

Roy Wilkins

James J. Reeb Memorial Lecture
~~University~~
Princeton March 3, 1967

Theological Seminary

~~_____~~
The man whom we memorialize today gave his life two years ago for freedom and for love. The cause was the age-old struggle for decency, and ~~_____~~ dignity equality ~~_____~~ of opportunity among human beings.

Many men ~~_____~~ have died in that struggle and many, like James Reeb, have inspired others to ~~_____~~ beliefs and to deeds in behalf of the ideal.

In our country the crusade has been in progress for many ~~_____~~ generations. We had set ourselves the task at the outset of creating a nation where men would be equal before the law, where citizens, irrespective of their origins, would be judged upon their own abilities and would be free to advance as far as those abilities would take them. All this in a framework of individual freedom which respected the rights of man.

By 1965 when James Reeb came upon the great stage, we knew that the fight for our ~~_____~~ ideals was no easy one. We had had our ~~_____~~ wrestling over freedom of speech, of worship, of assembly, of ~~_____~~ speech. We knew that these were under constant assault, sometimes sly and circuitous in nature, often ~~_____~~ frontal ~~_____~~ and bold.

We had learned through years ~~of~~ of slave-owning and ~~the~~ slave-trading how deep and devious were our commitments to the degrading human slave code.

When, finally, we could not live longer as a nation with our ~~decadence~~ and its ~~poisoned~~ tentacles of commerce of every sort between men and states and regions, we fought a war and ~~wiped out~~ slavery. By constitutional amendments we made the former slaves citizens, gave them the ~~ballot~~ ballot and decreed equal treatment for them in American life.

But the ~~words~~ words of constitutional blessing did not change either the status ~~of~~ of black men or the hearts of white ones. Since the days of Reconstruction we have been trying to right the wrongs we knew to be there.

The United States Supreme Court ~~added to the~~ nation's travail with its ~~wickedly mischievous~~ ruling of 1896 which created the myth of a "separate-but-equal" constitutional world for Negro citizens. These were to live and die under this dictum for 58 years until the ~~United States Supreme Court~~ United States Supreme Court of 1954 struck down the separate-but-equal doctrine in the famous ~~school~~ school segregation

cases in May of that year.

In that year, which may properly be regarded as the year of the Second Emancipation, Negro Americans at last came under the same constitution as that which sheltered their white fellow citizens. There was no more Never-Never land for them, a land in which their rights as citizens were determined, not by the constitution, but by whimsical, but ~~not~~-the-less forceful, interpretations of equality under separatism. The rights of Negroes were what white people in a given locality said they were.

The new time and the new color-blind constitutionalism met were resistance--cunning, obdurate, violent. The years from 1954 to 1965 strewn with heartaches, setbacks and defeats, slow and painful, but also with thrilling advances, both physical and psychological.

Who here cannot remember the sit-ins, the marches, the demonstrations, the jails, the songs, the humor and the tears? Who does not see the gallant Kennedy and the years leading up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964?

Who did not go down into the valley of souls after Dallas

and climb the high ~~mountain~~^{mountain} of hope and of exalted resolve with the drive of Johnson toward the finishing of unfinished business in civil rights?

We ran into Selma ~~on~~^{on} that mountain climb and James Reeb helped us across the hateful crevice with his sacrifice.

~~We could not know that ~~this~~ the senseless ~~death~~^{killing} of this good man~~
~~would~~

We prayed that the senseless killing of this good man would ~~this~~ make the battle of Selma the last battle for freedom, but even as we prayed we remembered how many, ~~down~~ down through the ~~ages~~ ages, had died for man's forward inching and we knew in our hearts that after Reeb there would be more, many more, before the kingdom ~~was~~ came.

Last Monday--four days ago--Wharlest Jackson went about his work in the plant of the Armstrong Tire and Rubber Company in Natchez, Mississippi. He had just been upgraded to the job of mixer, a ~~category~~ category no Negro workman had held before in that plant. He worked overtime and left the plant late.

His pickup truck was parked on the street because the company parking lot was too small for all the ~~cars~~ cars of the employees. ~~In~~^{Within} a few minutes' drive of the curb, an explosion ripped through

the little truck and Jackson was ~~in~~ a dead man.

He was the father of five children. ~~and his wife had marched in a~~
~~protest demonstration in 1965~~ He had been treasurer of the Natchez,
 NAACP until last month when he resigned because ~~because~~ of his wife's
 recurrent illness. She had marched in a demonstration in 1965, had been
 held in ~~the~~ Parchman prison for a time ~~before~~ before bail was *made*
 available and had never been the same ~~after~~ *that* after ~~the~~ experience
 which ~~had~~ included sleeping on the floor.

Wharlest Jackson usually ~~gave~~ gave a ride home to George Metcalfe,
 fellow
 a worker who was maimed for life by a bomb planted under his car on
 August 27, 1965. At the time Metcalfe was president of the ~~the~~
 Natchez NAACP and had just finished leading a campaign to increase the
 number of registered Negro voters. Fate intervened. Metcalfe did not work
 the same schedule last Monday as did Jackson. Thus the failure to kill ~~him~~
 in August, 1965, was not redeemed by success ~~last~~ last Monday.

What a fiendish and dastardly ~~and~~ and cowardly obstruction to
 the ~~the~~ unending crusade for freedom! And how futile! The march to the
 voting booths in Selma was not stopped by the brutal murderers of James
 Reeb and the march to better jobs, better families and better education

in Natchez
 for children will not be stopped by the ghastly murder of Wharlest Jackson and the cruel maiming of George ~~Metcalfe~~ Negro Metcalfe.

In January, 1966, Vernon Dahmer, a farmer and business man of Hattiesburg, Miss., announced on a Sunday that his grocery store could be used in the voter registration campaign. That night, between midnight and dawn, nightriders firebombed his home ^{and} his grocery store, ~~burning him~~ burning him so severely that he died the next day.

Mr. Dahmer had been president of the Hattiesburg NAACP. He was a widely ~~respected~~ respected ~~citizen~~ citizen. Out of his extensive land holdings ~~his~~ his family ~~had~~ had made available the land used by the county for ~~the~~ a school. He was a good business man, operating besides his grocery store a saw mill and a sugar mill.

Four sons came to the funeral, two in the uniform of the United States Air Force, one in an Army ~~uniform~~ and one in ^a ~~the~~ Marines uniform. Four sons he had given to his country, but he was cut down for aiding the campaign to have his people vote.