

LBJ Calls for Racial Justice

This speech by President Lyndon Johnson (condensed here) was made in 1965 after a famous civil rights march at Selma, Alabama. The marchers wanted better protection of voting rights for blacks.

I speak tonight for the dignity of man and the destiny of democracy.

At times history and fate meet at a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama. There, long-suffering men and women peacefully protested the denial of their rights as Americans. Many were brutally assaulted. One good man, a man of God, was killed.

Many of the issues of civil rights are very complex. But about this there can be no argument. Every American citizen must have an equal right to vote. Yet the harsh fact is that in many places in this country men and women are kept from voting simply because they are Negroes.

The Negro citizen may go to register only to be told that the day is wrong, or the hour is late, or the official in charge is absent. He may be asked to recite the entire Constitution, or explain the most complex provisions of State law.

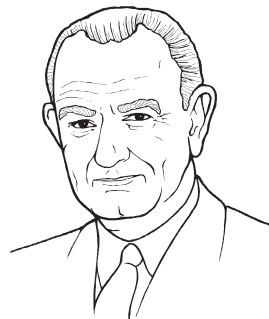
For the fact is that the only way to pass these barriers is to show a white skin.

Experience has clearly shown that the existing process of law cannot overcome systematic discrimination. Wednesday I will send to Congress a law designed to eliminate illegal barriers to the right to vote. This bill will strike down restrictions to voting in all elections – Federal, State, and local – which have been used to deny Negroes the right to vote.

But even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part

of a far larger movement. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life.

Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but really all of us, who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice.



As a man whose roots go deeply into Southern soil, I know how agonizing racial feelings are. But a century has passed, more than a hundred years, since the Negro was freed. And he is not fully free tonight.

A century has passed since the day of promise. And the promise is unkept.

The time of justice has now come, and I tell you that I believe sincerely that no force can hold it back. And when it does, I think that day will brighten the lives of every American.

For Negroes are not the only victims. How many white children have gone uneducated, how many white families have lived in stark poverty, because we have wasted our energy to maintain the barriers of hatred and terror?

This great, rich, restless country can offer opportunity and education and hope to all: black and white, North and South, sharecropper and city dweller. These are our enemies: poverty, ignorance, disease. They are the enemies and not our fellow man, not our neighbor.

Questions: *Why does President Johnson believe the federal government must step in to protect the voting rights of black citizens? What does he say is the larger issue, even beyond voting rights?*

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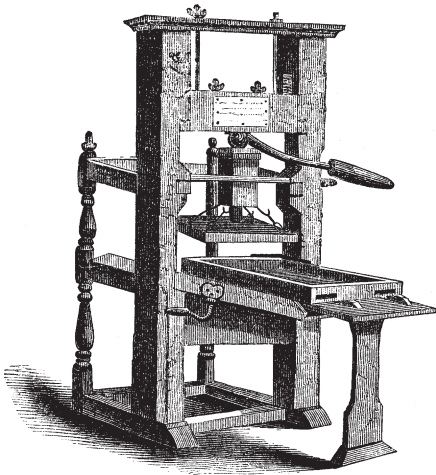
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