

“A FRESH LOOK AT RACE RELATIONS”



“A Fresh Look at Race Relations”

Introduction

In 1954, nearly a century after the formal abolition of slavery in the United States, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, one of the most important Supreme Court decisions in US history, declared that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. The decision partially overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which in 1896 established the “separate but equal” doctrine. Under the doctrine, segregated facilities for black and white Americans were legal if they offered services of the same or comparable quality. In reality, *Plessy v. Ferguson* confirmed the long-standing practice of discrimination against black Americans. It argued that while the US Constitution protected equal political and civil rights for black and white Americans, it did not ensure equal “social rights.”

Organized efforts to overturn *Plessy v. Ferguson* began already in the early 20th century. Civil rights activists and lawyers fought to dismantle the legal system of segregation in the United States step by step. In 1951, Oliver Brown, a black father from Kansas, joined that legal struggle. Brown wanted to enroll his daughter in a white public school that was closest to their home in Topeka, Kansas. When the school refused to enroll Brown’s daughter and Brown lost his case in lower courts, he and other local black families, who joined the case, filed a class-action lawsuit in US federal court against the Topeka Board of Education. The plaintiffs argued that Topeka’s racial segregation violated the Constitution’s Equal Protection Clause because the city’s black and white schools were never equal. When *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was heard before the Supreme Court, it was one of five cases filed to fight segregation in public schools. The name of the case became the name of the five combined cases. In a unanimous decision (9-0), the Supreme Court agreed that the racial segregation of children in public schools violated the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment.

The Supreme Court decision was a momentous victory for civil rights activists and all black Americans. Simultaneously, many white Americans, particularly in the South, were outraged and ready to block integration efforts. The battle for equal and just access to education was far from over. It was now also additionally complicated by the Supreme Court’s choice not to provide any specific guidelines on when and how desegregation of public education should take place. In this activity, you will examine a speech, in which a white man reflects on the state of racial relations five years after *Brown v. Board of Education*.

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A Fresh Look at Race Relations Address by Hon. Chester Bowles of Connecticut

EXTENSION OF REMARKS
OF

HON. RICHARD BOLLING

OF MISSOURI

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, June 22, 1959

Mr. BOLLING. Mr. Speaker, the speech which follows is one of the finest speeches I have ever seen. No doubt it will annoy many people because it does not oversimplify the terribly difficult problem of race relations. But the thoughts it contains and the approach it takes deserve the prayerful consideration of every man of good will in the United States. In my opinion through this speech our able colleague from Connecticut, the Honorable CHESTER BOWLES, has performed still another great service to the Nation.

WELFARE IN A WORLD PERSPECTIVE: A FRESH
LOOK AT RACE RELATIONS

(Remarks by the Honorable CHESTER BOWLES at the Annual Health, Welfare, and Recreation Conference of the Health and Welfare Council, Hotel Statler, Washington, D.C., Friday, May 22, 1959)

Mr. Morgan, Mr. Tribble, Mr. Aiello, delegates to the annual Health, Welfare, and Recreation Conference, no invitation I have had since I returned to Washington in January has been more welcome or challenging than this opportunity to speak to you today.

Those of us who temporarily occupy one position or another in public life—particularly those of us who call ourselves legislators—often come to think in legal, statistical, overgeneralized terms.

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It is refreshing to be once more in the midst of people representing nearly 200 agencies who are spending their time and talents day after day in helping to solve the practical problems of the 2 million people who live in our National Capital area.

With considerable hesitation, I have decided to take this occasion to discuss our most critical and embittering social problem—race relations.

This week is a particularly good time to take stock. Five years ago last Sunday our Supreme Court ruled that color alone could no longer bar any child from a public school.

It was a momentous occasion and we all felt it. Those who had long favored desegregation thought the struggle had been won. And most of those who opposed it assumed that the only question left unanswered was the timing and the technique. The fact itself was accepted by the vast majority of Americans—north, east, south, and west.

Since then, more than one-fourth of the bi-racial school districts in the 17 southern and border States which officially practiced school segregation have been nominally desegregated, usually in a quiet and healthy manner which has escaped the headlines. In this connection the record of the District of Columbia, which so many of you helped to write, has been historic.

But these 5 years also have been scarred with smoldering resentments, defiance of court orders, and outbreaks of violence.

These expressions of racial conflict have not been limited to our Southern States. Nor are they symbolized merely by a deserted school in Little Rock.

On the contrary, the attempted bombing of an integrated high school in Hobbs, N. Mex., a white mob stoning a Negro home in Levittown, Pa., an outburst of racial gang

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war in Chicago—these are signs to give pause to all the participants in America's racial conflict.

In 1954 the Nation as a whole underestimated the significance and meaning of the Supreme Court's decision. Since then we have tragically missed opportunities for constructive action.

After several years of optimism and complacency it is now clear that integration is a bigger, more stubborn, more universal, and more important problem than many of us imagined. We know now that racial differences and discrimination go deeper than Supreme Court decisions, not to mention paratroopers, can reach.

All of us, North and South, Negro and white, need to think anew.

Where and how do we go from here?

For we must go on in fulfilling the promises of the Constitution and of our national conscience. We can pause for reappraisal, but we cannot stop or go back.

The problem is full of agony and, as in most great issues, no one side has a monopoly of truth. Each has its points which must be considered with both humility and tolerance. All of us need to be awakened from our dogmatism and from our clichés.

My remarks today will undoubtedly disappoint those who have taken extreme positions in this controversy. Yet my approach inevitably reflects my personal experience—as a longtime friend of the South, as a former Governor of a northern industrial State, as a former Administrator of a large Federal agency in the turmoil of wartime Washington, and as U.S. Ambassador to India, where I saw our difficulties as the dark-skinned two-thirds of the world see them.

I offer my views not as solutions, but as guidelines to the kind of national discussion which I think is long overdue.

1. We must recognize the problem of discrimination as a national, not a sectional one.

Half of all American Negroes now live in the North. There is now no northern city without its tensions and its shame.

Yet many northerners still smugly look at racial discrimination as a sectional problem. Thus they condemn what they consider to be the slow pace of integration in the South,

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while remaining indifferent or nearly so to the discrimination all around them.

There are 39 States outside the South. Only 19 have established Fair Employment Practices Commissions. In the other non-Southern States, there has been no legislative action on employment discrimination at all.

Since 1949, when we in Connecticut first authorized our State Commission on Civil Rights to prevent discrimination in publicly owned housing, there has been some progress elsewhere. Yet today only nine States outside the South have adopted antidiscrimination legislation affecting publicly assisted housing. In 30 other non-Southern States, no official action to end housing discrimination has occurred.

The great northern and western industrial cities are all drawing Negroes out of the South, and are all faced with the demoralization of city slum life that goes beyond race.

There are five times as many Negroes in Chicago as in Birmingham, four times as many in Detroit as in New Orleans, six times as many in Los Angeles as in Miami.

In most northern cities the professed equal protection of the laws still hides extensive segregation in fact—by residential exclusion, and by the natural selection of poverty. In few of our major northern cities do more than 20 percent of the Negro students attend school with white children.

To be sure, some cities such as New Haven, Pittsburgh, and Washington are now taking far-reaching steps to rebuild themselves, including the slum clearance and human rehabilitation essential to the solution of racial conflicts.

Yet almost any northern community that honestly examines its own racial relations will realize how far it is from living up to its professed ideals. And once we see what is missing in our own cities and States, we will be less inclined to feel that it is enough to denounce the foolhardy actions of white extremists south of the Mason-Dixon line.

Nothing will speak more persuasively to the South than a better example among the too-ready critics farther North.

2. The Constitution as interpreted by the Supreme Court will ultimately prevail.

The Constitution, after all, is color-blind. The 14th amendment does require the end of racial discrimination in all parts of our

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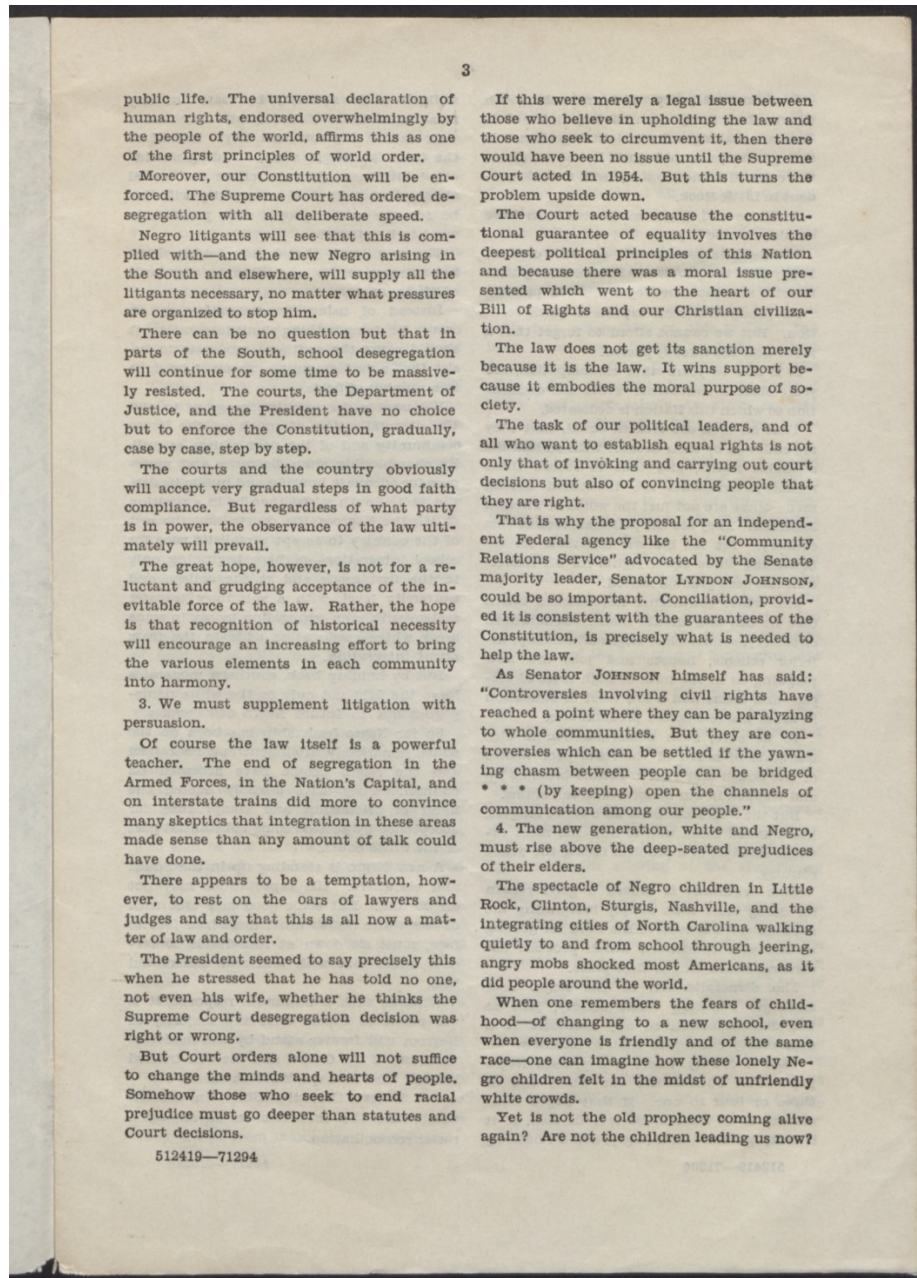
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In almost every city and town in the South where school integration has begun, the children are making out all right together. "If the grownups would just leave us alone, there would be no trouble," said a white student in Little Rock.

5. White and Negro moderates both have an historic role to play.

Many white southerners are still content to say that the problem will take a long time to solve and that the Negro must be patient.

No thoughtful man expects a quick solution. But we cannot afford to forget that a lot of time has already passed.

It is now 96 years since emancipation, 183 years since a southerner wrote the declaration to which this Nation is dedicated.

That all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, and that to secure these rights governments are instituted among men—these are not just the words of Thomas Jefferson. They are the political creed of this country. Yet the historic timetable for establishing these equal rights for all Americans has been gradual indeed.

The white southerner nevertheless has a case he can and should make. Generations of slavery, second-class Negro citizenship, inferior schools, houses and jobs are now plaguing us in the form of high rates of disease and crime and a low level of education in areas where Negroes predominate.

To be sure, such demoralization is also the state of much of the rural poor whites of the South and Puerto Ricans brought up and trapped in our congested urban slums.

But the Negro has been an outcast longest, has suffered most, and is now the most extreme example of a problem facing the whole country.

This argument is indeed a good reason for doing more than simply integrating the schools. It underscores the need for getting at the very conditions which produce the demoralization in the first place.

The demoralization of the Negro does endanger southern white society, just as the demoralization of any members of a community endangers that community.

Take a county where a depressed Negro population outnumbers the white two or three or four to one. If that Negro community is ill housed, ill fed, ill clad, if it is sick, ignorant, and angry, can a relatively

well-off white minority be "safe" in any meaningful sense of the word?

Or take a big southern city. If half of the town is a Negro slum, breeding uneducated bitterness, juvenile crime and racial violence, what kind of community will this be for the white people who pretend to want to live there?

The new South that is now taking shape has no room for low and inhuman standards of life for anyone.

Instead of using demoralization as an excuse for doing nothing about integration, it should cause the southern moderate to insist that a vast amount more must be done in a number of fields.

We need a far-reaching program to end the demoralization of much of the Negro community and of the poor whites as well. By championing slum clearance and measures for adequate housing and public health, the white South might then be in a position to ask the Negroes, the courts, and the rest of the country to accept a realistic pace for school integration—perhaps beginning only in the first grade and at the college and university level, with a voluntary transfer system with even segregation by sex in some areas where coeducation adds to the fears about integration.

But by holding back, southern moderates leave the field not only to the white demagogues but to future Negro demagogues.

So far Negro leadership has been on the whole remarkably intelligent and restrained and the Negro people have accepted its counsel. They have steadily offered the hand of friendship and compromise for acceptance by at least some substantial part of the white South.

A new Negro is standing up in the South and elsewhere. His expectations may not all be met. But some good and true men of the white South must meet him face to face, must sit down at roundtable conference, must talk with him and understand him.

Without such a minimum response, it is too much to expect that the majority of Negroes will forever stand by the moderate ministers of the Gospel and the well-trained lawyers who now speak for them.

6. I believe that the Christian Church must take the initiative in advancing a racial reconciliation.

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Let's face it: In many churches in America, a minister who goes against the prevailing sentiment of his congregation risks his job as much as the politician who alienates his constituents.

But from the beginning of the Christian era, it has been the church's duty to prevail against erroneous opinions, even at the price of martyrdom. Surely the church today should be the last citadel against the public relations approach that has infected so much of American life.

Many bishops and ministers in the South have spoken against violence and in favor of law and order. But is this enough?

There will be violence, and the law will be frustrated, unless the two sides in the racial conflict now splitting every southern community begin to communicate again with each other, to negotiate, to reason together, to find common remedies.

Is this not the time for the white and Negro ministers of every southern community to form a continuing roundtable conference dedicated to finding Christian solutions to the racial problems of their community?

For, after all, no country should be in a better position than the United States of America to solve this problem this way. Not only do we have nearly two centuries of democratic experience behind us, but the racial groups in this country, particularly in the South, have the great good fortune and blessing to share the identical Christian faith.

It is no coincidence that it was a white minister in the South, perhaps the most fervently religious section of our country, who said of the integration crisis: "There's just one question to ask: what would Christ do?"

In our hearts we know the final answer. We know that Christ came to demonstrate the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man. We know we are our brother's keeper.

We know too that we have done those things which we ought not to have done and left undone those things we ought to have done.

We know that the pride of race, the fear of the strange and the different is one of man's original sins and that it has not been fully erased from man's mind anywhere.

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But we also know, as Lincoln said, that the Declaration of Independence "gave liberty not alone to the people of this country, but hope to all the world. It gave promise that in due time the weights would be lifted from the shoulders of all men, and that all should have an equal chance."

Our religious and democratic faith tells us to get on with this job like men.

7. Our capacity to deal with discrimination in America is a measure of our capacity to lead a worldwide revolution for freedom.

My own perspective on this problem has been, I confess, affected by looking at it for some time from the other side of the globe. As a former Ambassador to India, I know how spectacularly American prestige rose as a result of the Supreme Court desegregation decision.

While touring Africa 4 years ago I sensed against how vital a successful solution of our racial troubles is for our future relationship with the two-thirds of the world's people who are colored.

In the winter of 1957 in South Asia I saw the enthusiasm generated by the successful conclusion of the Negroes' bus boycott in Montgomery, Ala. Later in the Soviet Union I saw the Communists take full propaganda advantage of the bombing of Negro churches in the same State.

Of course we can say that prejudice is as old as the hills and just as persistent. India, for instance, has known conflict and caste through centuries of struggle between Hindus and Moslems, Brahmins and untouchables.

In Algeria there is open warfare between the French minority and the Arab majority.

In all of Africa the outnumbered white man feels the stirring of the slumbering African masses.

Therefore as we Americans concentrate on a new effort on our own major social problem, we can take mild comfort from the awareness that our country does not stand alone in isolation as an immoral historic throwback to a bygone age of prejudice.

Having said this, I hasten to add what is merely the other side of this coin. The world community has a vested interest in the speed and effectiveness with which we end discrimination in the United States. Our own role in the world depends increasingly upon the same proposition.

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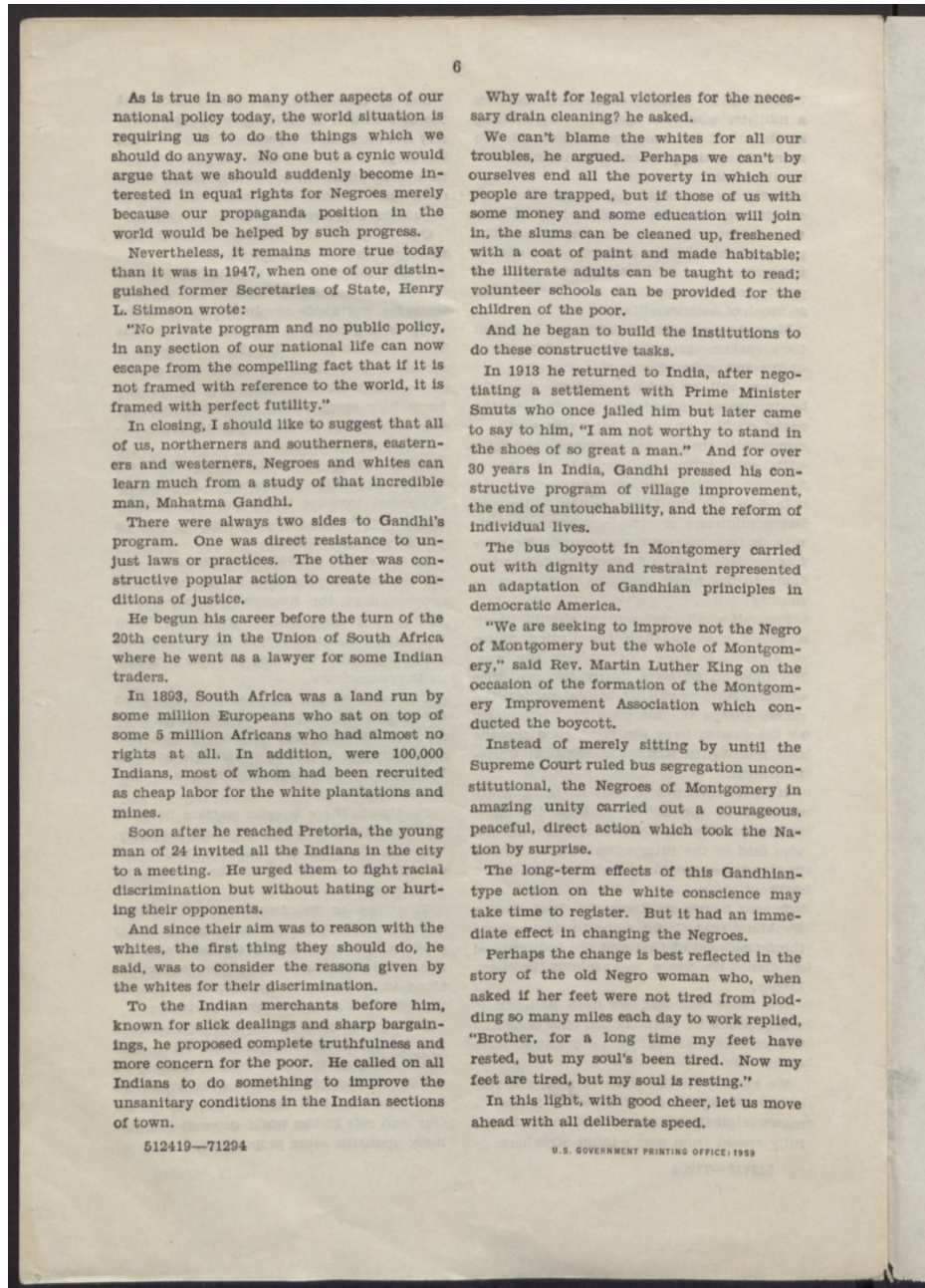
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As is true in so many other aspects of our national policy today, the world situation is requiring us to do the things which we should do anyway. No one but a cynic would argue that we should suddenly become interested in equal rights for Negroes merely because our propaganda position in the world would be helped by such progress.

Nevertheless, it remains more true today than it was in 1947, when one of our distinguished former Secretaries of State, Henry L. Stimson wrote:

"No private program and no public policy, in any section of our national life can now escape from the compelling fact that if it is not framed with reference to the world, it is framed with perfect futility."

In closing, I should like to suggest that all of us, northerners and southerners, easterners and westerners, Negroes and whites can learn much from a study of that incredible man, Mahatma Gandhi.

There were always two sides to Gandhi's program. One was direct resistance to unjust laws or practices. The other was constructive popular action to create the conditions of justice.

He begun his career before the turn of the 20th century in the Union of South Africa where he went as a lawyer for some Indian traders.

In 1893, South Africa was a land run by some million Europeans who sat on top of some 5 million Africans who had almost no rights at all. In addition, were 100,000 Indians, most of whom had been recruited as cheap labor for the white plantations and mines.

Soon after he reached Pretoria, the young man of 24 invited all the Indians in the city to a meeting. He urged them to fight racial discrimination but without hating or hurting their opponents.

And since their aim was to reason with the whites, the first thing they should do, he said, was to consider the reasons given by the whites for their discrimination.

To the Indian merchants before him, known for slick dealings and sharp bargainings, he proposed complete truthfulness and more concern for the poor. He called on all Indians to do something to improve the unsanitary conditions in the Indian sections of town.

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Why wait for legal victories for the necessary drain cleaning? he asked.

We can't blame the whites for all our troubles, he argued. Perhaps we can't by ourselves end all the poverty in which our people are trapped, but if those of us with some money and some education will join in, the slums can be cleaned up, freshened with a coat of paint and made habitable; the illiterate adults can be taught to read; volunteer schools can be provided for the children of the poor.

And he began to build the institutions to do these constructive tasks.

In 1913 he returned to India, after negotiating a settlement with Prime Minister Smuts who once jailed him but later came to say to him, "I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man." And for over 30 years in India, Gandhi pressed his constructive program of village improvement, the end of untouchability, and the reform of individual lives.

The bus boycott in Montgomery carried out with dignity and restraint represented an adaptation of Gandhian principles in democratic America.

"We are seeking to improve not the Negro of Montgomery but the whole of Montgomery," said Rev. Martin Luther King on the occasion of the formation of the Montgomery Improvement Association which conducted the boycott.

Instead of merely sitting by until the Supreme Court ruled bus segregation unconstitutional, the Negroes of Montgomery in amazing unity carried out a courageous, peaceful, direct action which took the Nation by surprise.

The long-term effects of this Gandhian-type action on the white conscience may take time to register. But it had an immediate effect in changing the Negroes.

Perhaps the change is best reflected in the story of the old Negro woman who, when asked if her feet were not tired from plodding so many miles each day to work replied, "Brother, for a long time my feet have rested, but my soul's been tired. Now my feet are tired, but my soul is resting."

In this light, with good cheer, let us move ahead with all deliberate speed.

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Questions:

1. How does Bowles characterize the period of five years since *Brown v. Board of Education*? Did the 1954 Supreme Court decision end segregation and racial prejudice in the United States?
2. Bowles offers seven points, in which he identifies problems and proposes solutions to the question of what he calls “race relations” in the United States. What are they? Summarize each point in 2-3 sentences.
3. Who is Mahatma Gandhi, whose life Bowles discusses at the end of his speech? Research who he was. In what ways did Gandhi inspire some American civil rights leaders?
4. Why according to Bowles Gandhi’s activism could serve as a good example to follow for Americans?
5. Bowles was a white politician, diplomat, and public servant. How do you think his own point of view affected his understanding of racism in the United States?
6. Many white Americans considered Bowles to be too radical. As Governor of Connecticut, he introduced policies that aimed to end racial segregation. He also supported civil rights causes. In 1951, after serving only one term, he lost his gubernatorial re-election bid to a conservative opponent who attacked Bowles’ record of supporting civil rights. At the same time, many black Americans considered Bowles’ approach to how Americans should address the issues of racism to be too moderate. In this speech, Bowles himself emphasizes that he advocates “moderate” solutions. Why do you think Bowles promoted what he called a “moderate” approach? And why do you think so many black and white Americans had opposite opinions about him and his ideas?
7. How does Bowles’ speech connect to the history of Arkansas? Do you recognize any issues that Bowles discusses as relevant to the history of civil rights in Arkansas?