

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 359: Martin Luther King's Dream

So, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream.

It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed.

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created each other.

I have a dream that one day on the Red Hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners

will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice,

a sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin,

but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

That was the Reverend Martin Luther King speaking from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial on the 28th of August 1963

to a vast audience of almost, perhaps it's been estimated, a quarter of a million people who had joined a great march on Washington to demand civil rights for black people in America.

And Dominic, we're just down from the Lincoln Memorial.

We've just been up to visit the very spot on the steps where Martin Luther King gave that speech.

So if you hear people walking by, if you hear dogs, noise of wind, planes, whatever, that's why we're on location.

And the theme of today is that speech, probably one of the most famous speeches in American history,

and one of the most famous speeches certainly in the 20th century.

I think so, absolutely.

So it's often voted, certainly in polls in America, will vote at the greatest speech of all time.

I think it's one of the few speeches that has genuinely global cash aid.

Yeah, because it has a resonance far beyond America.

Oh, yeah, you can see it's written on, there are bits of it written on walls on the West Bank at Tiananmen Square in 1989.

Protesters held up placards with the words, I have a dream.

So yeah, absolutely.

It has this resonance and also where we are, Tom.

I mean, people come to the Lincoln Memorial and come to the spot where King gave his speech.

So they're visiting not just Lincoln, but they're visiting King.

And King's Memorial is very close to where we're sitting now.

And for people in America, for a lot of people, this is a place of pilgrimage.

Right.

These are two great saints.

OK, so you've given me an opening there.

Right.

You often criticize me for shoehorning, sacral Christian references in, but Martin Luther King is a reverend.

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And I think it's really important to understanding the tone, the timbre, the resonance of the speech to recognize that King is a preacher.

Yes, absolutely.

So what we're going to do today is we're going to come to the speech and we're going to come to the great drama of

King stepping up to the podium to address this audience.

By the way, not just the quarter of a million people around him, but millions of Americans watching television because it's on a network news, isn't it?

And they switch to broadcast it live to cover that that part of the speech.

Exactly right.

Exactly right.

So we'll talk about the speech itself a little bit later, but maybe first time what we should do is give a bit of context.

Because this is not just a story about one bit of rhetoric.

It's a story about a man on a moment and it's a story about a point in American history that actually we haven't really covered in the rest of history.

Well, we talked about the American Civil War, didn't we?

And then we talked about the way in which segregation continued despite the victory of the Union and the abolition of slavery into the 20th century.

And still in the 50s and into the 60s, there is segregation in many states, particularly across the south between black and white American citizens.

Yeah, absolutely.

So what we'll call the Jim Crow laws that were brought in after the failure of reconstruction at the end of the American Civil War.

So these were, I mean, so non-American listeners who are not familiar with this, this would be the American equivalent of a kind of apartheid.

So, you know, black people can't sit in the same part of the bus.

They can't sit at lunch counters.

They can't go to the same schools.

They can't go to universities, all of these kinds of things, or at least the same universities.

We'll give a bit of context on this.

I know it's a massive subject.

It's sometimes thought the civil rights movement just comes out of nowhere.

That's not right.

There had always been civil rights campaigners from the 1890s onwards.

There would always been people pushing back, trying to push back.

Of course, it's very difficult because, I mean, the southern governments have almost untrammelled power.

There is violence.

There's constant violence.

There is lynching.

So Ku Klux Klan, burning crosses and all that.

It's not just the Klan, though.

It's also, you know, the police.

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Yeah, the entire infrastructure of oppression.

But from the Second World War, something obviously changes.

And that's partly because of the service of African Americans in the war.

There's also a landmark Supreme Court decision in 1954.

Listeners who are familiar with this story will know exactly what I'm talking about.

It's called Brown versus the Board of Education.

And this begins to desegregate schools.

So it basically says segregated schools, separate but equal, as they were called, are not right.

They are unconstitutional.

They are wrong.

But Dominic, something else that changes, presumably, is television and radio and mass media.

Because you were talking about how difficult it is for the campaign to kind of take wing.

But if it's being amplified on television, then presumably, opportunities for mass movements to grab attention are massively enhanced.

That's absolutely right.

And there's one other outside aspect to this, which is, of course, the Cold War.

This is very bad publicity for the United States when it's claiming to stand for freedom against Soviet communism.

Democracy and liberty.

You have a series of incidents, which they're all worthy of podcasting themselves, by the way.

I'm sure we'll do them all eventually.

The most famous one is, of course, the story of Rosa Parks.

And the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955.

So Rosa Parks refuses to accept her second class status on the bus.

Lots of our listeners, not just Americans, will be familiar with that story.

The Montgomery bus boycott is the first moment where you really see the emergence of this character,

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. as a national figure.

He's quite a short man, King, actually.

But there's something about him, even at that point.

As you said, he's a Christian.

He's a clergyman.

He's a Baptist preacher.

And he carries this immense moral authority.

And when he speaks, it's with the cadences of the Bible.

Yes, absolutely.

He speaks with a prophetic voice.

I mean, literally a prophetic voice.

He is invoking images from the Hebrew prophets.

And he's speaking all the time.

So in 1963, just to anticipate, he gives a speech practically every single day.

I think something like 350 speeches in a 365-day year.

So he's brilliant at it and will come on to how he crafts his speeches to appeal to different kinds of audiences.

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Absolutely brilliantly done, by the way.

But to go back to the context, the momentum of civil rights accelerates in the late 1950s, early 1960s.

You have a whole series of incidents.

The forced integration of schools in Little Rock, Arkansas at the end of the 50s.

Wave of sit-ins, starting in North Carolina in 1960.

People, the so-called freedom riders, so people who ride,

they are a group, they will ride interstate buses in 1961 to try and desegregate the buses.

That very famous story in 1962, a student called James Meredith, who became the first black student at the University of Mississippi.

But something changes in 1963.

So this is the year.

So there's a real, it's a kind of ratcheting up of the momentum.

So there are a couple of things.

Very famously, the desegregation of the University of Alabama.

Now, the governor of Alabama, Governor George Wallace, lots of listeners will have heard his name.

He becomes the champion of segregation.

And he stands, he literally stands to him in the schoolhouse door.

And he says, I fling down the gauntlet in the face of tyranny,

standing up to the federal government and we stand for segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever.

Because that's the important thing to understand, isn't it?

That both sides think that they're right.

And we, in the 21st century, we can clearly see the ways in which

Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement are right.

But it is important to understand that for large numbers of white Americans,

they think they're in the right and that their campaigning against tyranny and oppression.

The tyranny of the federal government, that's exactly right.

Then they say they stand for state's rights.

Absolutely, that's exactly what they say.

And there was a definite sense in the spring and summer of 1963,

so in the months that lead up to this moment of tension rising.

And Martin Luther King has been in the news a lot.

So in 1963, in the spring of 1963,

news people like the New York Times are running more stories about civil rights than they had done in the previous years put together.

It's a sign of the extraordinary salience that this has.

You mentioned television.

There's this one televised moment that goes not just around American households, but around the world.

And this is King goes to Birmingham, Alabama.

Or we would say Birmingham, Tom.

Yes, we would.

But they would say Birmingham.

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So he goes to Birmingham, which is a notoriously violent segregationist place. It's been nicknamed Bombingham.

Because so many civil rights activists are being attacked.

Yeah, there have been so many bomb attacks on civil rights leaders' homes.

And he goes there and he leads these protests.

And the authorities in Birmingham, most famously this police chief who, and beyond parody, he's called Eugene Bull Connor.

Right.

Bull Connor sets dogs on the protesters.

And the protesters are children, aren't they?

Well, not at first.

King is jailed at one point.

And he writes his famous...

Famous, the letter from Birmingham jail.

From Birmingham jail.

This letter from Birmingham jail where he says...

He writes it on toilet paper.

And he writes it at the margins of a newspaper in his cell.

And he talks about the fierce urgency of now.

And he says, we have waited too long.

We have been patient too long.

This is the moment.

And then when he comes out,

he does this thing where he doubles down and he enlists children, black school children.

And he puts them in the protest, puts them in the front line.

And of course, that makes, you mentioned Telly,

that makes for extraordinary television,

that they are the people on whom the dogs,

the water cannons, the full force of the authorities,

that wrath is being vented.

Yes.

And so you were saying about how people in the Kennedy administration are very sensitive to the way in which these kind of scenes are not conducive to America presenting itself as the bulwark of liberty.

Yes, absolutely, right.

And obviously, that's kind of like the stuff

you're getting in apartheid South Africa, these...

Oh, terrible scenes.

A huge embarrassment for Kennedy.

So, John F. Kennedy, he's been in since January 1961.

But the real dilemma for him is that his electoral coalition

includes the white South.

Yeah, of course.

He is treading a very fine line.

And actually, he and his brother, Robert.

So, Robert Kennedy is the Attorney General,
responsible for law and order.

And Robert Kennedy is saying at this point,

I wish they would just pipe down.

I wish this would all go away.

Why can't they just...

Do they need to go to the toilet in the same toilets
as everybody else?

Do they need to ride on the same buses?

Because they're frustrated with the Kennedy administration
because they can see the moral force of the case.

Although they don't quite understand it,
but they can sort of see it intellectually.

But also, they're terrified about going too far
and alienating their white Southern base.

But there are two kind of strains of white opinion
that presumably Martin Luther King
is trying to recruit to his side.

And one is that kind of progressive liberalism
that Kennedy stands for.

But there is also isn't there a sense
that King is trying to shame white Southern Christians.

So that letter from Birmingham Jail,
I mean, he has this incredible phrase
that Jesus was an extremist for love.

And he compares himself to St. Paul being jailed.

And there is this idea that if only he can
awaken a sense of the spirit rush

that he literally believes in,
that the spirit descends and animates him.

And he can get white Christians to share in that spirit rush.

Then who knows what might happen?

Right.

And he really, I mean, he absolutely believes this.

It's a very religious mantle.

I mean, this isn't window dressing.

I mean, he's not a Baptist preacher for nothing.

And he's the son of a Baptist preacher.

I think he's the third generation of Baptist preachers.

So everything that he says is infused

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with the cadences of the Bible.

Yeah.

And so the Christian idea that he is articulating is that you don't obtain justice by doing unjust things.

Right.

So non-violence and so on.

We must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force.

Yeah.

But there are people in the civil rights movement who don't necessarily agree with that.

Exactly.

So there's another constituency and there's another aspect to King.

King is not just a preacher.

He's a politician.

Now that may sound odd

because he's obviously never elected to political office.

But he's a political actor, political agent.

And he has a black constituency that he cannot afford to lose.

And throughout 1963, as the pressure is rising and these violent scenes are shown on television, there are people in the black community who are saying enough of this.

Yeah.

So Malcolm X.

So Malcolm X who is not a Christian has converted to Islam.

Correct.

And Islam is perhaps a slightly more muscular approach to obtaining justice.

And his appeal is slightly different.

His heartland is different.

It's in the big cities of the north.

So New York, for example, Chicago, places like that.

And his attitude is very different.

He says, I am for violence.

If non-violence means we continue postponing a solution to the American black man's problem just to avoid violence.

Right.

And there are a lot of people who actually, as 1963 as the summer progresses, there are people who are saying to King, you're too slow. You're too kind of lily-livered.

We should, you talk about the fierce urgency of now.

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Well, if you mean it, we have to do something.

Right.

So Martin Luther King is actually treading quite a fine line, isn't he?

Because on the one hand, he has black activists who may be tempted to side with Malcolm X's arguments that non-violence is a busted flush.

And on the other hand, Martin Luther King needs to appear to white liberals to try and recruit them to the cause as well.

White liberals and white moderates, I would say.

So people who are not particularly political.

So people who basically haven't really thought about it, want the problem to go away.

He has to mobilize their outrage.

He has to get them outraged.

He has to get them to see the world through his eyes.

Correct. Exactly.

Exactly right.

So that's the context.

And now let's talk a little bit about the platform.

Because what gives him the opportunity?

It's not King's idea to have this march.

There has never been a march like it.

So now we live in a world where the idea of huge hundreds of thousands of people descending on Washington is quite common.

So it might be the Tea Party.

It might be Trumpists.

It might be civil rights campaigners.

It might be Black Lives Matter.

It might be...

It hasn't really happened before in 1963.

And the idea comes from an older generation of civil rights leaders.

So the guy who's responsible for it is this guy called A. Philip Randolph.

Now, Philip Randolph was born in Florida in 1889.

And he was a union leader.

He was a Black man.

He organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

I mean, that's a great name.

It's a great name.

I mean, it's an album.

It's a brilliant name for a group, isn't it?

Aggressive rock.

John Peale would have loved it.

John Peale would have loved that.

Exactly.

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So, and he's actually quite a nostalgic figure because he wears these dark wool three-piece suits. He's a very...
Going in the South.
He's an immensely dignified man.
God, he must be sweated a lot.
So he had first come up with the idea of the march on Washington in 1941.
So as America is about to enter the Second World War, and he wanted the march to be about segregation in the military, which was then segregated and in the defense industry.
And he was persuaded out of it by Franklin D. Roosevelt, who said, you know, not a good idea with us entering the war, divisive, and Roosevelt had, as a sort of quid pro quo, had said, I will desegregate war industries.
Not the military.
Truman did that.
So Roosevelt, yeah, they did a deal and the march never happened.
But by 1963, Philip Randolph wants to have another go.
He's now 74, and he thinks this is one last chance for him to have his dreams.
I mean, this is his lifelong dream.
He has a dream.
He does have a dream, Tom.
And by his side is a man who is a bit younger than him, who's in his fifties called Bayard Rustin.
He's a fascinating figure.
He's an extraordinary man.
So he's incredibly tall.
He's very eccentric.
He has a sort of mop of hair.
He's a Quaker.
He's a fascinating man.
Light written, but he's very unlike written.
In other ways.
He's a pacifist.
He is a communist, and he is also openly gay at a time when that is very unusual.
So in 1953, he'd actually been arrested in Pasadena and charged with the lewd vagrancy for having sex with two men in the back of his car.
And he'd been sent to jail for 60 days.
Now, as you will know, Tom, a lot of the civil rights leaders are intensely Christian and are very uncomfortable with Bayard Rustin.
But he's a brilliant organiser

and absolutely devoted to the cause.
But I think also it's fascinating
because he seems to be the kind of intersection point
between the Christian and the liberal
development of civil rights.
Yes, but he's also a fascinating figure
because he's a link to the communist.
I mean, he's a communist.
And actually, although it embarrasses some
of the civil rights leaders to admit it,
the communists are very active in civil rights campaigns
because, of course, the Communist Party
is an avariciously anti-racist party.
And there are people who are American communists
who are very idealistic
and absolutely devoted to the cause of equality
and brotherhood and all this sort of stuff.
So it's an alliance.
It's an alliance, exactly.
So they basically pitch the idea
to the other civil rights leaders,
to the people from the National Urban League,
from the NAACP,
the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People,
and the Congress for Racial Equality
from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee,
which is called SNCC,
which is very active.
It's called SNCC.
That's a great name.
And it's very active in the South
doing a lot of the campaigning in the South.
And at first, actually,
all the other civil rights leaders say,
don't know, they're not terribly enthusiastic.
But King is keen on it, isn't he?
Because it's the centenary
of the Emancipation Proclamation
given by Abraham Lincoln.
Yeah, and his shadow, we are sitting.
We're currently sitting.
Yeah.
And so he can see the kind of resonance of that.
Because, again, just as he's trying to get white Christians

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to recognize the justice of what he's saying in Christian terms,
so also, with this anniversary,
he can get patriotic Americans
to recognize that he's only asking for Black people
what is written into the Constitution.

Well, you're anticipating, brilliantly, Tom,
I have to say, one of the great themes of his speech,
which is that we're asking for the American promise
to be redeemed.

We're asking for the check to be cashed.

That's exactly right.

And I think, I mean, people sort of joke,
and they say, basically,
he was a tiny bit ambivalent about it at first,
but by mid-summer,
he basically has convinced himself
that it was his idea all along.

I guess you need that kind of self-confidence
to do what he does.

So at the end of June,
they go to see John F. Kennedy.

Now, Kennedy, in the wake of Birmingham,
has committed himself to civil rights
and civil rights legislation,
even though he knows it will make him exceedingly unpopular
in the white South.

We're jumping ahead here.

We're going to do a podcast about Kennedy's assassination
in November.

When he arrives in Dallas,
one of the reasons he is anxious is because he knows
there are so many white Southerners
who loathe him because of his identification
with civil rights.

And actually, when they meet Kennedy,
Kennedy is still dragging his feet a bit.

So he says to King privately,

I don't want you to do this
if it's involved with a load of communists.

You know, this is very bad for you.

It's bad for me by association.

They have this meeting with Kennedy,
and they say to him,

listen, it's probably going to happen anyway.

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Let's talk about it anyway.
We're going to do it whatever.
It's better if we do it kind of in association with you,
if we make sure it's peaceable.
And they also say to him,
if you don't ally with us,
you're handing the initiative to the radicals,
you know, to Malcolm X,
to these kinds of people.
It's much better if we're on the same page.
But the sort of unspoken quid pro quo
is that they will sideline
the more radical elements of their own group,
their own coalition.
And do they do that?
They do do that.
So they meet in Harlem in early July.
So it's Philip Randolph,
the organizer of the sleeping car porters,
Jap and the other leaders of the groups.
And they say to him,
Bayard Rustin, Mr. Pasadena,
Lude Vagrancy,
he has to be pushed into the shadows.
He can't march at the front,
and you have to spearhead this yourself.
And he says, fine,
I'll do that as long as you allow me
to pick my own deputy.
And they say, OK, fine.
He says, great, my deputy is Bayard Rustin.
So Bayard Rustin,
he's in the background.
He does all the planning.
And actually he's brilliant at it, Tom,
because I said no one has ever planned a march like this.
And he does it.
And all the details.
So it's Bayard Rustin who works out
banal things, but they're really important.
How many toilets they need?
How many blankets?
Is he the one who,
brilliant detail you've given in your notes for me.

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They advise people not to put mayonnaise
in their sandwiches,
because it spoils easily in the sun
and can cause diarrhea.

Yeah.

Such attention to detail.

Well, you have to have attention to detail
of these things,

because otherwise it won't work.

The interesting thing, of course,
a lot of people are very much against this,
by which I mean white people.

So with the public,
this is a fascinating detail.

Among the public,
twice as many people have an unfavorable view of the march,
as have a favorable view of it.

White Southern representatives
are absolutely outspoken.

So there's a guy from South Carolina,
representative William Dawn.

He says,

this is reminiscent of the Mussolini fascist
black shirt march on Rome.

It's reminiscent of the socialist Hitler's
government sponsored rallies in Nuremberg.

So the whole compare your enemies to Hitler thing
is really kicking in.

Yes, very much.

A very famous segregationist senator,
Strom Thurmond,
who is still senator from South Carolina
at the age of 320.

He said,
this is all Bayard Rustin's doing.

He is a communist,
a draft dodger,
and a homosexual.

Didn't he publish the photo of him talking to
Martin Luther King in the bath?

In the bath.

In the bath.

Yeah, in the bath.

Kind of in Uendo.

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And yeah.
But the authorities have all kinds of,
you know,
contingency panic measures.
Extraordinary, actually.
So this is from the Guardian columnist,
Gary Young,
wrote a brilliant book about,
I have a dream speech in the March on Washington.
This is from his book.
He says,
all elective surgeries in Washington DC were cancelled
because they thought there would be so much violence,
there'd be so many people in the hospitals.
Sales of alcohol are banned.
The judges are told to prepare
for criminal hearings to run throughout the night.
Congressmen tell their female staff,
stay out of the city
because there's going to be trouble,
there's going to be violence,
all this kind of thing.
The Pentagon has got 19,000 troops,
but no dogs.
But no dogs.
So that's the concession.
Because they have learned that.
That doesn't look good.
A couple of just small things
before we get approached the day.
One, there are no women.
It's a really, really interesting.
So no Rosa Parks.
So no Rosa Parks.
No, no, no.
And why is that?
Well, I mean, is it strategic?
Is it?
No, it's not strategic chauvinist.
Yeah, it's chauvinist.
I mean, let's just be blunt about it.
The civil rights movement's leadership
are of a generation where they think
the women will basically make the,

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as we would say in Britain,
they'll make the tea.
But not with mayonnaise.
Exactly.
They'll make the sandwiches, but not with mayonnaise.
Yeah.
So there is a tribute to Negro women fighters
for freedom, as they are called.
But it is delivered by a man.
And the women, so Rosa Parks and Co,
are called upon to take a bow,
but they're not allowed to say a single word.
So that kind of tells its own story.
And so that is then setting up one of the movements
in the 60s that will be massively influenced by this,
which is feminism.
Exactly.
And indeed gay rights.
Yeah.
I mean, part of feminism comes out of people
who've been involved in 60s movements who say,
I'm actually sick of making the tea.
Yeah.
So let's get to the day itself, Tom.
28th of August, 1963, very hot day.
Right from the early morning,
it's obvious this is going to be a massive deal.
So thousands and thousands of people arriving by train,
100 buses an hour,
coming through the Baltimore Harbor Tunnel.
So by 10 o'clock or so,
the place is absolutely rammed.
It's obvious that the crowd is much blacker
than people had anticipated.
So they thought they would, you know,
it might be 50-50 or something.
Actually, it's about a fifth.
Yeah.
It's about a fifth white, four-fifths black.
The number of African-Americans who turn up
amazes the organizers.
They knew it would be big,
but they didn't know it would be this big.
There are far more children than they expected.

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Far more older people.
Also, right from the start, it's obvious,
the mood is nothing.
Oh, it's much more,
it's not quite celebratory.
That's wrong.
But it is hopeful.
Yes.
It's passionate.
It's proud.
It is.
It's not violent.
You know, for a lot of people,
it's actually a really moving, well, enjoyable day.
So Bob Dylan sings to the crowd.
I wouldn't enjoy that song because I don't like Bob Dylan.
You were banned from doing impersonations,
but I think we can allow you Bob Dylan.
But Jane Baez, she said that the most striking memory
she had was looking out at the crowds
and seeing all the church hats.
It's, dare I say, a sacral experience,
perhaps for people.
I mean, people have come as they would to church.
Some very unexpected people are there.
Charlton Heston was there.
That's unexpected, isn't it?
That's unexpected.
Bert Lancaster was a great liberal campaign,
a Billy Wilder, Sidney Poitier, Marlon Brando.
Another of your victims, Tom.
Our producer, Theo, was pointing at you saying,
do not do your Marlon Brando voice.
I'm not going to.
Josephine Baker?
Marlon Brando is walking around
carrying an electric cattle prod
to symbolise police brutality.
That's method acting.
It is method acting.
Taken to a ludicrous extreme, I agree with you.
So there are going to be 16 speakers,
and King is going to go last.
There have been an argument about whether or not

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King should go last.
And the organisers said, well, listen,
who wants to go after him?
And nobody.
Because he is known as the best writer.
Because he is already known by far as the best.
So in a sense, it's the position of honour.
Yeah.
You're the one who will be kind of last.
But isn't there also a slight sense
that that might be the graveyard slot?
Because towards the end of the day,
people start drifting away, get tired,
a bit hot, mayonnaise is kicking in.
You've had too much mayonnaise.
Exactly, it's on.
So, I mean, you and I, we're here in June.
I mean, I've been to Washington in August.
It is unbelievably hot, humid and stifling.
And even if you've got your church hat on,
that sun is beating down.
It is beating down.
So one person dies of a heart attack.
More than a thousand people are treated by the Red Cross.
There's no violence at all.
And I suppose also if people come in on the train,
they've got to get the train back.
They've got to get the train back, exactly.
And the speeches are fine,
but people have heard them all before.
They're not that great.
And Norman Mailer, he put it very well,
he said there was an air of subtle depression
by the afternoon of wistful apathy,
which existed in many, like a baseball game,
after it's obvious that one team is going to win, basically.
So there's just a sort of sense, you know, you know how it is,
like at a festival or anything,
you've been for the day out, it's the late afternoon,
everyone's very hot, kind of time to go home.
And number 16, Martin Luther King steps up to the podium.
And as he steps up, Tom, there are people already leaving.
There are people who've retreated from kind of where we are now.
They've gone under the trees to escape the sun.

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There are people who are streaming back towards the railway station.
And this is his moment, his appointment with Destiny.
And this, of course, is the perfect time for us to take a break.
OK, so we will see you back in a few minutes for Martin Luther King's appointment with Destiny.
Hello, welcome back to the Restless History.
We are, well, we're having a dream, aren't we, Dominic, in the company of Martin Luther King, who is addressing this great movement of civil rights campaigners, activists who've descended on Washington in the summer of 1963. They're all a bit hot, all a bit tired. They've got to get back home. So Martin Luther King is now stepping up. He's got to grab their attention. And he's got to grab the attention of America as well. Because, you know, he is being filmed. Correct. This is going to be going out across the United States. Exactly right. So the networks have been covering the march off and on all day. But both ABC and NBC interrupt their regular programming to come to Martin Luther King at the platform. And he has been told by the other civil rights leaders, many of whom are quite jealous of him. They have told him, you have 10 minutes max. If you go over 10 minutes, or one of them says to him, Roy Wilkins says to him, you go over 10 minutes, we'll cut off your microphone. You know, don't mess around. So the pressure is on that King. He is, as we said before, he's the third generation preacher. He was a brilliant speaker at kindergarten. He could recite bits of the Bible from memory. And he's a, you know, I mean, he's a very, very learned theologian as well. Yeah. Very learned man. But he doesn't write his speeches all himself. He has people who help. Because we said he gives 350 speeches a year. So he has two aides who help him with this, Clarence Jones and Stanley Levison. And they've been working on this speech for three to four days.

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Now, normally when he does his speeches, he has kind of interchangeable elements. So he does a bit of this, bit of that, like a preacher, like a vicar would, like a clergyman, very used to speaking, you know, depending on the moment as the mood takes him, he will use this paragraph, that section, because they know this is the first time really that he is speaking, not to his, just to his base, but to millions of Americans who will watch on TV who've probably never really heard him speak before. Yeah, exactly. So he can actually use riffs that he's used before. And the dream, the idea of having a dream is one of those riffs, right? Yeah. So they're in his hotel suite the night before and they are actually debating, will he use that dream stuff? Because he has used it. He'd used it in a prayer service in Georgia in 1962. He'd used it in North Carolina at the end of 1962. He'd used it quite a lot, the dream idiom, throughout the summer of 1963. So he'd been at a fundraiser in Chicago a week earlier. And it said, I'd have a dream that one day, right down in Birmingham, Alabama, where the home of my friend was bombed last night, white men and Negro men, white women and Negro women will be able to walk together as brothers and sisters. And some people said to him, some of his aides actually said to him, I think that's a bit cliched. I think that stuff about the dream is a bit tiresome. So one guy, Wyatt T. Walker, actually explicitly said to him, do not use the lines. I have a dream it's too trite. Right. But I mean, that's because presumably these guys have been in King's entourage all this time. And so they've heard him do it loads and loads of times. Is that me listening to your anecdote, Tom? Well, I mean, it's like a band who have been playing in clubs and pubs and above whatever,

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suddenly being given a stadium.
And you're playing to millions of people
who've never heard you before.
So you want to go with your greatest hits.
Right. This is what our producer, Tony,
who's lurking in the background here,
he says to us about the rescue.
I'm not comparing us with Martin Luther King, Tom.
That would be absolutely ridiculous.
Just to be absolutely clear, I'm not comparing us.
Just bringing that up the rest of the world.
But yeah, you bring out the big guns.
But actually King stays up till four o'clock in the morning,
the night before the big march.
Well, he says, I am now going upstairs to my room
to counsel with my Lord, i.e. Christ.
And he is giving a political speech,
but he's also giving a religious speech.
But he decides, I'm not going to use it.
They're right. It's too, it's tired.
Or does he, though? I mean, that's what he says.
Yeah, this is what he says. You're right.
There's a little bit of controversy about this, isn't there?
Fascinating.
You know, we'll come to maybe how that I have a dream moment
kind of kicks in.
It's fascinating.
Because I have views, not minute.
It's fascinating for us who, you know,
we both do public speaking,
that this is a wonderful case of being able to go through a speech
and to see how the, because he's, of course,
he has a text, but King is used to departing from his texts.
Let's go back to that moment.
He's introduced by Philip Randolph.
Philip Randolph is an enormous man, great tall and lanky.
King is about five foot six, sort of short and stocky.
And he stands there at the podium.
There's polite applause, not rapturous applause.
And then he starts speaking.
And by the way, his voice, he has a tremendous voice.
So he has this.
You've banned me from impersonating it, haven't you?
I have banned you.

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And I absolutely, under no circumstances,
you're allowed to.
But it is a tremendous baritone.
Yeah.
Rolling baritone.
And he starts with a reference to the guy
in whose shadow we're sitting.
He says, five score years ago, a great American,
in whose symbolic shadow we stand today,
signed the Emancipation Proclamation.
That's Abraham Lincoln.
And right from the start, you see,
he's anchoring this in American history, heritage,
the great traditions of America.
So Gary Young, whose book on the speech,
I couldn't recommend more highly,
he points out that if you listen to an audiobook,
the audiobook is 150 words a minute.
If you give a slideshow presentation on Zoom,
100 words a minute.
But King is speaking at 77 words a minute.
So it's slow.
Every word judged like a preacher in a pulpit, Tom,
which is what he is.
Yeah.
This is what he's doing.
And he has this device, which he uses a lot,
a naffara.
Yes.
You're familiar with the naffara?
A rhetorical.
Yeah.
So the rhetorical device where you repeat the same phrase
again and again at the beginning
of successive sentences, 100 years later,
the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled
by the manacles of segregation
and the chains of discrimination.
100 years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island
of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean
of material prosperity.
100 years later, again and again,
reminding people Lincoln made this promise.
Yeah.

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And it has not been fulfilled.
But it's not just Lincoln, is it?
It's the founding fathers.
Right.
You're absolutely right.
It's the Constitution.
This is really the point of issue between him and Malcolm X,
because Malcolm X is saying Black Americans should
emancipate themselves from the entire structures
of white America.
Yeah.
King is saying, no, we are holding white America
to its own promises, its own ideals,
its own kind of best aspirations.
Absolutely right.
And this is an argument that reverberates to this day
among campaigners for Black rights.
Some will say, we're just asking that America live up
to its own professed ideals,
and others will say America is poisoned from the start
by the original sin of slavery.
Yeah.
And King doesn't say the latter.
He explicitly says, it's this wonderful metaphor,
the metaphor for which some actually,
some of his aides and some civil rights leaders
say this speech ought to be remembered,
which is the metaphor of cashing a check.
He says, in a sense, we've come to our nation's capital
to cash a check.
And he says, when the architects of our republic
wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution,
they were signing a promissory note that all men,
yes, Black men as well as white men,
you notice the emphasis on men,
which people wouldn't say today,
will be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty,
and the pursuit of happiness.
And he says, America has defaulted on this promise,
and we have come to cash it,
a check that will give us upon demand
the riches of freedom and the security of justice.
And then there's a bit about the sort of urgency
which he talked about.

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So another anaphora.
Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy.
Now is the time to rise from the dark and desolate valley.
Now is the time.
You know, a very standard rhetorical technique.
The crowd like that, all very good.
He's bringing in some biblical stuff.
So the stuff about rolling waters,
you must be familiar with that.
Just this rolling down like waters and righteousness,
like a mighty stream from the book of Amos.
I'm not massively familiar with the book of Amos.
That's tremendous.
Brilliant.
Great book.
It's all great stuff.
So now he's moving towards the end of the speech.
And actually, this is how it's meant to end.
So he's meant to end with these resounding words
that one day we'll join hands and sing,
free at last, free at last, thank God Almighty.
We're free at last.
And had he ended then.
He wouldn't be remembered.
It probably would not be remembered.
It was fine.
It was like standard Martin Luther King civil rights speech.
It was absolutely fine.
And then, I mean, there was a dispute about what happened.
Some people say, like you just did,
that you suggested earlier,
he was always actually going to use the dream stuff.
He was just saying that,
because his aides were giving him a hard time about it.
I'm not saying that.
I mean, you know, he's a practised orator.
So he will have in his head riffs
that he might be ready to use
if he feels that the time is right.
But I think more than that,
he has a literal conviction
that the spirit can descend
and can animate him with Pentecostal fire.
And he can speak with tongues.

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And I think he literally believes this.
And I was kind of reading through the speech
and then reading through this moment
where it suddenly has a lift off.
And weirdly, I was reminded of a poem
by the Welsh poet, R.S. Thomas,
which may seem a million miles away
from civil rights movement, everything.
But R.S. Thomas is writing about a Methodist preacher.
He's talking about this abandoned chapel
that says that an amazing thing happened in this chapel.
Here once on an evening like this,
in the darkness that was about his hearers,
a preacher caught fire
and burned steadily before them with a strange light
so that they saw the splendour
of the barren mountains about them
and sang their amends fiercely,
narrow but saved in a way that men are not now.
Oh, that's a very good talk.
And I think that that's kind of what happens.
He catches fire, you know,
and fire is the descent of the spirit
in the Christian tradition.
Well, it wouldn't be the rest of his history,
unless I attempted to puncture enthusiasm with.
Of course.
Banal cynicism.
Of course.
So, there's a story that is often told
that a gospel singer,
who was supposedly King's favourite gospel singer
called Mahalia Jackson,
that she shouted up to him,
tell them about the dream, Martin.
Tell them about the dream.
He goes, it's like a heckle.
Yeah.
And which you would be used to, by the way,
if you're a Baptist preacher,
because people would often do that.
It would be call and response.
And she shouts, tell them about the dream.
And he starts improvising as he would have done.

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And I'm sure you're right, Tom.
There are a lot of people in,
particularly in Britain and Europe,
who may be listening to this podcast,
who are not religious,
who will discount this aspect of King and his personality.
But you're absolutely right.
He is a committed believer.
Yeah.
He would be the kind of person
who would believe that he's seized by the Holy Spirit.
Yeah, but I mean, if you want the Spirit to descend on you,
you have to prepare.
Yeah.
So, he may have these kind of phrases ready in his head,
waiting for the fire to catch.
Right. Which is what happens.
I mean, he gets the sort of the heckle.
He's got very close to the end of his 10 minutes, by the way.
So, in the end, he ends up speaking for about 12 minutes or so.
But he doesn't get cut off.
But he doesn't get cut off.
And you do get this sense that suddenly he catches fire.
I mean, he would describe that he would fly off
and then he'd be looking for a place to land.
So, this is him flying, taking off.
And then he gets going and he says,
even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow,
I still have a dream.
It's a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.
I think that's really important
because that obviously, again,
is that appeal to moderate white viewers
who believe in the American dream.
I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up
and live out the true meaning of its creed.
We hold these truths to be self-evident
that all men are created equal.
And the crowd kind of cheers.
And then he's...
Cheer this. And they're starting to get excited.
They cheer. And then he's off.
And then there's this...
Because the cheers, presumably, pep him up.

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Pep you up. Of course.

This is electricity now.

He's firing. He's firing on all cylinders.

I have a dream that one day on the Red Hills of Georgia,
that's his home state,

the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners
will be able to sit down together at the Temple of Brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day, even the state of Mississippi,
where he's just been,

a state sweltering with the heat of injustice,

sweltering with the heat of oppression,

will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

And then these very famous lines.

Yeah.

I have a dream that my four little children

will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged
by the color of their skin,

but by the content of their character.

And then I have a dream today.

And the audience, you can tell,

they're really, really hooked at this point.

And he goes on and on.

And then he gets to this point.

I have a dream where he has a direct biblical quote, isn't it, Tom?

Yeah, from Isaiah.

That one day every valley shall be exalted,
every hill and mountain shall be made low,

the rough places made plain,

the crooked places will be made straight,

and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,

and all flesh shall see it together.

Incredibly powerful.

So what's that from?

From Isaiah.

The book of Isaiah.

And the thing is that he is invoking there
millennia worth of aspirations for justice.

And these are aspirations that are shared by white Christians.

Exactly.

So people listening to it who have been hitherto
unmoved by the civil rights movement,

there's nothing here that they could possibly object to.

It's incredibly, you know, to us as white Britons,
reading this or watching the footage,

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I think it's still incredibly moving.

Yeah, really powerful.

So powerful.

Yeah.

Sorry, there's a dog just there in the background.

The amazing thing about it, as Gary Young points out in his book, is that this passage, the bit for which the speech is remembered, is just 301 words long.

So it's less than a fifth of a total speech, and it lasts for two minutes and 40 seconds, which is a sixth of the whole.

So it's remembered for this one passage.

And then actually the end.

I think the end is very moving.

So then he goes back brilliantly.

He finds a way to end that incorporates both this stuff and the end that he had planned.

And he takes it back to this idea of patriotism.

So he goes back to this song, this hymn,

My Country 'Tis of Thee, Sweet Land of Liberty of Thee I Sing, which believe it or not, Tom, the tune is God Save the King.

Wonderful.

Very stirring for those of us listening.

He'd be brilliant if he started singing that.

Very unexpected.

The speech could...

I mean, this is the great takeaway from this episode of The Restless History.

The speech would have been even better if it had sung.

But it's also got the rhythms of all those kind of folk singers.

Yeah, absolutely.

Absolutely.

And he ends with this geographical tour of the Union.

Let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire.

Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York.

Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenes of Pennsylvania.

So he's gone through the north, and then he goes south.

But not only that, let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia.

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee.

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi.

From every mountainside, let freedom ring.

And then he goes on and he comes back to the point where he was always planning to end.

With the day when all of God's children, black men and white men,

Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics,

will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual.

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Free at last.

Free at last.

Thank God Almighty.

We're free at last.

It's a sad scene.

Yeah, I mean, just hearing you do it,
sends a shivers down the spine.

I mean, not chilling shivers, Tom.

No, I feel an urge to go out there and fight for freedom.

Well, John F. Kennedy, who was watching it,
who had never seen a full or heard a full Martin Luther King speech,
apparently watched in the Oval Office on TV and he said to his aides,
he is good.

Yeah, and Kennedy would know because Kennedy's a great orator too.

He is damn good.

Interestingly, I mean, the fascinating thing is that after that,
and we've said how moving it is, did it convert anybody?

And the brutal answer is no, it didn't actually.

I accept that.

But I think that it does contribute to what will become the vibe of the 60s.

It does.

All you need is love, all that kind of thing.

It does, of course, but not initially.

No, but it's a slow burner.

It's a slow burner.

So at the time, do you want to know what the Jackson, Mississippi,
Clarion Ledger said?

The next day, the front page was a photograph of the litter left in Washington,
and the headline was, Washington is clean again with Negro trash removed.

So that, I mean, there's a stunning, shocking thing to read.

Of course.

Gives you a sense of the polarization.

But I think that that sense of, well, all you need is love is something that palpably
reverberates through the 60s.

It does, but among people who already agree with it, Tom, I think,
of course, of course, but often these are people who are young.

And so the youth spirit of the 60s, I'm sure, you know, because it's the intersection
point between what is quite a conservative tradition, the biblical tradition of the
black Southern churches and the kind of the youth quake of the 60s counterculture.

And Martin Luther King's career obviously will continue throughout the 60s until his
assassination in 1968.

And when he gets killed, he's seen as being a martyr, not just for,
you know, his Christian beliefs, but for the spirit of 60s progressivism as well.

Don't you think?

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I do think that, Tom.

But I think you've jumped very quickly from 1963 to 1968.

Well, that's because we're running out of time, Tom.

Well, that is because we're running out of time.

But it's apoc, Tom, we can do what we like.

But I think what that slightly misses is that the fact that the impact of the speech at the time wanes very quickly.

I understand that.

So it's barely discussed in 1964.

Well, there is this question about, would the speech be remembered were it not for the assassination?

Absolutely.

Because by 1966, King is saying in speeches, well, actually, I'll tell you what happens in 1966.

He goes to speech in Chicago and he is booed by young black men.

He's yesterday's ma'am.

The action is with the radical panthers that are on the scene now.

And afterwards, he says, I had preached to them about my dream, but they were hostile watching the dream that they had so readily accepted turning to a frustrating nightmare.

In other words, they're sick of hearing about the dream.

They're sick of hearing all this when their hopes are constantly being frustrated.

And actually, by the time he dies in 1968, he himself has become much more radical.

He's speaking about economic justice, about basically socialism.

And he's speaking out against Vietnam, isn't he?

And he's speaking out against Vietnam.

And some people, so some of his aides and his friends, say he shouldn't actually be remembered for the I Have a Dream speech.

He should be remembered for his later more radical speeches, attacking the war in Vietnam, attacking imperialism and capitalism, and that that is truer to the man he became.

Because one of the paradoxes of this is that even though the I Have a Dream speech is absolutely part of the kind of the kaleidoscope of 60s radicalism, it's kind of part of the mood music.

In the long run, it does seem that it is an expression of the civil rights movement that is most congenial to conservatives.

Agreed.

So, you know, that's why basically the Martin Luther King, who is being celebrated at the Lincoln Memorial at its feet, is the Martin Luther King who gives the I Have a Dream speech, not the Martin Luther King who is making speeches against Vietnam.

Yeah, absolutely, Tom.

I couldn't agree with you more, and that's what a lot of King scholars say, that actually Martin Luther King and the emphasis on this particular speech,

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it's a kind of way of sanitizing him and making him less nuanced, more moderate, less unsettling, less confrontational a figure. And that actually, if you were being really harsh, now we've talked about how moving the speech is, if you were being really harsh, and I'm not saying I would necessarily take this line, you would say this is the rhetorical equivalent of John Lennon's Imagine. It's a, you know, you said about the 60s, the spirits of the 60s, Tom, that it is kind of let's all be friends, join hands. Right, but I mean, you know, my repost to that would be, I know you hate John Lennon, I know you hate Imagine, but Imagine is an incredibly popular song that has created a kind of mood music for millions of people. Well, Tom. And I, you know, I don't think that that's necessarily an insult. No, well, I like Martin Luther King. I think the I Have a Dream speech is tremendously powerful. I wouldn't compare it with Imagine, because as you rightly say, I absolutely despise Imagine with every fiber of my being. But why this is remembered is because I think the American dream is obviously very powerful, the life-liberating, the pursuit of happiness, the rights and stuff. And I think the speech captures this sense that the dream has not been fulfilled, but it's still, you know, it doesn't do to be unduly cynical about it, that there is a promise there. As an outside someone who's not American, I think that a dream in which people of all races and backgrounds can live harmoniously is much better than one in which it's taken for granted that injustice is so kind of shot through the fabric of American history and its constitution, that there's no, you know, there's no solution. Yeah, I agree with you. That to me is its power, that it's not so it's not cynical. It's not it's optimistic. It's optimistic offers hope, the optimism, the hope. And of course, the religious side of it is what gives it the texture, isn't it? I think the biblical quotations, the rolling cadences, and so on and so forth. Tom, we've talked long enough. So King, it took him, what, 12 minutes to deliver this beautiful piece of oratory. We've spoken for far longer and come up with nothing remotely comparable. Well, that's what critics are all about, isn't it? Talking at enormous length about something that is delivered in much punchier form. That they can't possibly hope to reproduce. But it's also a reflection of the fascination of the broad theme of the civil rights movement. And how it impacts not just on America, but on, you know, on the West more broadly. But also the fascination of Martin Luther King as a character. And so we've focused very much on one speech. But I do think we should come back and do some episodes on his life and his career. Undoubtedly we will.

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And on the civil rights movement and other aspects of it.

We'll undoubtedly come back to this.

Well, on that bombshell, Tom, I think we should stroll off, down to look at some more memorials, more monuments.

It's an amazing place, Washington DC.

Steeped in history.

And we're going to go off and have a look around at the Washington Tourist Board of Listening.

We do take donations.

Available for hire.

Yeah, we are available for hire.

And on that.

Commercial.

Unduly, utterly inappropriate in Congress notes, which is absolutely what you expect from the rest of this history.

Goodbye, and we'll see you next time.

Goodbye.