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Museum Musings
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Remembering King Speak at K-State: Part 3

In January 1968, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to an audience of more than 7,000 at Kansas State University about "The Future of Integration." In this portion of his speech, he uttered his famous line, "A riot is the language of the unheard," explaining that despite his deeply held commitment to nonviolence, the "intolerable" conditions that people rioted against deserved equally vigorous condemnation. "Our nation's summers of riots," he said, "are caused by our nation's winters of delay."

"The economic, the housing, the educational problems have made for a great deal of bitterness. We have seen angry explosions of this bitterness in the form of violence over the last two or three summers.

"I need not give a long explanation or exposition of my position on the question of violence versus non-violence. I am still convinced that non-violence is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity. I am still convinced that violence creates many more social problems than it solves. And if the Negro in America succumbs to the temptation of using violence as his problematic strategy, unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness. And our chief legacy to the future will be an endless strain of meaningless chaos.

"So I will continue to raise my voice against violence, against riots, because they tend to intensify the fears of the white majority, while relieving their guilt. And we need a method that will somehow disarm the opponent, expose his moral defenses, and at the same time work on his conscience.

"But after saying this, I must say that it would be an act of moral irresponsibility for me to condemn riots and not be as vigorous in condemning the continued existence of intolerable conditions in our society, which cause people to feel so angry and bitter that they conclude they have no alternative to get attention by to engage in this kind of violence.

"What we must see is that a riot is the language of the unheard. And what is it that America has failed to hear? She has failed to hear that the plight of the Negro has worsened over the last few years. She has failed to hear the promises of freedom and equality that have not been met. America has failed to hear that large segments of white society are more concerned about tranquility and the status quo than about justice, humanity, and equality. And so it is still true that our nation's summers of riots are caused by our nation's winters of delay. As long as justice is postponed, we will be on the verge of social destruction.

"Now let me rush on the say that if we are to go the additional distance to make justice a reality, and truly integrated society a reality, we are going to have to do something about it. And may I remind you that the struggle now is much more difficult. Over the last ten or twelve years, we were struggling to end segregation and the syndrome of deprivation surrounding that system. Many people supported us in that struggle. They were honestly outraged when they saw the brutality that we faced from a [Sheriff] Jim Clark in Selma, or a Bull Connor in Birmingham. So out of a sense of decency they rose up and supported that struggle.

“Some of the people that have supported that struggle are not supporting it so well today. It really boils down to the fact that they were doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. T. S. Eliot says somewhere that there is no greater heresy than to do the right thing for the wrong reason. A lot of people supported us in Selma and Birmingham because they were against Bull Connor and they were against Jim Clark — and not because they were for genuine equality for the Black man. And the new era of the struggle is now a struggle for genuine equality.

“A lot of people supported us there in those struggles because it didn't cost the nation anything. It did not cost the nation one penny to integrate lunch counters. In fact, it helped the business community. It did not cost the nation one penny to guarantee the right to vote or to have access to public accommodation. And now we are dealing with problems that can only be solved by the nation providing billions of dollars to do it. Therefore, it is much easier to integrate a lunch counter than it is to eradicate slums. It is easier to guarantee the right to vote than it is to guarantee an annual income. And yet these are the better things that must be tackled.

“If the problem is to be solved in the days ahead, let me make some suggestions about things that I consider necessary. If we are going this additional distance, we are in dire need of a massive action program all over our country to get rid of the last vestiges of racism and its external effects. In short, the problem will not work itself out. We must continue to work at it with zeal and with determination.

“In order to develop the kind of action programs that I am thinking about, we must get rid of two or three myths that are still being disseminated around our society....”

Excerpts of King's speech will continue next week. For comments or questions, please contact GearyHistory@gmail.com, or call 785-238-1666. The museum is open to visitors Tuesday through Saturday, 1-4 p.m.