

Name: _____ Class: _____

RFK's Speech Following the Death of MLK

By Senator Robert F. Kennedy
1968

Senator Robert F. Kennedy (1925-1968), served as U.S. Attorney General from 1961 to 1964 before becoming a U.S. Senator for New York in 1964. He delivered this speech after the civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968. While campaigning for president two months later, Robert Kennedy was assassinated as well. As you read, takes note on how Kennedy uses rhetoric to make his speech more persuasive.

- [1] I have bad news for you, for all of our fellow citizens, and people who love peace all over the world, and that is that Martin Luther King was shot and killed tonight.

Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and to justice for his fellow human beings, and he died because of that effort.

In this difficult day, in this difficult time for the United States, it is perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. For those of you who are black--considering the evidence there evidently is that there were white people who were responsible--you can be filled with bitterness, with hatred, and a desire for revenge. We can move in that direction as a country, in great polarization--black people amongst black, white people amongst white, filled with hatred toward one another.



"Attorney General Kennedy and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. 22 June 1963, Washington, D.C." by Abbie Rowe, National Park Service is in the public domain.

Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did, to understand and to comprehend, and to replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand with compassion and love.

- [5] For those of you who are black and are tempted to be filled with hatred and distrust at the injustice of such an act, against all white people, I can only say that I feel in my own heart the same kind of feeling. I had a member of my family killed, but 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 go beyond these rather difficult times.

My favorite poet was Aeschylus.¹ He wrote: "In our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart until, in our own despair,² against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God."

1. Aeschylus (525 B.C.E. – 456 B.C.E.) was a Greek playwright known for his poetic language.

2. **Despair** (*noun*): to no longer have any hope or belief that a situation will improve or change

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

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

We can do well in this country. We will have difficult times; we've had difficult times in the past; 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.

- [10] But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide³ in our land.

Let us 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.

RFK's Speech Following the Death of MLK by Senator Robert F. Kennedy is in the public domain.

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. Which of the following best identifies the central idea of this speech? [RI.2]
 - A. Americans should imitate the Greeks and turn to religion in times of tragedy.
 - B. One must resist the temptation to blame others following a tragedy like King's assassination.
 - C. Americans should respond to King's assassination with compassion and unity.
 - D. Americans should use King's death to inspire others to defend their civil rights.

2. How do paragraphs 3-4 develop the message of the speech? [RI.5]
 - A. The paragraphs explain the strength that is required to overcome a tragedy to make the listeners aware of the difficult future.
 - B. The paragraphs make an emotional plea to the audience to honor King's legacy by avoiding violence.
 - C. The paragraphs demonstrate that society cannot achieve racial equality unless everyone learns about why King died.
 - D. The paragraphs introduce the idea that political protest is dangerous to explain that America is in danger of riots.

3. PART A: Which of the following phrases best describes the connection the speaker makes between Aeschylus' quote and King's death? [RI.3]
 - A. Experiencing tragedy is painful, but it can teach lessons about love and healing.
 - B. Tragedy makes many people forget what is most important in life, which is to be kind and compassionate to loved ones.
 - C. It is possible to avoid tragedy if people are willing to learn lessons from the past.
 - D. Tragedy cannot be avoided, but it can be used to tame the violent parts of the soul.

4. PART B: What phrase from the text following Kennedy's quote of Aeschylus best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
 - A. "what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness; but love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another" (Paragraph 7)
 - B. "a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or they be black." (Paragraph 7)
 - C. "But the vast majority of white people and the vast majority of black people in this country want to live together, want to improve the quality of our life, and want justice for all human beings who abide in our land." (Paragraph 10)
 - D. "Let us 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." (Paragraph 11)

5. How does Kennedy use rhetoric to advance his purpose? Cite evidence from the text [RI.6] in your answer.

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. In this speech, Kennedy addresses the public following King's assassination. What do you believe in the most important lesson about tragedy that we can learn from Kennedy's speech?
2. Why do you think that Kennedy brings up his brother's assassination in this speech?
3. Kennedy discusses Greek qualities several times. Do you think that this was an effective strategy for uniting the American people?
4. Riots broke out across America following King's death, though not in Indianapolis, where Kennedy delivered this speech. Do you think Kennedy's speech prompted a peaceful response to King's assassination? Why? What lessons can we learn from Kennedy's speech about achieving peace, particularly along racial divides?