

“A Statement to the South and the Nation,”
Issued by the Southern Negro Leaders
Conference on Transportation
and Nonviolent Integration

10 January–11 January 1957
Atlanta, Ga.

At an 11 January press conference, the delegates gathered in Atlanta released the following manifesto. In it, the black leaders outline their telegrams to federal officials and call upon white southerners to “realize that the treatment of Negroes is a basic spiritual problem. . . . Far too many have silently stood by as a violent minority stalks over the southland.” They encourage black Americans “to seek justice and reject all injustice,” and to dedicate themselves to the principle that “no matter how great the provocation. . . . Not one hair of one head of one white person shall be harmed.” During the press conference King also read a telegram from Eleanor Roosevelt, who wrote that she was “deeply distressed by violence which has occurred” and “would suggest an appeal to the President since this is a Supreme Court order.”¹ In addition to their wires to Eisenhower, Nixon, and Attorney General Brownell, the conference issued telegrams thanking the editor of the Montgomery Advertiser and the white clergymen of the Montgomery Ministerial Association for their statements on law and order in the wake of the recent bombings.²

All over the world men are in revolt against social and political domination. The age old cry for freedom and human dignity takes on a significance never experienced before. For in a very real and impelling sense no man, no nation and no part of the universe is an island unto itself.

Asia’s successive revolts against European imperialism, Africa’s present ferment for independence, Hungary’s death struggle against Communism, and the determined drive of Negro Americans to become first class citizens are inextricably bound together. They are all vital factors in determining whether Twentieth

1. John N. Popham, “President Urged to Talk on Rights,” *New York Times*, 12 January 1957.

2. King, Jemison, Shuttlesworth, and Steele to Grover C. Hall and to Thomas Thrasher, both dated 11 January 1957.

11 Jan Century mankind will crown its vast material gains with the achievement of liberty
1957 and justice for all, or whether it will commit suicide through lack of moral fiber.

Because America is one of the two most powerful nations on earth and, even more, because our power and our prestige are pledged to freedom and civil liberties for the individual and constitutional government for the nation, the unresolved problem of civil rights becomes the most crucial issue of our culture. This is so because the nation, in proclaiming freedom, shines as a beacon of hope for the oppressed of the world and yet denies even elementary democratic rights to its Negro minority. But beyond this moral embarrassment, all of the nation's institutions remain stunted and frustrated by the contradiction between what America practices and what America proclaims.

The church has the high task to provide the American people with moral leadership. And while the major denominations have spoken out clearly for brotherhood, the task of many local churches is made more difficult by the moral compromise in part imposed upon them by the civil rights conflict.

Even the Congress of our land is shackled. It is unable to enact urgently needed social legislation. Federal aid to education and increased social security bills for the benefit of white and Negro people die in congressional committees because the division over civil rights permits a small political minority to capture and control the legislative branch of our national government.

Thus the entire nation suffers because our democratic vitality is sapped by the civil rights issue. This is even more true of the South. In her unwillingness to accept the Negro as a human being, the South has chosen to remain undeveloped, poorly educated and emotionally warped.

Through recent Supreme Court decisions, declaring that discrimination based on race violates the Constitution, the issue has been joined. There is no turning back. The nation must now face the reality that America can never realize its vast economic, social and political potential until the struggle for civil rights has been decisively won.

We are convinced that the great majority of white Southerners are prepared to accept and abide by the Supreme Law of the Land. They, like us, want to be law-abiding citizens. Yet a small but determined minority resorts to threats, bodily assaults, cross-burnings, bombing, shooting and open defiance of the law in an attempt to force us to retreat. But we cannot in clear conscience turn back. We have no moral choice but to continue the struggle, not for ourselves alone but for all America. We have the God given duty to help save ourselves and our white brothers from tragic self-destruction in the quagmire of racial hate. We must continue to stand firm for our right to be first class citizens. Even in the face of death, we have no other choice. For if in carrying out this obligation we are killed, others, more resolute even than we, will rise to continue the drive to free the United States of the scourge of racial conflict.

In dedication to this task, we call upon all Negroes in the South and in the nation *to assert their human dignity*. We ask them *to seek justice and reject all injustice*, especially that in themselves. We pray that they will *refuse further cooperation with the evil element which invites them to collude against themselves in return for bits of patronage*. We know that such an assertion may cause them persecution; yet *no matter how great the obstacles and suffering, we urge all Negroes to reject segregation*.

But far beyond this, *we call upon them to accept Christian Love in full knowledge of its power to defy evil.* We call upon them to understand that *non-violence is not a symbol of weakness or cowardice*, but as Jesus demonstrated, *non-violent resistance transforms weakness into strength and breeds courage in face of danger.* We urge them, no matter how great the provocation, to dedicate themselves to this motto:

11 Jan
1957

“Not one hair of one head of one white person shall be harmed.”

We advocate non-violence in words, thought and deed, we believe this spirit and this spirit alone can overcome the decades of mutual fear and suspicion that have infested and poisoned our Southern culture.

In this same spirit, we place the following concerns before white Southerners of goodwill:

1. We call upon white Southern Christians to realize that the treatment of Negroes is a basic spiritual problem. We believe that no legal approach can fully redeem or reconcile man. We urge them in Christ's name to join the struggle for justice. They, as individuals, can begin now:
 - (a) By working to see that all persons, regardless of color or creed, who seek the saving grace of Christ are accepted as equals in their churches.
 - (b) By encouraging schools and colleges controlled by the church to set an example of brotherhood.
 - (c) By speaking out in moral terms and by acting on the basis of their inner convictions, and accepting as Negro Christians must, the consequences of the Christian imperative. In this way they may well reduce the violence directed toward the Negro community; restore order and hasten reconciliation.
2. We call upon every white Southerner to realize that the major choice may no longer be segregation or intergration, but anarchy or law. We remind them that communities control their destinies only when order prevails. Disorder places all major decisions in the hands of state or federal police. We do not prefer this, for our ultimate aim is to win understanding with our neighbors. In a profound sense, the lawlessness and violence our people face is blood upon the hands of Southern Christians. Far too many have silently stood by as a violent minority stalks over the southland. We implore men of goodwill to speak out for law and order.

As citizens and as representatives of equal rights movements all over the South, we cannot ignore the vital role that government could play in easing tensions and in helping Negroes secure their constitutional rights.

In recent years the Judicial Branch of government has behaved in a responsible manner. But not since Reconstruction days has the Congress passed any civil

11 Jan rights legislation. Since 1952, the Executive Branch has not clearly given direc-
1957 tion to millions of confused citizens on questions relating to civil rights.

We therefore have called upon the Executive Branch of our government in the following manner:

1. Today this conference wired Dwight D. Eisenhower, President of the United States, asking him to come south immediately, to make a major speech in a major Southern city urging all Southerners to accept and to abide by the Supreme Court's decisions as the law of the Land. We further urged him to use the weight of his great office to point out to the South the moral nature of the problems posed at home and abroad by the unsolved civil rights issue.
2. We also wired Vice-President Nixon urging him to make a tour of the South similar to the one he made on behalf of Hungarian refugees. We told him that through such a trip he could report to the President and the American people the economic boycotts, and reprisals, and bombing and violence directed against the persons and homes of Negroes who assert their rights under the Constitution. We further indicated that thousands of Negroes had fled Mississippi within the last year with no moral or financial help from their government.
3. In the light of the Supreme Court decision in transportation and the Attorney General's December meeting with federal district attorneys from the South, we today request that Mr. Brownell grant an interview with representatives of this conference to discuss the responsibility of the Department of Justice in maintaining order in several areas where Negroes and whites who stand for justice, fear for their lives.³

We have made this statement, believing that the trials of the present are not in vain. For we are convinced that if Negroes of the South steadfastly hold to justice and non-violence in their struggle for freedom, a miracle will be wrought—from this period of intense social conflict and that a society based on justice and equality for all, will gradually emerge in the South. Then we shall all be emotionally relieved and freed to turn our energies to making America truly “The land of the free and the home of the brave.”

PD. NCCP-PPPrHi: Box 46.

3. The authors refer to Brownell's 10 December 1956 conference with thirty-three U.S. district attorneys at which he called for “voluntary compliance” by bus carriers with the Supreme Court's 13 November 1956 ruling against Montgomery bus segregation in *Browder v. Gayle*. On 18 January Assistant Attorney General Warren Olney replied on behalf of Brownell. Olney's telegram is not extant, but Brownell apparently declined to meet with King (see Olney to King, 30 January 1957).