

Speech on the Death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Robert F. Kennedy (April 4, 1968)

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Essay by John R. Bohrer (guest post)*



The speech is so memorable, in part, because it was extemporaneous. Indianapolis officials wanted Robert F. Kennedy to cancel an open-air campaign rally in a Black neighborhood after a then-unknown assailant shot and killed Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on a motel balcony in Memphis. Kennedy insisted upon speaking.

He arrived late, after dark, to a crowd waiting in a parking lot near some basketball courts. Word had already spread that King had been seriously wounded. Some, but not everyone, knew he was dead.

As Kennedy approached the back of the flatbed truck where he would speak, reporters noticed he was mouthing some words to himself. According to the “Boston Globe,” it appeared “almost as if he were saying a silent prayer.” Others, like friend Kenneth O’Donnell, believed that in moments like this one, Kennedy would talk to his late brother, President John F. Kennedy. It is also possible that he was merely imagining what he would say.

An aide drafted a speech, but Kennedy waved it away. Instead, he gripped a few handwritten fragments which he never appeared to refer to. Kennedy didn’t even know what the crowd knew. “Do they know about Martin Luther King?” he said once aboard the truck.

Kennedy spoke for about five minutes that night. He touched on feelings of anguish, the desire for revenge, learning through suffering, and what the country needed now--all from the heart. While Kennedy could never have known it, he had been gradually composing these remarks for years.

The Robert Kennedy of five years earlier could not have delivered the same speech. No one felt sympathy for him then, as he embodied nepotism and power. In 170 years of American democracy, a President’s blood relative had never held a top Cabinet post until 35-year-old Robert Kennedy went from his brother’s 1960 campaign manager to become Attorney General. At Justice, he had been a better investigator than an advocate.

Kennedy was cautiously for Dr. King’s movement, yet more consumed with averting catastrophe. He opened his office to Robert Drew’s film crew in their documentary, “Crisis: Behind a Presidential Commitment,” about the standoff at the University of Alabama in June 1963, burnishing a public image for the rule of law.

Privately, Robert Kennedy signed the order to surveil King on the suspicion of being a Communist dupe. The FBI subsequently collected moral blackmail, recording King having extramarital sex. Robert Kennedy irresponsibly shared this and other secretively obtained derogatory information about King with his sister-in-law, Jacqueline Kennedy, as she later recounted to historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

By 1968, Robert Kennedy had changed.

For a time, he was practically dumbstruck by JFK's assassination. He often spoke in halting sentences. Overwhelmed by sorrow, he sometimes openly cried during speeches or in interviews with reporters. As for his future, he was adrift. King saw it for himself, remarking to colleagues about the sadness in the silent Kennedy's blue eyes at the signing of the 1964 Civil Rights Act--a reminder of tragedy amid the triumph.

Without words, Kennedy had become the ambassador of grief.

The stunning news of King's April 4, 1968 murder layered a suddenly chaotic political scene. In the weeks prior, Robert Kennedy declared he would challenge his brother's 1960 running mate, President Lyndon Johnson, for the Democratic nomination. Johnson subsequently announced his withdrawal from the race, citing a need to focus on peace in Vietnam. The Indiana primary was one of the few contests to test the remaining candidates before the conventions.

Kennedy was only three weeks into his insurgent campaign, which built crowds in across the state that day, ending in Indianapolis. Against the warning of police who believed retaliatory violence would surely follow King's murder, Kennedy chose to speak to the rally, to mourn together, and--whether he consciously knew it or not--to lay bare what he had grappled with since his brother's murder.

"You can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge...", he said, "tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act against all white people. I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling."

Then, his mind went to something he learned in the wake of his own tragedy.

Shortly after JFK's death, Jacqueline gave Robert a book, Edith Hamilton's "The Greek Way," a popular interpretation of the ancient society, its government and culture. Kennedy devoured it, scribbling its passages in a journal and committing them to memory. One was Hamilton's translation of the poet Aeschylus:

God, whose law it is that he who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despite, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God.

Hamilton's interpretation employed the archaic use of "despite" to mean a persistent contempt or wound. Speaking in Indianapolis on the night of King's killing, Kennedy changed the word to "despair," to embody what he had felt in his own heart since 1963.

"It's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in," Kennedy said to the people of Indianapolis. "We can move in that direction as a country, in greater polarization... filled with hatred toward one another." But he reached toward a more hopeful path.

"What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness, but is love, and

wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.”

Kennedy himself had faced choice like this one when, in the summer of 1964, Lyndon Johnson effectively forced him out of his administration. Kennedy had to decide whether he would continue on in public life without his brother and face the voters on his own in a daunting new environment: a US Senate race in New York.

Kennedy chose the path away from bitterness. On September 2, 1964, his final day as Attorney General before resigning to run for the Senate, Kennedy thanked Justice Department staffers at a ceremony. “When I think of all the things that have happened since that snowy inauguration day in January [1960],” Kennedy said to them, “I like to think our role has been the one that is suggested in an old Greek saying: ‘To tame the savageness of man, make gentle the life of the world.’”

Kennedy would include that old Greek saying in his remarks on the night of King’s killing. Perhaps they could learn from them as he did.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.