

King "practiced" his "I Have a Dream" speech in North Carolina

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In this Aug. 28, 1963, photo, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, gestures during his "I Have a Dream" speech as he addresses thousands of civil rights supporters gathered in Washington, D.C. AP Photo

RALEIGH, N.C. — Before the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous "I Have a Dream" speech to hundreds of thousands of people in Washington, D.C., in 1963, he practiced his message in front of a much smaller crowd in North Carolina.

Reporters had covered King's 55-minute speech, which was delivered and recorded at a high school gymnasium in Rocky Mount on Nov. 27, 1962. But until recently, the tape wasn't known to exist. That all changed when English professor Jason Miller found an aging reel-to-reel tape in a town library. Miller played it in public for the first time Aug. 11 at North Carolina State University.

"It is part civil rights address. It is part mass meeting. And it has the spirit of a sermon," Miller said. "And I never before heard Dr. King combine all those genres into one particular moment."

King used the phrase "I have a dream" eight times in his address to about 2,000 people at Booker T. Washington High School in Rocky Mount, eight months before electrifying the nation with the same words at the March on Washington. He was fine-tuning elements of the speech before he took it to the nation's capital.

"The Message Of A Movement"

There are some changes in the language he used in Rocky Mount compared to Washington, D.C. King referred to "the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners," saying he dreamed they would "meet at the table of brotherhood." On the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, King changed that phrase to "sit down together at the table of brotherhood." But there are important similarities, including "Let Freedom Ring," which served as his rallying cry in both speeches.

"It's not so much the message of a man," said the Rev. William Barber, president of the state chapter of the NAACP. "It's the message of a movement, which is why he kept delivering it. It proves once again that the 'I have a dream' portion was not a good climax to a speech for mere applause, but an enduring call to hopeful resistance and a nonviolent challenge to injustice."

Miller, an academic, discovered the recording while researching "Origins of the Dream," his book exploring similarities between King's speeches and the poetry of Langston Hughes. The climax of his research came after reading a historic newspaper story about the speech in the state's archives. If there's a transcript, then there must be a recording, he thought.

His journey to track down the recording wasn't easy and included emails and calls to other historians. He eventually heard back in the fall of 2013 from the Braswell Public Library in Rocky Mount, where staff said a box with the recording had mysteriously appeared on a desk one day. Handwriting on the box described it as a recording of King's speech with a note that said "please do not erase."

Historians Suspect King Improvised

Before listening to the recording, Miller confirmed that the 1.5-millimeter acetate reel-to-reel tape could be played safely. He brought it to an audio expert in Philadelphia who set it as close to its original levels as he could. The expert, whose clients include the Library of Congress, digitized the tape, which made it easier to hear and transport.

After comparing the Rocky Mount recording to the script King used for his Washington speech, Miller concluded that the practice run paid off: the dream section of the speech was not in typewritten notes for the Washington remarks. Historians suspect King improvised that part in Washington, having practiced it and become comfortable with the

language in the Booker T. Washington High School gymnasium. Historians say the singer Mahalia Jackson shouted "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" as he reached a slow point in his prepared text. When he improvised on the spot, he lit up the audience.

Three people who were in the audience that day in 1962 listened again as the recording was played at the university's James B. Hunt Library. Herbert Tillman, who was about 17 years old at the time, recalled how happy the crowd was to see and hear such an inspiring leader.

"Everybody was attentive to what he had to say," Tillman said. "And the words that he brought to Rocky Mount were words of encouragement that we really needed in Rocky Mount at that time."

An Inspiration Then, An Inspiration Now

Barber, from the NAACP, said this newly available recording of King's earlier speech — urging blacks to focus on voting rights and peacefully but forcefully push for change — is just as inspiring today.

"Make no mistake. This kind of oratory is dangerous," Barber said, "especially for those who want to go back, especially for those who want the status quo because this kind of oratory can loose the captive and set people free to stand up and fight for their own freedom."

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence shows that King was planning what to say in his speech at Washington, D.C.?
- (A) He was fine-tuning elements of the speech before he took it to the nation's capital.
 - (B) But there are important similarities, including "Let Freedom Ring," which served as his rallying cry in both speeches.
 - (C) Historians say the singer Mahalia Jackson shouted "Tell them about the dream, Martin!" as he reached a slow point in his prepared text.
 - (D) Herbert Tillman, who was about 17 years old at the time, recalled how happy the crowd was to see and hear such an inspiring leader.

- 2 Read this paragraph from the section "An Inspiration Then, An Inspiration Now."

"Make no mistake. This kind of oratory is dangerous," Barber said, "especially for those who want to go back, especially for those who want the status quo because this kind of oratory can loose the captive and set people free to stand up and fight for their own freedom."

Which of the following BEST defines "status quo" as it is used above?

- (A) a dream for the future
 - (B) the way things used to be
 - (C) a plan for the next generation
 - (D) the way things are usually done
- 3 Read this sentence from the fourth paragraph.

King used the phrase "I have a dream" eight times in his address to about 2,000 people at Booker T. Washington High School in Rocky Mount, eight months before electrifying the nation with the same words at the March on Washington.

Which of these words is CLOSEST in meaning to "electrifying" in the sentence above?

- (A) inspiring
- (B) upsetting
- (C) shocking
- (D) energizing

- 4 Read these sentences from the section "Historians Suspect King Improvised."

After comparing the Rocky Mount recording to the script King used for his Washington speech, Miller concluded that the practice run paid off: the dream section of the speech was not in typewritten notes for the Washington remarks. Historians suspect King improvised that part in Washington, having practiced it and become comfortable with the language in the Booker high school gymnasium.

Which conclusion is supported by this selection?

- (A) King knew he would make the dream a big part of his Washington speech a long time ahead of it.
- (B) King did not practice the dream section of the speech between the speeches at Rocky Mount and Washington.
- (C) King usually improvised in his speeches, using typewritten notes only some of the time.
- (D) King didn't want to use the dream section of the speech in Washington because he had used it so often before.