



UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF TENNESSEE
Joel W. Solomon United States Courthouse
900 Georgia Avenue
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37402

MARKING MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. DAY:
THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF THE FEDERAL COURT

Many people repeat Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s quotation that "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." President Barack Obama, for one, repeated it often. Where did this quotation come from, and what is its connection to the federal courts?

We begin in 1965, with the historic march from Selma to Montgomery to protest the suppression of black voting rights in Alabama. On "Bloody Sunday," March 7, 1965, Alabama State troopers and mounted sheriff's deputies waded into hundreds of civil rights protesters on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma to stop the march. Among the beaten marchers that Sunday was future Congressman John Lewis, one of the leaders of the march.

After Bloody Sunday, Dr. King and other civil rights leaders decided it was imperative to complete the March. They filed a lawsuit in federal court in Montgomery seeking an injunction to prevent Alabama officials from interfering in the rest of the march. That case was assigned to United States District Judge Frank M. Johnson, Jr.

Judge Johnson held an evidentiary hearing at which Dr. King and other witnesses testified. Dr. King testified about his philosophy of nonviolence:

This philosophy says in substance that one must have the inner determination to resist what conscience tells him is evil with all of the strength and courage and zeal that he can muster; at the same time he must not resort to violence or hatred in the process. It is a way of seeking to achieve moral ends through moral means, and I would say that the basis of the philosophy of nonviolence is the persistent attempt to pursue just ends by engaging in creative nonviolent approaches and never coming to the point of retaliating with violence or using violence as an aggressive weapon in the process.

Under cross examination, Dr. King was asked about his views on disobeying the law when he thought the law was unjust or unfair. He gave this response:

I think there are times that laws can be unjust and that a moral man has no alternative but to disobey that law, but he must be willing to do it openly, cheerfully, lovingly, civilly, and not uncivilly, and with a willingness to accept the penalty,

with a hope and a belief that by accepting this and doing it in this way he will be able to arouse a conscience of the community over the injustice of the law and therefore lead to the bright day that everybody will set out to change it.

After the hearing, Judge Johnson ruled in favor of Dr. King and the marchers. In his ruling he said: “The law is clear that the right to petition one’s government for the redress of grievances may be exercised in large groups. Indeed, where, as here, minorities have been harassed, coerced and intimidated, group association may be the only realistic way of exercising such rights.” Judge Johnson permitted the march to Montgomery and prohibited Alabama authorities from interfering with the marchers.

Dr. King was greatly impressed with Judge Johnson’s handling of the hearing and the decision. He is quoted in the *New York Times* as commenting at the time that Judge Johnson was “the man who gave true meaning to the word ‘justice.’” For this and other decisions upholding the Constitution, Judge Johnson received threats and much criticism.

As a result of Judge Johnson’s decision, Dr. King and about 2,000 other marchers crossed the Edmund Pettus bridge and completed the five-day, 54-mile trek to Montgomery and the state capitol on March 25, 1965. The marchers were joined in Montgomery by nearly 50,000 supporters, ministers, priests, rabbis, ordinary citizens, and social activists. It was on the grounds of the Alabama state capitol building that Dr. King gave his historic, nationally televised speech containing the often-quoted phrase, which itself originated with the nineteenth century Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker. Dr. King had used the quotation before, but never before a national audience.

Dr. King called the country’s supportive response to the brutality on Bloody Sunday “a shining moment in the conscience of man.” In wrapping up his speech, he said:

I know some of you are asking today, ‘How long will it take?’ I come to say to you this afternoon, however difficult the moment, however frustrating the hour, it will not be long, because truth pressed to earth will rise again.

How long? Not long, because no lie can live forever!

How long? Not long, because you will reap what you sow!

How long? Not long, because the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

As a result of Bloody Sunday, Dr. King’s actions, and Judge Johnson’s decision, the need for a national voting rights law was irrefutably demonstrated. That year the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed by Congress and signed by President Lyndon B. Johnson. The law enabled millions of black people in the south to exercise their Constitutional right to vote and to thereby participate more fully in their local, state, and federal governments. It is actions like these—by individuals, elected officials, and judges—that bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice.

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