COLLECTOR HAS MLK SPEECH, MINUS 'DREAM'

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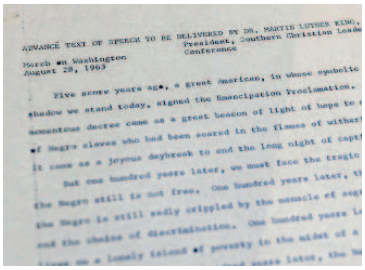
Rockland/Westchester Journal News
USA TODAY NETWORK

As the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday arrives, three mimeographed pages in a White Plains office building speak to the genius of the man and the moment for which he is likely best remembered, his "I Have a Dream" speech.

The pages are the advance text of the speech King delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the largest civil rights gathering of its time.

One of 20 known copies of the speech resides under glass in the offices of Seth Kaller, a dealer in historic documents and artifacts.

Here's where the genius comes in.



The first page from an original mimeograph of the advance text of Martin Luther King Jr's 1963 speech.
SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS

Nowhere on those pages distributed to the press covering the march do the words "I Have a Dream" appear.

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MLK speech

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King improvised his most famous lines as he looked out at the 250,000 people he had summoned to Washington on Aug. 28, 1963.

MLK's 'March' speech heavy with policy

King's speech was designed to be short, just four minutes, heavy with policy.

In it, King invoked the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution, the Bible and Shakespeare. He began with "Five score years ago," an echo of the Gettysburg Address to the date of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863.

It had been 100 years since Lincoln freed the slaves, he noted, but "the life of the Negro is still badly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination."

The civil rights leader's speech, even without "The Dream," did what Lincoln had done a century earlier at Gettysburg: It made a connection to the nation's founders in a moment of national crisis and urged Americans to live up to their founding principles.

The central idea of King's speech was that those founding documents were a promissory note that had come due.

"It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned," King said. "Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check, a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds.'"

King urged action — "the fierce urgency of now" — but urged his followers not to reciprocate the violence to which they had been subjected. It had been a bloody summer. Protesters had been beaten, set upon by police dogs and targeted by powerful streams from firehoses.

'He's damn good'

Still, they had come to the nation's capital in peace, to push for civil and economic rights for Blacks, Latinos and other marginalized groups.

People of all creeds and colors, from faith and civil rights groups and labor organizations, had come by car, bus and train. They had come to hear King and — although they were far from their houses of worship — they were ready to be taken to church.

They had heard Marian Anderson sing the national anthem, and speeches from student leader John L. Lewis and AFL-CIO Chairman Walter Reuther, from Whitney Young of the National Urban League and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP. Mahalia Jackson had sung.

King had never faced such a large crowd before, not to mention all three television networks simultaneously. With just a single paragraph remaining in his prepared remarks, King had already begun to send his crowd on its way.

Seth Kaller, a dealer in historic documents and artifacts, with an original mimeograph of the advance text of Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech to the March on Washington on Aug. 28, 1963. SETH HARRISON/THE JOURNAL NEWS

"Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to South Carolina, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our Northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed," he said. "Let us not wallow in the valley of despair."

The crowd gave him a sustained ovation. Then King pivoted to the soaring and familiar.

Mahalia Jackson, sitting to King's left in the crowd, shouted, "Tell them about the dream, Martin."

Then King strayed from his prepared text, and made history.

"I say to you today, my friends, though even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream," he began.

For 10 minutes, he held the crowd rapt, his oratory soaring to meet the moment, telling them of how things could be, of Black children and white children playing together, of his four children being judged "not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character."

He did not refer to his text again, but he did return to the final line on those pages, the line he knew by heart, the line that sent 250,000 pilgrims back to their cars, buses and trains satisfied: "Free at last, free at last; thank God almighty we are free at last."

Author: MLK 'knew how to read a room'

Jonathan Eig, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his 2023 biography, "King: A Life," said the pivot was classic King.

King had begun with a solid speech, Eig said, but likely not a speech that would have been remembered as one of his best.

"Then he decided really on the spur of the moment that he was going to preach and he just launched into this sermon. I think he just felt it. He felt the crowd. He felt that he hadn't moved them.

"His favorite place to be was in the pulpit, giving a stirring sermon," Eig said. "Speeches are what he would write when he wanted to deliver a specific sort of policy-oriented message. But this was a sermon meant to inspire people the way he would inspire people in a church, and I think it was just an emotional decision. It felt like the right thing to do at the time."

The Baptist preacher could tell when he was connecting with his congregation, and when he wasn't.

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