leading up to his taking the podium.

We learn that "I Have a Dream" was not the planned focus of the speech, in fact, that divinely-inspired, emotional crescendo was substantially improvised on the spot as an after-thought. King's intended theme merely revolved around an earnest explanation that blacks had descended on the District of Columbia "to cash a promissory note for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

For, while preparing his speech on the eve of the march, King had been advised by a colleague to cut out the lines about his having a dream. "It's trite... It's cliché," Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker warned.

But, the next day on the National Mall, as Dr. King came close to finishing reading from his prepared text, gospel great Mahalia Jackson started prompting him to go off script.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

Martin Luther King Jr. addresses a crowd from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial where he delivered his famous, "I Have a Dream," speech during the Aug. 28, 1963, march on Washington, D.C.



“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

— Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

At OHSU, we believe – as Dr. King did – in tolerance, equality and justice. Today more than ever, we must embrace and protect his legacy. We must take this opportunity to change the narrative, to promote healing in a time of fear, trepidation, confusion and uncertainty. In our hospitals and clinics, laboratories, classrooms and with the communities we serve, OHSU is committed to an inclusive culture that creates a safe, respectful and healthy environment. This is a critical moment to redouble our commitment and raise our voices so that others may hear:

All are welcome at OHSU.

