

***DR. KING'S LAST SPEECH: THE PROMISED LAND  
AND THE RULE OF LAW***

**Many thanks for inviting me here to talk with you today. I would like to talk about the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King's last speech, delivered 40 years ago tonight, on April 3, 1968. Some of us here are old enough to remember the fateful year of 1968 – and I am one of them; I turned 13 years of age in October of that year. It is, for most of us, a very bad memory indeed; I remember it as a year that kept getting worse and worse as the months rolled on.**

**Strangely enough, it was a year that started pretty well and ended pretty well. January of that year began a period later named the Prague Spring, in which it looked as if Czechoslovakia might be able to get itself out from under the grinding boot of the Soviet Union. And in December of that year, specifically on Christmas Eve, Apollo 8 became the first earth-launched vehicle to orbit the moon – an essential mission that allowed the first moon landing the following year.**

**But the bulk of that year seemed like hell. It was the year of Robert Kennedy's assassination – in the**

**Ambassador Hotel, within one mile of my home in Los Angeles. It was the year that Soviet tanks crushed Prague Spring. It was the year of the so-called Tet Offensive against American and allied forces in Vietnam by the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong, and even though it ultimately resulted in a major military victory for the United States and its allies, and a corresponding crushing defeat for the enemy, nonetheless it caused great demoralization among Americans because we'd always been told that the Communists were weak and couldn't maintain any sustained attack. 1968 was that year of what Norman Mailer called "The Siege of Chicago," during the Democratic National Convention in the summer. And, of course, it was the year of the murder of Dr. King in Memphis, Tennessee, within 24 hours of his delivery of his last speech.**

**Martin Luther King was in Memphis in April as part of his ongoing support for city sanitation workers, who had been on strike since February. Almost all the city sanitation workers were black, and they not only were poorly-paid but they were also denied benefits that other city employees received, such as medical insurance and overtime pay. Dr. King had been in Memphis the previous week when a march turned into a mess through the fault of others, and he returned to set things right. He arrived on Wednesday afternoon, the third of April, and he checked into the Lorraine Motel, a black-owned establishment where he had stayed before, and where he would be shot and killed the following day.**

**Dr. King was tired upon his arrival and wanted to rest, and besides that a storm was starting. A meeting had been set for strikers and their supporters that evening at the Mason Hall, but Dr. King's associate Ralph David Abernathy went there to speak.**

**There were two thousand people there. I'm sure they all liked Abernathy just fine, but they had braved the elements to get there and they wanted to hear from Martin Luther King, not Ralph David Abernathy, and the crowd let him know it. Abernathy called King at the motel and pleaded with him to come to the Mason Hall. King came over and gave what has come to be known as the "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech.**

**Most people, if asked about Dr. King's greatest speech, would probably say it was "I Have a Dream," delivered at the Lincoln Memorial in August of 1963. And without taking away anything from that speech, in my opinion his greatest speech was his last one. It wasn't great because anything it said was *new*. An accomplished preacher and orator such as Martin Luther King would always have had a number of speeches or sermons more or less memorized and ready to deliver at a moment's notice. His "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech contains many passages that he'd delivered before. Even the final paragraph, the one everyone remembers who knows anything about the speech, had been given in somewhat different form before.**

**And yet: Perhaps it was the urgency with which he spoke on April 3<sup>rd</sup>. Although he was definitely tired when he started his speech – as you can tell by listening to the recordings – he seemed to gain energy as he spoke. Perhaps also it was the influence of the storm raging outside, which you can still hear on the recordings that speech. Perhaps it was because he had foreknowledge of what would happen the next day. And perhaps it is *our* knowledge after the fact of his murder the next day that makes his final words so powerful to us now.**

**Near the end of the speech Dr. King talked about how he had almost died when he'd been stabbed in New York by someone he called “a demented black woman.” He talked about how his plane from Atlanta had been delayed because the pilot wanted to make sure that all the bags were carefully checked, presumably to look for bombs in the luggage. This is how King finished:**

*And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?*

*Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop.*

*And I don't mind.*

*Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!*

*And so I'm happy, tonight.*

*I'm not worried about anything.*

*I'm not fearing any man!*

*Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord!!*

Now it's worth asking who the "people" were that Dr. King said would get to "the promised land". I think he had more than one group in mind. A speaker as accomplished as Dr. King could use one *word* to refer to more than one *thing*.

First, he was talking about the people he was talking to. The strikers and their families were the ones who were suffering. They were the ones going without. They were the ones who couldn't pay the rent. They were the ones whose futures were in grave doubt. Dr. King was telling them that they would be rewarded for their pains.

Second, more broadly, as a civil rights leader, King was talking about, and to, the people of black America. The *Promised Land*, the land flowing with milk and

**honey, was promised to the children of Israel as a reward for their generations of bondage in slavery and their wanderings in the wilderness. It was Moses, the one who had led the Israelites out of Egyptian slavery, who had been allowed to go up to the mountaintop to see the promised land. Moses, the leader of a population of former slaves, was the one who had not been able to reach the Promised Land. The references would not have been lost among an African American audience.**

**Third, and even more broadly still, I believe that King was talking to and about all of the American people. That's not just guesswork, and it's not based simply on the quotation from *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. "We, as a people, will get to the promised land." "We, as a people..." What does that sound like? And if you actually listen to the speech, you hear King emphasize the word "We" and the word "People". Americans are familiar with this. Didn't we once have to memorize something like this?**

***WE THE PEOPLE of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this CONSTITUTION for the United States of America.***

**That's the promise, which is the promise of a land governed by the rule of law applied alike to all the people. The Promised Land is not one actually flowing with literal milk and literal honey. The Promised Land**

**is one which establishes Justice, ensures Tranquility, provides for Defense, promotes general Welfare, and secures Liberty to all of us and to those who come after us. The promises in the Preamble to the Constitution are the promises extended to those who live in a land governed by the rule of law. The Promised Land is the place we live in when the benefits of the rule of law are granted to all Americans.**

**In these days of Power Point presentations, we sometimes expect speakers to give us discussion issues, often in three parts apiece, sometimes with multiple subparts, and to set forth Life Lessons and Action Plans. Such Power Pointers sometimes ask us, “How can we cash all of this in?”**

**Well, I don’t have any of that. What I can suggest to you is this: that memories are worth having, and worth keeping. In this country we often commemorate important historical events by establishing holidays in their honor. Sometimes the events are happy ones, such as those of July 4, 1776, which resulted in Independence Day, and of November 11, 1918, which resulted in Armistice Day, as originally named, but now known as Veterans Day. Sometimes the days we remember are less than happy, such as December 7, 1941, and September 11, 2001. Such days, for good or bad, help make us what we are. Important anniversaries should not pass by unnoticed.**

**One other thing for us to consider involves something that most professional historians don’t like,**

**and that is what they call “counter-factual history” – that is, what would have happened if the historical facts as we know them were changed. What would have happened if John Wilkes Booth’s derringer had malfunctioned at Ford’s Theater on April 14, 1865? What would have happened if the Japanese attack force had been called off just before reaching Pearl Harbor? But just because professional historians hate to engage in counter-factual history, that’s no reason for the rest of us not to think about these things. What would have happened if the sniper had missed, and if Martin Luther King had not been shot on April 4, 1968? Certainly the riots that erupted shortly after his assassination and continued for several days all across America would not have happened. Then again, if he hadn’t been murdered on April 4, 1968, perhaps he would have been killed a week later. Or a month later. Or a year later. But if he hadn’t been killed 40 years ago, and if he were still alive today at 79 years of age, wouldn’t much of the civil strife and discord in American during the rest of 1968 and beyond have been avoided?**

**Counter-factual history, though the historians may have contempt for it, helps us recognize what we value. Or, as in the case of the murder of Dr. King, what we lost.**