

CRITICAL MOMENT

SNAPSHOT OF A COMMUNICATIONS TURNING POINT



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“Normalcy, Never Again” is not the snappiest title for a speech, but if Dr Martin Luther King Jr had listened to his advisers, we would never have heard the one that replaced it: “I have a dream.”

The four words that secured King his place in history on that August afternoon in Washington, DC in 1963 weren’t meant to be. He had used them in previous speeches. His team didn’t want to hear them again. Clarence B. Jones, adviser and friend, recalls the words of the speechwriter Wyatt Walker the night before: “Don’t use the lines about ‘I have a dream.’ It’s trite. It’s cliché. You’ve used it too many times already.”

So King took the podium without them, opening with that rhetorical echo of the Gettysburg Address: “Five score years ago ...” There was applause for sure, but the crowd had heard many speeches that day. It was hot. They were tired. After a while the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, standing on the platform, intervened. She’d heard King “dream out loud” in Detroit. “Tell ’em about the dream, Martin. Tell ’em about the dream.”

There was a pause ... and the direction of the speech shifted. King said later that year: “I started out reading the speech, and I read it down to a point ... the audience response was wonderful that day ... And all of a sudden this thing came to me that ... I’d used many times before ... ‘I have

a dream.’ And I just felt that I wanted to use it here ... I used it, and at that point I just turned aside from the manuscript altogether. I didn’t come back to it.”

King’s words began to sing: “I say to you today, my friends, though, even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow ... I have a dream.”

The great civil rights leader chose not just to speak words on a page. Rather, he conveyed a dream. It is a reminder to us all that spreading a message in which we truly believe is more effective than merely sharing a script. ♦

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