

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

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

Word Count **711**



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

Editor's Note: On April 4, 1968, Senator Robert Kennedy was on the campaign trail in Indianapolis, Indiana. He was seeking the Democratic nomination for president. He received word that civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. had been assassinated that day in Memphis, Tennessee. Senator Kennedy had been set to deliver a campaign speech to a mostly African-American audience. He decided to skip his prepared speech. Instead, he delivered improvised remarks, speaking from 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, because I have some -- some very sad news for all of you. 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, and people who love peace all over the world. Martin Luther King was shot and 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 effort. In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are. We should ask what direction

we want to move in. For those of you who are black, considering the evidence evidently is that there were white people who were responsible, you can be filled with bitterness, and with hate, and a desire for revenge.

We can move in that direction as a country. We can move toward greater division -- black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, 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, compassion and love.

For those of you who are black and are tempted to fill with, to be filled with hate and lack of trust because of the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I would only say this. I can also feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, and 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 get beyond, or go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poem — 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 division. What we need in the United States is not hate. What we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness. What we need is love, and wisdom, and kindness toward one another. We need a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.

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

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times. We've had difficult times in the past, but we, and 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. They want to improve the quality of our life. They want justice for all human beings that abide in our land.

And let's 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.

Thank you very much.

Quiz

- 1 Which sentence from the speech MOST clearly reveals what Kennedy believes about United States citizens?
- (A) I think it is sad news for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world.
 - (B) In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are.
 - (C) We can move toward greater division -- black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another.
 - (D) But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together.
- 2 Read the sentence from the second paragraph of the speech.

For those of you who are black, considering the evidence evidently is that there were white people who were responsible, you can be filled with bitterness, and with hate, and a desire for revenge.

What is the effect of the word "evidently" on the sentence above?

- (A) Kennedy strongly believes that white people were responsible for King's death.
- (B) Kennedy is personally searching for proof that white people were responsible for King's death.
- (C) It is unlikely that white people were actually responsible for King's death.
- (D) It is not yet fully clear whether white people were responsible for King's death.

3 Based on the speech, Kennedy believes that there is an urgent need for change in the country.

Which selection best shows this idea?

- (A) We can move in that direction as a country. We can move toward greater division -- black people amongst blacks, and white amongst whites, filled with hatred toward one another.
- (B) But we have to make an effort in the United States. We have to make an effort to understand, to get beyond, or go beyond these rather difficult times.
- (C) 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.
- (D) So I ask you tonight to return home, to say a prayer for the family of Martin Luther King, yeah, it's true.

4 Read the paragraph from the article.

What we need in the United States is not division. What we need in the United States is not hate. What we need in the United States is not violence and lawlessness. What we need is love, and wisdom, and kindness toward one another. We need a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.

Kennedy repeats the phrase "we need" throughout the excerpt above. Why does Kennedy repeat this phrase?

- (A) to show that change must happen immediately
- (B) to explain the best way to achieve justice
- (C) to highlight the most important problems in the country
- (D) to inform his audience about recent events