Expect Justice Now
by Jessica Eastland

America bred itself on impatience. The colonists' unwillingness to wait indefinitely for Britain to make social changes impelled our separation from England—the event that thrust our nation into existence. Patrick Henry fiercely motivated the members of the Second Virginia Convention by contending that the colonists should not wait. "When shall we be stronger?" he argued. "Will it be the next week, or the next year? Will it be when we are totally disarmed and when a British guard shall be stationed in every house? . . . We have no election in this matter. If we were base enough to desire it, it is now too late to retire from the contest." His plea for urgency stemmed from the understanding that fighting against injustice required impatience and that a point had been reached where action could not be avoided. For every man who lived under the stress of a constant military presence in his home, or who faced a trial under a judicial system that submitted to the whims of a tyrannical king, or who was losing business over unnecessary taxes, waiting was no help. Our founding fathers believed that if the colonists wanted change, they should just change and change now. And not only should they change, but as Jefferson explained in the Declaration of Independence, it was "their duty to throw off such government." By acknowledging "their duty," these early Americans not only set a precedent but established an expectation for their blossoming nation: we expect of ourselves that we will always stand up impatiently against injustice. This expectation is what the slaves used to gain their emancipation. It is the expectation that women used to gain the right to vote. And it is the expectation that Martin Luther King Jr. channeled into the modern era by urging Americans to apply their impatient heritage to civil injustice. King's urgency—what he called "the fierce urgency of Now"—is deeply rooted in American tradition ("Dream" 6). His insistence on deliverance from injustice may be regarded as the Expectation of Now.

As King's civil rights crusade showed, the Expectation of Now is marked by two characteristics. First, the idea of "Now" is inspired by an unjust situation that necessitates an immediate response. Second, "Expectation" involves going beyond recognizing the situation to developing and acting on a plan to amend it—a plan that may reasonably be expected to work. As we see in the example of the American Revolution, simply recognizing the injustice of their subjugation to tyrannical rule did not provide the colonists with freedom. Groups of intelligent and brave men came together to find a solution within the context of their situation. The physical distance between England and the colonies had allowed the English to rationalize their tyrannical behavior. But our founding fathers keenly observed that the same distance could become their salvation. The ocean that stood between England and America became the tactical advantage that allowed America to weaken King George's forces.

This particular solution only worked within the context of the American Revolution. In a later struggle that put republican values to the test, the activists in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s could not separate from their oppressors, the segregationists, as the colonists had separated from England. African Americans were spread throughout the United States, and so was racial prejudice. Martin Luther King created the Expectation of Now in his national audience only after he recognized that an assumed disadvantage in the battle for civil liberties could become the means of freedom for African Americans: namely, the white moderate. He brought this political bloc to the fore: "I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Counciler or the Klux Klanner, but the white moderate" ("Letter" 368-9). Dr. King knew that if he could motivate the white moderates to seek reform, they would provide a major tactical advantage in his campaign to weaken the segregationist. They possessed the power to vote, the power to hold
public office, and the social standing to command the respect of other whites.

In order to galvanize white America, Dr. King emphasized the need for immediate action in both his "Letter from Birmingham Jail" and his "I Have a Dream" speech. First, he used historical evidence to remind Americans of their tradition of impatiently combating injustice. Next, he argued segregation was an injustice that could not wait by demonstrating its violence. He revealed not only the prevalence of discrimination in black America, but also the darkness and distress that it brought to every black person. Finally, he envisioned a bright future in which equality would be available to everyone, and he developed a plan to obtain his "dream" of the future.

In his call for equality, Dr. King places his audience, the American people, firmly within their own tradition of the Expectation of Now. From the Boston Tea Party to Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln, he presents our history by appealing to our commitment to fight to protect the promise that "all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" ("Dream" 4). His references in the Birmingham letter to Adolf Hitler and Communism appeal to a specifically American historical understanding of injustice while reminding Americans of their obligation to battle against it. "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." King understands that the solution of civil liberties for American blacks can be found within the hearts of white moderates because “the sacred heritage of our nation... [is] embodied in our echoing demands” ("Letter" 375). He cries out that this American "heritage" of striving for freedom should lead citizens to recognize that blacks are being "seared in the flames of withering injustice" ("Dream").

His use of "flames" is appropriate because he is invoking not just a history of action, but a history of immediate action. A man will know not to stand still when a fire alarm goes off because he knows of people dying in fires, and he will not wait three days before responding to such an alarm if a rescue is to be attempted. There is a “fierce urgency” to fire that necessitates an immediate response. In the same way, King knows an American will not stand still when the alarm of injustice is sounded because citizens respect the historical evidence of pain when others have failed to do so. King urges Americans to remember that there are situations where patience destroys lives. His appeal to history demands answers to questions such as: Would you have told Thomas Jefferson to just wait for England to change? Would you have instructed Abraham Lincoln to allow the South to give freedom to the slaves at the slaveholders' convenience? Can you forgive the Germans because they did not stand up in time to stop their tyrannical leader from murdering millions? He wants Americans to respond: "Of course not! We will not abide such injustice!" Just as a man cries "Fire!" and expects an immediate response, King now cries "Injustice!" and expects Americans to recognize “the fierce urgency” of the African American plight.

Having brought the passion of the past back into the hearts of his audience, Dr. King documents the ways in which the present situation of American blacks has reached a crisis. Here he suggests that white moderates have never lived an extreme reality in their "moderate" minds. When you can't feel the heat and smell the smoke, it's hard to believe a crisis exists. The African Americans are crying out for relief, but the white moderates are replying, "Show us the flames. Show us why we should not wait." The Now of black Americans has to become unbearably real for the white moderates. Regardless of the fault that could be found in their behavior up to Now, they are the ones holding the soothing waters of justice. They need to be compelled to use them.

With this in mind, Dr. King brings out the horrors of segregation. He lists grievances one after another, everything from police brutality to lynching to poverty. For example, he shows the
humiliation of one man trying to talk with his six-year-old daughter about why they cannot go to "Funtown" ("Letter" 366). In much of his rhetoric there is an overarching idea of "twenty million Negro brothers" suffering from inequalities, but in this example of a humiliated father and others like it, he vividly displays the pain of the present condition of an individual black man (366). This one man is living the horror of watching "ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form" in the mind of his daughter (366). King is communicating the need for action; he is insisting that white moderates face the fact that every moment they fail to advocate change, the individual black person must languish in this hateful existence. King moves away from a general idea of unhappiness to more specific situations where white moderates can sympathize, if not empathize, with the victim. And from sympathy comes action.

This method of enlisting support has always been well-received by America. The American revolutionaries understood that the larger idea of "mankind" is really only the combination of individuals. They understood that bringing happiness to individuals was the gateway to bringing happiness to mankind. In the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson famously maintained that "All men are created equal." That is, every single man is created equal. By appealing to this idea that individual needs are the foundation of universal happiness, Dr. King is appealing to the heart and soul of our nation. He knows that, of all people, Americans understand that failing to see and to respect individual needs can be devastating. He reveals that the contemporary response to African Americans harshly contradicts this nation's understanding of individualism.

He insists, moreover, that a change in this response is long overdue. Patience may be a virtue, and perhaps as a generic response, "Wait and see" is appropriate in some instances. But glaring injustice against each black man and woman demands unique and immediate attention. How long do the white moderates want the little girl to wait to go to Funtown? While white moderates wait for time to cure all, this little girl will not be allowed to attend school with white children. She will turn 18, but she will not be allowed to vote. She will watch her own children grow to submit to whites. She will become old and weak, but she will still have to give her seat on the bus to a young man because he is white. She will then die and never know the taste of equality. For her, "this 'Wait' almost always [means] 'Never,'" and never is unacceptable when you are dealing with someone's life and liberty ("Letter" 366).

Finally, Dr. King demands that white moderates open their eyes to the future of the nation. He predicts that the days until freedom is given to the blacks will have "neither rest nor tranquility" ("Dream" 7). Yet King does not believe that such a dark future will last long: "I have no despair about the future. . . . We will reach the goal of freedom" ("Letter" 375). He also knows that the freedom of African Americans will lead to a brighter future for the nation. The
is equally important to give Americans a hopeful future. What is the purpose of changing if you gain nothing? He shows them an America where “all of God’s children, white men and black men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, ‘Free at last!’” (“Dream” 21). As he lays out a plan of action, there needs to be a goal that is worth achieving, not just for black men and women, but for every citizen of America.

Keeping this “dream” of America as their goal, civil rights activists planned how African Americans would obtain their freedoms. But there has never been a rulebook for fighting against injustice. The colonists went to war to separate, Lincoln went to war to unite, and the suffragettes didn’t go to war at all. King understood that the plan to obtain civil liberties needed to work within the context of 1960s America. The African Americans were spread throughout the U.S., so just separating from America was impossible. If there was going to be change, it would need to be internal. Therefore it also needed to be nonviolent, because King and his followers wanted to live peacefully side-by-side with whites in the end. There were many things they could not do, but they could dramatize the Expectation of Now. High school and college students sat at a segregated lunch counter and ordered something. Other men and women chose not to take a ride on a segregated bus. Groups of African American citizens asked their local government to register them to vote. The only thing that separated them from civil freedom was the waitress not giving them the order, the bus driver not letting them on the bus, or the local official not signing the papers. A cup of coffee, a bus ride, a voter registration card, and every other form of justice could be had now. Why not expect to have it now? Why not demand to have it now? “Justice rolls down like waters,” proclaimed Dr. King in his speech (10), quoting Amos 5:24. The Expectation of Now simply broke the dams of segregation.

Two hundred years after the American Revolution and fifty years after the Civil Rights Movement, the complex strategies that the heroes of these movements used to obtain freedom are still a marvel to observe. Yet it is sobering to recognize how frequently America has embraced injustice. In the 1960s, white America ignored the dangers to freedom that their walls of superiority and hate had created. They condoned the latent contradictions in American culture because their convenience outweighed the concern that injustice could be at their door. But if social liberties are not for all, then what stops them from being denied to you? Dr. King showed America a future where the flames of injustice would interrupt every life. “The whirlwinds of revolt,” he said, “will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges” (“Dream” 7). America’s failure to provide justice for all would only build “structured dams that block the flow of social progress” (“Letter” 369). What would have happened if those dams had lingered?

Social dams unchallenged can mean death to millions. Dr. King knew that “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,” and he asked us to recall recent American and European history to confirm this truth (“Letter” 363). Look back to the Germans, who knew Hitler was wrong but didn’t stand up against the atrocities committed upon Jews. Martin Niemöller’s famous poem captures the consequences of German indifference:

First they came for the Jews
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for the Communists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a Communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists
and I did not speak out
because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for me
and there was no one left
to speak out for me.

After ignoring the persecution of others, many
Germans found themselves oppressed later. But when they tried to take a stand, there was no one there to defend them. If they did not suffer personal persecution at the hands of the Nazis, they suffered the economic and social devastation of their country that followed the end of World War II. The consequences of inaction in the face of such injustice are brutally real.

People fall prey to this mistake all the time. We build barriers in our society and we ignore the hazards because we never believe it is our problem; we shut our eyes to everything that does not directly concern us. We see others perish from injustices, but their perishing is not personal, so we push that feeling of "I need to do something to stop this" out of our minds. That is why action is the most critical aspect of the Expectation of Now. The 'Now' is frequently the easiest part. Most people can see a problem and understand the detriment of not responding quickly. But how frequently do people have the courage to maintain the Expectation of rectifying the situation? "Human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability; it comes through the tireless efforts of men," King said in his Birmingham letter (370). The Expectation calls for "tireless efforts" both in the planning of social change and in the quick execution of the plan. America has been blessed with heroes who have made a tradition of securing liberty for this nation, giving us a taste of Dr. King's "dream." But that dream only exists in motion. It is pushed and prodded into being by men and women who are not deceived that injustice is someone else's problem—men and women who impatiently expect freedom for everyone. These freedom fighters "are not satisfied until justice rolls down like waters," and they are willing to take immediate action to ensure that it does ("Dream" 10).

So fasten the Expectation of Now tightly to your heart, because this American tradition has led to us. The battle for liberty is now ours to fight. The barriers are our barriers. Our freedom is at stake. And we will be blamed if we fail.

**Works Cited**


