

Speech by Martin Luther King Jr. (drafted for planned delivery on Jul, 20, 1962):

Address delivered by Martin Luther King, Jr., President, Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, on the occasion of the Hall of Fame Dinner honoring Jackie Robinson, July 20, 1962, at The Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, New York City.

(Following formal beginning and acknowledgment of platform guests)

It is an honor to share the platform tonight with the distinguished Governor of New York State. As most of you are probably aware, both Governor Rockefeller and I come to this significant event by two different roads—from two different cities. Perhaps the only thing these two cities have in common is that they are both named Albany. Another thing is that they are both meaningful cities. Albany, New York, Mr. Rockefeller's bailiwick, is the capital of your great state. Albany, Georgia, within recent days, has become the focal point of the Negro freedom struggle in the reluctant South. I think the world is aware of how the two Albanies became linked a few days ago. For, the door had hardly slammed on the prison cells of Ralph Abernathy and myself before a powerful voice was heard from your state capital—the voice of Governor Rockefeller. Unlike many other well-intentioned friends of our struggle who set up a clamor for the physical freedom of two mere men, Governor Rockefeller probed clearly to the point of our crusade and asked the Federal Government to investigate an issue which is larger than any individual. That issue is whether or not the city of Albany, Georgia infringes upon the constitutional rights of Negro citizens with impunity. Governor Rockefeller demonstrates that he is head and shoulders higher in understanding than some others in the honored profession of politics.

Many sympathetic persons didn't realize that we had \$178 but we didn't have and don't yet have—in Albany, Georgia—human dignity. Money is not the price which will buy freedom there. The cost of freedom in Albany, Georgia, as the cost of freedom has been in every great arena of human rights—is sacrifice and more sacrifice, the willingness to demonstrate to the world that the Negro would rather be free in his soul and confront prison bars than to breathe the fragrant air of field or meadow and know within his heart that his personhood is not accepted in the human family.

But I did not come here this evening to speak of the civil rights struggle in the South, nor of the present situation in Albany, Georgia. I have come here tonight to say that The Southern Christian Leadership Conference is proud to have the opportunity to pay tribute to a great American—Jackie Robinson. Here, on the eve of his induction into the Baseball Hall of Fame, we are honored by the privilege of pausing one moment in time to speak with justifiable praise of a man who has

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become a legend and a symbol in his own time; to a man who has committed a rich legacy of confidence and hope held in escrow by destiny for unborn generations of black American babies who will be born into a newer dawn of freedom because Jackie Robinson challenged the dark skies of intolerance and frustration.

It seems particularly fitting that the latest battle in the hold war for freedom has its locate in the state of Georgia. Jackie Robinson was born in that state and the indomitable spirit which is characteristic of heroic Negro women of the South is the same stripe of courage and integrity which marks Mallie Robinson, Jackie's mother, who sits with us tonight. We are certain that the mother of our guest of honor is content in the realization that the vision she cherished was not nursed in vain. It was the vision of a woman, who, without help, had to bring a family out of the bleak shadows of the sharecropper's life into the sunlight of new opportunity in the Far West. This is Jackie Robinson's night, but he, himself, would be the first to tell you that you cannot declare a night in his honor without also honoring the two women who have been his inspiration and his strength; Mallie Robinson, his wonderful God-fearing mother, and Rachel Robinson, his wife, companion, his solace and full partner in moments of despair as well as moments of triumph.

This evening is one of triumph. For we have come together to join the great resources of your Northern culture to the deep determination of our Southern brother who wills to be free at daybreak tomorrow morning. As Governor Rockefeller set in motion the magic of the wireless to link two Albanies into a common problem, we of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference have linked ourselves to Jackie Robinson's magnanimity of purpose and unselfishness of heart in the quest for a greater unity among the Negro people and their white brothers in the search for full citizenship for all Americans.

It is not unusual that the glamor and the impact of Jackie Robinson should be directed at the search for this kind of unity. He stands astride two worlds with an amazing kind of dualism. They record books evidence that he has made indelible impressions in the annals of sports. In track, football, baseball and basketball, during his early career, he earned great respect as a natural athlete and fierce competitor. In baseball, in the major leagues of a sport which once denied Negro players a chance, he fashioned an enviable record, both as a player and more especially as a man. So, Jackie Robinson emerged victorious in the world of sports.

At the end of his sports career, Mr. William Black, a man with a deep social sensitivity and humanitarian instinct, offered Jackie Robinson a chance at the major leagues of business enterprise. Doubtless, there were may who regarded Jackie Robinson's entry into business as another gimmick, another publicity stunt, another trade of a big name for a big paycheck—a job which would merely window-dressing. These people were not aware that it is foreign to the nature of Jackie Robinson to be a figurehead. Wherever he goes or whatever he is doing, he cannot be used as window-dressing. The Georgia boy who surmounted tremendous odds to write his

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name in blazing letters in the skies of fame, settled down in an office in Manhattan's midtown and went to work to prove that Jackie Robinson, the man, not Jackie Robinson, the sports hero, deserved the confidence place in him. Today, he is not some super-salesman, embellished with the glitter of a famous name, some public relations representative resting on the laurels of former days and collecting the pensions of the past. Jackie Robinson is a vibrant, working, conscientious executive who so merited the approval of his associates that he has been made a director of his significant firm. And so, Jackie Robinson moves triumphantly in the world of business.

There are two other worlds. There is the world of the South from which Ralph Abernathy, Wyatt Tee Walker and I have just come; the South with its blatant and obvious abuse of the Negro—and there is the world of the North with its subtle and insidious conspiracy against the dignity of the Negro. Jackie Robinson stands astride these two worlds. I shall never forget reading of the rally this great American organized in the state of Mississippi to aid the magnificent work of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Through Jackie Robinson's efforts, heavyweight champion, Floyd Patterson was there. From California came another champion, Archie Moore. Curtis Floor, one of our great young athletes, was on hand. These luminaries of the sports world came together in the deep, deep South to give their moral witness to the urgency of the Freedom Struggle. Jackie Robinson was the catalytic agent which brought them together. On that occasion, Jackie Robinson replied, as he has on several occasions, to explain why he has involved himself so consistently in this fight for justice. Why anyone should ask that question may be beyond our comprehension. But there are those who do, pointing out to Mr. Robinson that it would seem that there is no need for him to concern himself about the problem, since he has "made" it in life. Mr. Robinson's reply is one of logic and dignity. He replies that he does not have it "made"—nor will he have it "made" until the humblest Negro citizen in Mississippi or Georgia or Louisiana—or even New York—has it "made" in terms of equal opportunity, justice, and equal protection before the law. This is why Jackie Robinson forgoes the serenity and comfort in which he might live—in the security of his position, in the comfort of his gracious home. He risks that security and that comfort to come back down the Jericho Roads of the Southern Struggle. Jackie Robinson has travelled the Deep South, to add his voice and stature and conviction to the struggle. And so, he stands astride the world of the South.

But one of the greatest contributions Jackie Robinson has made in the arena of human rights is his unclouded realization that not all the scars are Southern scars, not all the discomfort of ailing democracy is Southern discomfort. We cannot say we are against segregation in Birmingham and condone it in a hospital ward in Brooklyn. Time and again, Jackie Robinson has proven that he has no fear of becoming involved in issues no matter how delicate, when he believes justice is being undermined or human dignity assaulted. I need to recite to you all the instances in which the voice of Jackie Robinson has helped to crystallize the glaring truth that the Mason-Dixon Line is no boundary beyond which the only intolerance lies. Jackie Robinson has fought constantly to expose

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hypocrisy in Northern school systems, dishonesty and deprivation in Northern housing. He has constantly counselled a greater use of the ballot here where to take the short walk to the polling box does not involve jeopardy of life or limb or fortune. And so, Jackie Robinson stands astride the world of the North.

May I note here that right at this moment here in New York, we are witnessing dramatically the calibre [sic] of Jackie Robinson's stature. Not only can you tell the fibre [sic] of a man by the friends he has but also by the enemies he makes. Jackie Robinson believes so uncompromisingly in honesty that he speaks not only of the evils which misguided whites heap upon the Negro. He speaks also to the Negro about the evils he heaps upon himself or visits upon others. I tell you it was ammunition for us in Albany, Georgia, in the thick of the battle against intolerance, when we got the news that here in New York, Jackie Robinson had exercised the honesty, the courage and conviction to speak out against forces in Harlem which would seek to solve the ravaging fever of the black man's dilemma by rubbing upon it the vicious virus of anti-Semitism and religious and racial hatred. The Negro can never solve his problem with bitterness. The Negro can never win the victory with the weapons of defeat. Thank God for a Jackie Robinson who can stand his ground and say: "I have spoken what I believe to be the truth and I cannot retract the truth."

We know that a black supremacy is as evil as white supremacy and a black intolerance as bitterly wrong as white intolerance. So, Jackie Robinson stands tonight triumphantly, right-footed, sure-footed and calling the shots the only way he knows how to call them—as he sees them.

This passion for truth, this compulsion to stand up and be counted, counting not the cost, this determination to ally himself with the cry of the Negro—the Oliver Twist cry which rightfully asks for more of the porridge of democracy; these qualities have ranged powerful opposition against Jackie Robinson. But here is a man who recognizes that God offers to every mind its choice between truth and repose. It is up to every man to take whichever he pleases. He can never have both.

Jackie Robinson has chosen truth. The truth, within himself; truth of the calibre [sic] which led Eugene Debs to say: "While there is a lower class, I am in it. While there is a criminal class, I am of it. While there is a soul in prison, I am not free."

Three days from now, Jackie Robinson goes officially into the Baseball Hall of Fame. Superficially, that is why we are here. But truly, we are here because already historic truth has elected this man into that Hall of Fame which is as unperishable [sic] as God's truth; as select, distinguished company of humankind which will live gratefully in human memory; a company of those who lived not so much for their own self-glory as for the betterment of man; a company of which sons of oncoming generations will echo proudly in the words of John Ruskin: "See, this our fathers did for us."

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Jackie Robinson calls constantly to this nation to justify its claim to nationhood and world leadership. There should be a monument for him as there is one at Gettysburg, erected to honor the memory of a color-bearer who had become isolated from his regiment after a charge. The regiment retreated but the color-bearer remained in the thick of the battle with only a few men. The commander of the regiment sent a message through to the color-bearer. The command was: "Bring back the colors to the regiment."

The color-bearer sent a reply which epitomizes the urgent pleas of Jackie Robinson as he has been speaking to the conscient[sic] of America. The reply was: "Bring back the regiment to the colors."

There are those, Black and White, who have challenged the right of Jackie Robinson to ask these questions. He has the right. He has the right because he is a citizen. He has the right—more rightly—because back in the days when integration wasn't fashionable, he underwent the trauma and the humiliation and the loneliness which comes with being a pilgrim walking the lonesome byways towards the high road of Freedom. He was a sit-inner before sit-ins, a freedom rider before freedom rides.

And that is why we honor him tonight.

It is because he has been supplied to us by a Divine Providence which seems to have replied to the impassioned plea of a poet who wrote long ago:

"God give us men! A time like this demands it.
Strong men with pure hearts, steady hands;
Men, whom the lust of office cannot kill,
Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy
Men who possess opinions and will
Men who have honor and will not lie
Men who can stand before a demagogue and damn
his treacherous flattery without winking;
Tall men, sun-crowned,
Who live above the fog in public duty and private
thinking."

God has given us such a man in Jack Roosevelt Robinson.