

Ella Baker Freedom Day Rally Speech Text

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ELLA BAKER, "ADDRESS AT THE HATTIESBURG FREEDOM DAY RALLY" (21 JANUARY 1964)

[1] This is rather unusual. Aaron Henry said that I'd had my fling with all the civil rights organizations. Well, my greatest fling has still to be flung, because as far as I'm concerned I was never working for an organization. I have always tried to work for a cause, the cause to me is bigger than any organization. Bigger than any group of people, and it is the cause of humanity. The cause is the cause that brings us together, the drive of the human spirit for freedom.

[2] You know, I always like to think that the very God who gave us life, gave us liberty. And if we don't have liberty, it is because somebody else has stood between us and that which God has granted us. And so we have come here tonight, to renew our struggle, our struggle for that which we are entitled by virtue of being children of the Almighty. The right to be men and women, to grow and to develop to the fullest capacity with which He has endowed us.

[3] And as I have listened here tonight, my spirit has roved over a long period of years and I can think of a number of things I would like to say, but if I had anything at all to say tonight is to remind us of something that occurred to me, something that came into focus in a conversation on the night that Medger Evers's body came through Atlanta. A group of people were down at the station among us; we were there for the purpose of identifying with the great tragedy that had occurred in his being shot to death. And after the ceremony, the little ceremony in the station, one of the leading civil right leaders (I won't name any because leadership is one of those things, you know, I won't talk about them too much) but this person said, "We are in the final stages of the freedom struggle." And I challenge that.

[4] We are not in the final stages of the freedom struggle. We are really just beginning. We are just beginning the freedom struggle. Let me tell you why. Because even tomorrow, if every vestige of racial discrimination were wiped out, if all of us became free enough to go down and to associate with all the people we wanted to associate, we still are not free. We aren't free until within us we have that deep sense of freedom from a lot of things that we don't even mention in these meetings.

[5] And I'm not talking about Negroes, I'm talking about people. People cannot be free until they realize that peace—we can talk about peace—that peace is not the absence of war or struggle, it is the presence of justice. People cannot, pardon me, people cannot be free until there is enough work in this land to give everybody a job. Tomorrow, tomorrow if we were able to vote our full strength and we still voted our full strength, until we recognize that in this

country in a land of great plenty and great wealth there are millions of people who go to bed hungry every night. That tomorrow if we were to call up all the able-bodied men in our country, who could do some work, we wouldn't have work for them to do.

[6] And unless we see this thing in its larger perspective, unless we realize that certainly we must sing, we must have the inspiration of song, the inspiration that comes from songs like this one that was created and demonstrated here tonight, but we also must have the information that comes from lots and lots of study. And so we must come to grips with a lot of problems. We must also know that we are, in the final analysis, the only group that can make your free is yourself, because we must free ourselves from all of things that keep us back.

[7] And so in conclusion let me quote one of my favorite or improvise one of my favorite thoughts in scripture. And it has to do with the whole struggle I think, because it says, "For now we are nearer than when we first believed." I forgot the exact quote, but let us "cast aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light."

[8] I love to hear us sing. I've heard a lot of singing in my day. I've been a part of a lot of singing, but I know, and you must know, that singing alone will not do it for us. And we are going to have to have these freedom schools and we are going to have to learn a lot of things in them. We are going to have to be concerned about the kinds of education our children are getting in school, and all of this has to be done along—at the same time that we also recognize that our white brothers, the very white brothers in Hattiesburg and in other parts of Mississippi who have kept us in bondage, that they did it because they did not know any better.

[9] They have been fooled, and they have been fooled by those who told them the "big lie." The "big lie" was to the effect that they could do what they wanted in Mississippi with the Negro question. And you know what? The rest of the country for a long time tacitly agreed. That is, they didn't do anything about it.

[10] And so all of us stand guilty at this moment for having waited so long to lend ourselves to a fight for the freedom, not of Negroes, not of the Negroes of Mississippi, but for the freedom of the American spirit, for the freedom of the human spirit for freedom, and this is the reason I am here tonight, and this is the reason, I think, that these young men who have worked and given their bodies in the movement for freedom. They are here not because they want to see something take place just for the fun of it, they are here because they should know, and I think they do know, that the freedom which they seek is a larger freedom that encompasses all mankind. And until that day, we will never turn back.

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Contact Information

Voices of Democracy: The U.S. Oratory Project
Shawn J. Parry-Giles
Department of Communication
2130 Skinner Building
University of Maryland
College Park, MD 20742-7635

301-405-6527
spg@umd.edu

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