

**Analysing the Catalytic Power of Award Acceptance Speeches in  
Civil Movements: Martin Luther King’s Speech as a Political Call  
for Ending Racial Discrimination**

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Since time immemorial, leaders of civil and social movements have utilized various global platforms to advance their causes and spread their messages to a wider audience superseding cultural and national boundaries.

The Nobel Prize Acceptance Ceremony is one such prestigious platform that has been used by many leaders to make a statement of their beliefs and amplify the resonance of their movements.

According to an official spokesperson of the Nobel Prize community, the acceptance ceremony is one that is more than mere glorification of an honour and a title. Instead, it serves as an opportunity for laureates to deliver a resounding speech that reflects their work and beliefs and to address a global audience of leaders, scholars, and activists waiting to be sprung into action by the wheels of revolution (Nobel Prize, n.d.).

Malala Yousafzai, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2014 for her activism and campaign for promoting women’s education in Pakistan, took to

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the stage during her acceptance speech and spoke about the importance of empowering young girls in developing countries like Pakistan, where the status-quo is steadfastly creating gigantic rifts between the working and the non-working classes (Yousafzai, 2014). Her speech ultimately resonated through the minds and hearts of activists around the world who bannered around her movement and gave it more fuel in the coming years.

To give an example closer to home, consider the case of Sacheen Littlefeather, who is renowned for her controversial appearance at the 45<sup>th</sup> Academy Awards in 1973. She came on behalf of Marlon Brando, the recipient of the Best Actor award for his ever-popular role in *The Godfather*.

Brando, to make a statement about the treatment of Native Americans in the film industry and the United States, refused to accept the award (History.com Editors, 2009).

In her acceptance speech, Littlefeather clarified that Brando made his decision not to accept the title following the ongoing treatment of Native Americans in the film industry, more particularly, the recent conflict at the Wounded Knee where members of the American Indian Movement (AIM) had gathered in protest against the government's policies towards Native Americans.

Needless to say, Littlefeather's speech was not regarded well by the titans of the industry and was received with multiple jeers. She also received death threats following the debacle and passed away without any form of apology or consideration from the gala.

However, both Brando and Littlefeather received a long-overdue redressal from the Academy Awards after they passed away, reiterating the power of the statements they made by using the award acceptance ceremony as a global platform.

While both of these examples have their own area of interest, we shall use another one for further analysing the effect of these speeches on the trajectory of civil and social movements.

Martin Luther King Jr. delivered perhaps the most rousing Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech in 1964. He received the Nobel Prize for Peace in Oslo for his work in advancing civil rights for African Americans in the United States. In his speech, King addressed the racial divide and violence prevalent in America and called for a world where non-violent revolutions could sew the man-made rifts between peoples of different races and creeds.

Without further ado, let's dive straight into the nature of King's speech, its after-effects, and how he used the platform to guide the participants of the revolution to behave and act a certain way.

### **Martin Luther King Jr. – Dissecting the Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech**

King's acceptance speech begins with him addressing the relevant authorities and dignitaries present in the audience. The short greeting is followed by the start of his acceptance speech, which he makes on behalf of the 22 million African Americans in the USA, and the civil rights movements that garnered widespread international attention.

King then reminds the listeners of many horrific instances that took place shortly before the ceremony, reiterating silently the need for his movement. He begins by remembering the horrors that took place in Birmingham on May 2, 1963, when children and adults alike were subjected to high-pressure fire hoses, clubbed by police offers, and attacked by vicious dogs (Momodu, 2016). Disturbing images of the same appeared on television and in newspapers the following day, sparking international outrage but limited action from the city and the courts.

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He then mentions the brutal disposal of civil rights activists James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Neshoba County by the infamous Ku Klux Klan while they were working to register downtrodden African Americans to vote during the Freedom Summer Campaign of 1964 (CBS, 2021).

Finally, Martin recounts the horrific bombing and burning of churches in Mississippi, targeted solely because they sought to provide a safe haven for various civil rights activists. The KKK was involved in this incident too.

Mentioning these three instances took less than half a minute to be included in King's speech. And yet, the effect of his words lingered for hours after he kept the microphone away. By delving into the uncomfortable truths of racial oppression, King establishes that his speech is for the people and the movement and not for the appeasement of any international body. He wants the listeners to be poised for his upcoming calls to action.

By recapping the horrors that followed a simple Civil Rights Movement, King paves the way for a rhetorical question – why is he awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace when his very movement that was intended to promote peacekeeping instigated national violence?

The question, although rhetorical, allows King to smartly elucidate his idea of a revolution. He believes that the award is handed to him as recognition and appreciation for lighting a revolution where men sought to overcome racial oppression without resorting to counter-violence.

To support his claim, King iterates the principle of *ahimsa* demonstrated by the people of India in their freedom struggle. Non-violence, he counters the silent claims of extremists, is not sterile passivity. Instead, it is a strong moral force that can drive huge social transformations, as seen in the case of Gandhi against British rule.

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King, at this juncture, talks about his belief in a single unified nation where peoples of all colours, races, and creeds can live safely and cordially together. To attain such a utopian society, he speaks, men will have to find a way to reject the idea of retaliation, retribution, and revenge. Instead, the wheels of revolution should be governed by the tides of love.

In today's context, reading this speech from the comfort of our homes, we would not think much of his words about unity and non-violence. After all, comfort breeds complacency. As such, modern speeches have often lost their sheen behind unmeaningful and empty words.

But for Martin Luther King Jr., every word that he speaks, every second that he is on the stage, is meaningful – not just for himself, but for the millions of African Americans he is representing.

His words on non-violence are not empty visions of a better society – it is a call to action. By using the speech as a global platform, he wants to mobilize the youth of various communities to act against oppression in a certain way.

He believes that the best path to a successful revolution could not be a short, bloody one. Instead, true success is countering oppression with resolution.

The 1964 murders of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner prove it. The horrific event sparked national and international outrage, ultimately spurring the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

The Mississippi Burning was one of many thousand stories in the book of American oppression. The victimized community dealt with the tragedy with the utmost resolution. While the horrors could never be compensated, the Civil Rights Movement gained massive momentum because of how African Americans dealt with it.

Before that, the long cycles of protests and counter-protests moved in one direction only – toward further brutalization and oppression of marginalized communities.

Keeping that in mind, it was very important for King to subtly nudge the participants of his movement in the right direction – towards a resolute path of non-violence.

King, in his speech, refuses to accept that pitting men against men is the only way to reach an accord. While the path of non-violence might be one-sided, the onus of a successful revolution falls on the weakened shoulders of the already oppressed.

For that, he thanks the brave young men and women who never faltered as the revolution progressed, even in the face of adversity. In his speech, King recognizes the role of everyone who participated in the movement to create a better civilization for tomorrow.

While the world may not know their names, he says, freedom could never be attained without their invaluable sacrifices and resolute actions.

On that note, he reiterates the strength of his ideas by saying that Alfred Nobel would agree with what he said about why he, of all people, deserved to win the Nobel Prize for Peace.

### **The After-Effects of a Kingly Speech**

King's vociferous words were hardly a means to end the Civil Rights Movement. Instead, it served as an inaugural ceremony to widespread changes.

His words spurred more and more activists into action. The movement was joined by international allies and became a focal point of media coverage. King's words on non-violence being the vanguard of his movement were realized to the fullest – it became the leading philosophy for his followers.

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Most importantly, the speech put massive pressure on the leaders of the United States to make relevant constitutional changes. After this speech, King was established as the champion of human rights and social justice, and gained massive bouts of admiration and credibility from international groups.

Following King's speech, the Voting Rights Act was finally passed, putting a significant dent in racial discrimination in voting practices in the United States. Similarly, the speech also roused the ever-famous Selma to Montgomery March for demanding voting rights for African Americans in Alabama. The march was met with violent opposition from state and local authorities. But the resolute nature of the protestors eventually led to the passage of the Voting Rights Act.

King didn't stop at political revolutions. In 1966, King and other civil rights leaders together launched the Chicago Freedom Movement, where they addressed issues related to housing discrimination, economic inequality, and disparity in educational opportunities. All the momentum eventually piled pressure on Congress to pass the Housing Act of 1968.

It's fair to say that King and his Civil Rights Movement came on stronger on the other end of the tunnel following his rousing speech at the Nobel Prize Ceremony. Not only did he lay down the uniform goals of his movement, but he also garnered widespread support that eventually put a lot of pressure on the government of the United States.

The Civil Rights Movement could have gone a million other ways in haphazard directions. But Martin's leadership and his rousing speeches definitely played a huge part in how everything turned out.

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