

EULOGY FOR MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

by Robert F. Kennedy

BACKGROUND

In 1968, Senator Robert F. Kennedy, the brother of the late President John F. Kennedy, was making his own run for the presidency. On April 4, he was campaigning in Indianapolis, Indiana, when he received news of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. As someone who also believed in equality, Kennedy was moved to deliver this eulogy (a speech that honors a person who has died) for the civil rights leader just hours after King's death.

I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight.

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort.

10 In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black—considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible—you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization—black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another. **A**

Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

A

LITERARY FOCUS

Do you think Kennedy is appealing more to **emotion** or to logic in the first three paragraphs? Provide details that support your answer.

A LITERARY FOCUS

Underline Kennedy's **anecdote**. What effect do you think it has on the listeners?

B QUICK CHECK

According to Kennedy, what is needed in the United States?



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For those of you who are black and are 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. I had a member of my family killed, but he
was killed by a white man. But we have to make an effort in the
United States, we have to make an effort to understand, to go
beyond these rather difficult times. **A**

My favorite poet was Aeschylus.¹ He wrote: "In our sleep,
pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until,
in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the
awful grace of God."

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 or lawlessness; but 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 they be black. **B**

So I shall ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer
for the family of Martin Luther King, that's true, but more
importantly to say a prayer for our own country, which all of us
love—a prayer for understanding and that compassion of which
I spoke.

1. **Aeschylus:** Greek poet who lived during the sixth century B.C.

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times; we've had difficult times in the past; we will have difficult times in the future. It is not the end of violence; it is not the end of lawlessness; it is not the end of disorder.

But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land. **C**

50 Let us dedicate ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago: to tame the savageness of man and make gentle the life of this world.

Let us dedicate ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people. **D**

C**VOCABULARY****Academic Vocabulary**

How does the speech make Kennedy's commitment to the civil rights movement *evident*, or obvious?

D**READING FOCUS**

Summarize Kennedy's speech in three sentences or less.
