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# The Road to Democracy

address by  
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President, Oberlin College

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## 'The Road to Democracy'

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William E. Stevenson,  
President, Oberlin College



Mr. Stevenson, President of Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, has had a distinguished career as a scholar, athlete, lawyer, Red Cross administrator and educator. He is a graduate of Princeton University, a former Rhodes scholar and was a member of the U. S. Olympic team. During World War II he directed the American Red Cross program in England. Later he went with the invasion forces to North Africa where he set up Red Cross programs there and in Sicily and Italy. At the close of the war, Mr. Stevenson returned to his law practice until 1946, at which time he was called to the presidency of Oberlin College. He is active in many local, regional and national organizations, and is currently a member of President Truman's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services.

It is a tribute to the Urban League that this distinguished and representative group of people is meeting here tonight. Happily, this is not the first such occasion and numerous similar meetings, many under the auspices of the Urban League, have taken place in St. Louis and elsewhere during the past years.

This meeting is, of course, a pleasant social occasion but, in my opinion, it has far greater significance than that, for it furnishes tangible proof, for all the world to see, that American democracy, as it is professed, does exist and that Americans of different color, racial antecedent and creed, can—and do—break bread together without self-consciousness, but rather, with natural friendliness and mutual esteem. I think that a gathering such as this is symbolic of what America can be, what it will be, what it must be.

Somewhat indirectly my own interest in furthering harmony and understanding between races and minority groups can be attributed to the Urban League. During the war Mrs. Stevenson and I served in North Africa and Italy with the Red Cross, and, through that experience, I happened, for the first time in my life, to have had an opportunity to become well acquainted with Negroes, who were Red Cross staff members. They were a fine group of people; they performed their duties well, even under the most trying circumstances, and seeing them and knowing them—quite frankly—opened my eyes and taught me more about the absurdity of racial prejudice than I ever could have learned by reading many books on anthropology or sociology. One of the finest of the women who served with the Red Cross in my theatre, was Geraldine Dyson, one of your own St. Louis people. Everybody

liked her, and she did an outstanding piece of work. One of the finest men that I met, overseas, was Sidney Williams, formerly with the Urban League here in St. Louis, then Executive Secretary in Cleveland and now serving in that capacity in Chicago. Sidney and I puzzled together over numerous problems in our Red Cross work, many of them of a racial nature. I happened to be in charge of more than 1,000 Red Cross workers in the Mediterranean Theatre of Operations during 1942, '43 and '44, and I can conscientiously say that not one of them did a better job than did Geraldine Dyson or Sidney Williams.

But more important—by the fair and patient attitude shown by Red Cross workers like Geraldine Dyson and Sidney Williams, by their readiness to see the need for what we were sent overseas to do, by their friendliness and cooperative attitude, toward their associates at all times, and by their invariable tactfulness and cheerfulness—they won the admiration and respect of all who knew them. They were a continual source of inspiration to the rest of us. The Negro race never had better nor more effective missionaries for its cause.

Because of my admiration for Sidney Williams, it was natural for me to have become interested in the Urban League. That interest has been extended and my respect for its program greatly increased by my acquaintance with Lester Granger in the past year, during which we have both been serving as members of President Truman's Committee on Equality of Treatment and Opportunity in the Armed Services. No small part of the success of our efforts can be credited to Lester Granger's fine personality, his intelligence and his calm, judicial wisdom.

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I am very happy that his presence here with us tonight indicates his full recovery from his recent serious illness.

As one who, as I have just described it, has had his eyes opened in racial matters through the circumstance of acquaintance and close association with representative Negro Americans, I am a firm believer in advancing the cause of racial understanding—and consequent better opportunities for qualified Negroes—through the helpful "education" that inevitably comes from bringing people of different attributes (be it race, creed, color, national origin or sex) together—to afford them a chance to get to know each other, to learn about each other and from each other. I share the aptitude of the Urban League that the best sort of education in race relations is inter-group participation in work and play, and I am confident better mutual understanding must inevitably result if people are open-minded and not irreconcilably warped by prejudice, intolerance and bigotry. I therefore believe that it is most important for those of us who are sincerely dedicated to the cause of true brotherhood to exert our best efforts toward opening up opportunities for Negroes and whites to associate with one another so that the latter may discover—just as I did—that there is no justification whatsoever for discrimination and segregation on racial grounds.

To that end it is, of course, particularly important that the free association of people of all races should take place among our children and young people—that is before the prejudices of their parents have been handed on to them, or at least before such prejudices have become firmly fixed. That means that, in many ways, the "firing line" of better race relations is in our churches, in our community and recreation centers, and, above all, in our schools and colleges. If we can win the "battle" for racial understanding and human brotherhood in these places and before our young people become adults, we will have made the greatest possible forward strides. Surely no scientific authority is needed for the caution that it is during the impressionable years of childhood and youth that the minds and souls of young people can best be reached. In furtherance of the complete indoctrination of their people by their vicious ideas and inhuman ideologies, Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin all concentrated their attention on the impressionable years before their young people had grown up.

Does not our problem here in America resolve itself down to this simple proposition: we cannot eliminate discrimination without getting to know each other, and we cannot expect to attain that end so long as we continue segregation? The vicious circle can only be broken by those who have the resolution and courage to make a start. And actually that start may be far easier than might be supposed. As Buell Gallagher put it

"In his serene and less clouded moments the white man sees something of what has happened to him, but he is like a squirrel in a cage running desperately just to hold his position. It never occurs to him that if he stopped running the cage would stop revolving."

I believe, for example, that our experience at Oberlin College has confirmed the value of education in race relations through daily association and experience. As some of you may know, from its very beginning in 1833, Oberlin College has stood for racial equality and students of all races have always been welcome at Oberlin. The first degree was granted to a Negro as early as 1844, and since that date many Negroes have been included among the distinguished sons and daughters of the College.

There is no question, in my mind, that the fact that Oberlin graduates have often been complimented for their social consciousness, and are frequently found as leaders or active workers in community and welfare organizations such as the Urban League, can be traced in no small measure to the fellowship they had

with students of other races during their college years.

Just as during the war I saw, on many occasions, Negroes and whites working and fighting together at the front or relaxing together in wholesome recreational pursuits, I observe at Oberlin the same free and natural intermingling between our white students and our Negro students and those of other races and from other countries. And it is a happy circumstance that Wade Ellis, a Negro, is one of our most respected and popular faculty members. Can anyone suggest a better approach to tolerance and brotherhood than through such a spontaneous and rational relationship? Happily the same sort of process is going on in an ever-increasing number of places. Even colleges and universities which have not enrolled Negro students in the past are today anxious to have them, and Negro teachers will be found today on the faculties of many institutions where they would not have been found a few years ago. For such a turn of events we can all be truly thankful. To my mind, it signifies that the log jam of continued narrow-mindedness has been broken and that the cause of proper human relationships has been pushed off dead center and is moving forward ever more significantly and more rapidly.

Certainly there are many developments which indicate progress, sincere interest in the race problem on the part of intelligent citizens and, better still, a resolve and determination to do something helpful and constructive. The inclusion of Negroes so successfully in big league sports, the refusal of colleges to play others which object to Negro players, the plays, books and moving pictures dealing so scientifically and realistically with segregation and intolerance—all these things indicate quite clearly that public apathy is being overcome and that general concern about the problem of race has been aroused. When this current state of affairs is contrasted with conditions only ten or fifteen years ago, the improvement in our national atmosphere of social consciousness is, I

believe, not only most encouraging but even startling.

That the tide is running rapidly in the direction of equality of treatment and opportunity for peoples of all races is dramatically demonstrated by what has taken place in our Armed Services in the past ten years. Before this last war began there were no Negroes in the Marines, none in the Navy outside of mess attendants and the few in the Army were limited to jobs of a menial nature and in only a very few types of units. As we all know, the demand for qualified manpower during the Second World War forced a change in the thinking of our high ranking procurement officers, and by the time the war was over Negroes had been admitted to the Marines, to many new jobs in the Navy, and in a wide variety of positions in the Army. Thanks to the education which such war experiences brought about, these gains, far from having been lost, have been consolidated and even far greater gains have now been made. For many months now, the Navy has been functioning under a policy of complete abandonment of any racial discrimination. Qualified Negroes have equal opportunity in all parts of the Navy. From the time of enlistment, through "boot training" to eventual assignment aboard ship or at shore stations, Negroes and whites are receiving the same treatment and chances for jobs and advancement. Last June a Negro graduated from Annapolis, and I believe that there are several midshipmen enrolled there at the present time.

The same improved attitude obtains in the Marines and in the Air Force, the latter having abolished segregation about a year or so ago and having disbanded its all-Negro fighter unit and assigned its personnel to serve with various units, which previously had been all white.

And only a week ago, the Army, which hitherto had moved forward more slowly than had the other branches of the Department of Defense, adopted a policy of historic significance, so far as race relations are concerned. Under a new direc-

tive, on the training and assignment of Negroes in the Army, skilled Negro personnel can now be integrated with white units of all kinds, restrictive assignment quotas for Negro troops possessing skills needed in specialized fields will be discarded, and Army commanders are being instructed to fill vacancies throughout the Service "without regard to race or color." While this new Army policy falls short of the goal of complete non-segregation, which I know all of us here tonight hope will be attained before very many years longer, the new policy does open up jobs and opportunities in the Army on a wide basis, and, in my opinion, the Army's new attitude represents a tremendous stride forward toward equality and eventual non-discrimination. I think the President's Committee, of which Mr. Granger and I are members, and of which Judge Charles Fahy is chairman, can take a fair share of the credit for bringing about these forward steps in the Armed Services. The Committee has felt that actual results were all that counted. It has, therefore, been our policy to carry out the assignment which the President gave us without publicity or fanfare and on the basis of friendly and direct discussion with the leaders of the three Services. The question of racial quotas in Army enlistment has not yet been solved, but the problem is still under discussion, and our committee is optimistic about its early solution.

I think we can take great encouragement from the fact that, just as the Urban League has taken a leading and constructive part in moving forward the cause of equal opportunity and interracial harmony and understanding, many other forces are likewise working effectually and to an ever-increasing degree toward the same end.

And yet, despite the encouraging progress of recent years, much of which has been made in such a comparatively short time, I know that all of us here tonight are unhappy that we must talk merely of progress and not yet of the full realization of our aims and hopes.

I do not feel that it is overdramatizing the situation to say that the problems about which we have been talking here tonight can have tremendous import upon the future of the world, for if we cannot demonstrate that our democracy really works we may well face defeat in the great ideological battle which now involves, directly or indirectly, all the peoples of the world.

It is ironic that democracy is being judged, in these times, by its unworthy acts while communism is being judged by its high-sounding promises and easy words. Yet that is the fact, and so long as the rest of the world must face the cleverly devised, hostile and ruthless propaganda being spewed forth from behind the iron curtain, yet cannot retaliate with the real truth, we will be on the defensive in this war of ideas and ideological claims.

Entirely apart from reasons of justice or of conscience, must we not, as a practical matter, meet the concentrated communist attack on our democracy by removing—and very promptly, for time is of the essence—such faults in our national life as racial injustice, discrimination, prejudice and bigotry? It is these latter weaknesses which provide the communist states with their main ammunition in attempting to win the rest of the world away from democratic concepts toward a form of government in which freedom, as we know it, is a mockery and people as a whole are treated as mere chattels of a ruthless and authoritarian state.

Is it not tragic that at this great crossroads in history our influence and effectiveness should be so badly impaired because we Americans practice prejudice and intolerance in our relations to each other? At a time when so many throughout the world are looking to us for leadership, and when the necessities of the situation demand that our influence should be at its greatest height, we can only lower our glances because our consciences are far from clear. We cannot preach democracy successfully abroad when we are permitting it to be made a mockery here at home.

We cannot help our neighbor remove the mote from his eye so long as we have the beam of segregation and intolerance in our own national eye.

Honest and intelligent people know that the Negro race has been retarded in its potential development by lack of educational and economic opportunity. Negroes have been exploited and held to standards of living which have been a national disgrace. Let's face it—in some instances taboos and prejudices have even been deliberately built up and instigated so that Negroes could be maintained as cheap labor for the economic benefit of others.

Honest and intelligent people know that there is no basis, physically or mentally, for any differentiation or discrimination between the Negro and white races. We are faced with a purely social concept, and not a biological one.

Nothing will of course be gained by placing the blame on the South, for we all know that there are prejudices against minority groups in the North, the East and the West. Vindictiveness and rancor will not help us to solve this problem. We cannot defeat intolerance by being intolerant. We can only eliminate interracial antagonism by recognizing it as the vicious thing it is and by firmly resolving to stand up and be counted with those who are dedicated to the attainment of equality in all things for all men.

In his distinguished book *An American Dilemma*, Dr. Myrdal has pointed out that:

"The real problem is not the Negro, but the white man's attitude toward the Negro . . .

"America can demonstrate that justice, equality, cooperation are possible between white and colored people.

"America is free to choose whether the Negro shall remain her liability or become her opportunity.

"The development of the American Negro problem during the years to come is, therefore, fatal, not only for America itself but for all mankind."

Certainly that is a challenge to every business, labor union, school, college, church and community in this country. Not only that, it is a challenge which must be met if our country and all that it has offered us and meant to us is to survive. How ironic and tragic it will be if a thousand years from now historians must write that America went the way of Greece and Rome because some of its people stubbornly persisted in attitudes and acts which made a lie out of the great democratic principles of equality and freedom for all, without regard to race, creed or color. We cannot let that happen, and it won't happen, if every one of us has the resolution, determination and, whenever necessary, the moral courage to make democracy a living thing, in every sense of the word.

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