

Famous Speeches: Robert Kennedy on the Assassination of MLK Jr.

By Robert F. Kennedy, adapted by Newsela staff on 04.15.16

Word Count **747**



Robert Kennedy with Martin Luther King, Jr., June 22, 1963, Washington, D.C. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Editor's Note: On April 4, 1968, Senator Robert Kennedy was on the campaign trail in Indianapolis, Indiana. He wanted to be the Democratic Party's candidate to run for president. He was told that civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated that day in Memphis, Tennessee. Senator Kennedy had been set to give a campaign speech to a group of mostly African-American voters. He decided to skip his prepared speech. Instead, he chose to say what was on his mind without any preparation or notes. He spoke while standing on the back of a flatbed truck.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I'm only going to talk to you just for a minute or so this evening. Could you lower those signs, please? I have some very sad news for all of you. I think it is sad news for all of our fellow citizens. It is sad for people who love peace all over the world. The news is that Martin Luther King was shot. He was killed tonight in Memphis, Tennessee.

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that work. This is a difficult day, and a difficult time for the United States. It might be a good idea to ask what kind of a nation we are. We should ask what direction we want to move in. There is evidence that white people were responsible for Dr.

King being killed. For those of you who are black, you could be filled with bitterness because of this. You could be filled with hate, you could be bitter, and you could want revenge.

We can move in that direction as a country. We can move toward the country being more divided. We could move toward black people staying amongst blacks, and white people staying amongst whites. The two groups could be filled with hate toward one another. Or we can try, as Martin Luther King did, to understand. We can replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand. We could have kindness and love instead.

Those of you who are black might be tempted to be filled with hate for white people. You might not trust all white people because of the injustice of such an act. I would say this to you. I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. Someone in my family was killed. He was killed by a white man, too.

But we have to try in the United States. We have to try to understand, to get beyond, or go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poem, or my favorite poet was Aeschylus. And he once wrote:

"Even 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 to be divided. What we need in the United States is not hate. What we need in the United States is not physical attacks and lawlessness. We need love and wisdom. We need kindness toward one another. We need to have fair treatment under the law for those who still suffer within our country. The same fairness must be there whether they are white or black.

So I ask you tonight to return home, and say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King. But more importantly, say a prayer for our own country, which all of us love. You should pray for the understanding and kindness of which I spoke.

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times. We have 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 most white people and most black people in this country want to live together. They want to improve our lives. They want fairness for all human beings that live in our land.

And let's devote ourselves to what the Greeks wrote so many years ago. They wanted to tame the savageness of man and make the life of this world more gentle. Let us devote ourselves to that, and say a prayer for our country and for our people.

Thank you very much.