

Dick Gregory (1932-)

Speech at St. John's Baptist Church

Birmingham, Alabama - May 20, 1963

He might have chosen to stay home and protect his lucrative career as a nationally acclaimed comedian, but Dick Gregory was ready to go to jail in Birmingham, Alabama. May 6, 1963, marked the day more nonviolent civil rights protestors were arrested than any other day in American history. As demonstrators took on a city with a reputation as "the Bastille of segregation."

Gregory flew in from Chicago to help. He led the first group of what became a wave of children and teenagers marching out of church doors to get arrested for protesting peacefully for equal rights. More than 3,300 people were already in Birmingham's jails when thousands more took part in what became known as "The Children's March." Birmingham's notorious police chief, Bull Connor, turned high-pressure fire hoses and snarling police dogs loose on the orderly protestors. The news coverage sparked international outrage.¹

After spending four days in jail, Gregory flew home to Chicago, then returned to Birmingham about a week later to address a Monday night mass meeting with the story of his arrest. Gregory was a veteran of civil rights protests. In 1961, he was asked by voting rights activist Medgar Evers to speak at a rally in Jackson, Mississippi. He lent his hand and his humor to other groups as well.²

Gregory was born in 1932 in St. Louis, where he grew up poor, especially after his father deserted his mother and five siblings. Gregory attended public schools and won a track scholarship to Southern Illinois University, which he attended until he was drafted in 1954. Gregory made a name for himself in Army talent shows, and after his discharge in 1956, he quit college to pursue a career in comedy. His first big break came at the Chicago Playboy Club when he filled in for an ailing white actor and, defying the odds, entertained a group of Southern businessmen with his racially barbed routine.

At the height of the Birmingham protests, Gregory gave confidential advice to Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy on how the Kennedy administration could work with civil rights leaders. It led to a secret New York meeting between RFK and a group of African American leaders, artists, and others organized by author James Baldwin.³

Gregory remained active in politics and civil rights. In 1967, he fasted for forty days to protest the Vietnam War. He also ran for mayor of Chicago and the U.S. presidency. In the 1970s and 1980s, Gregory became a widely quoted advocate of dieting and nutrition.

[Listen to the speech](#)

I'll tell you one thing, it sure is nice being out of that prison over there. Lot of people asked me when I went back to Chicago last night, they said, "Well how are the Negroes in Birmingham taking it? What did they act like? What did they look like?" I said, "Man, I got off a plane at 10:30, arrived at the motel at 11 and by one o'clock I was in jail." *[laughter]* So I know what you all mean when you refer to the good old days. I asked one guy, "What is the 'good old days'?" and he said, "10 B.C. and 15 B.C." And I said, "Baby, you're not that old" and he said, "Nah, I mean 10, 15 years before Bull Connor got here."

[laughter]

Man they had so many Negroes in jail over there, the day I was there, when you looked out the window and see one of them walking around free, you knew he was a tourist. I got back to Chicago last night and a guy said, "Well how would you describe the prison scene?" and I said, "Baby, just wall to wall us."

[laughter]

So I don't know, really, when you stop to think about it. That was some mighty horrible food they were giving us over there. First couple of days, it taste bad and look bad and after that it tasted like home cooking. *[laughter]* Matter of fact, it got so good the third day it got so good that I asked one of the guards for the recipe.

[laughter]

Of course you know, really, I don't mind going to jail myself, I just hate to see Martin Luther King in jail. For various reasons: one, when the final day get here, he is going to have a hard time trying to explain to the boss upstairs how he spent more time in jail than he did in the pulpit. *[laughter]* When I read in the paper in Chicago that they had him in jail on Good Friday, I said that's good. And I was praying and hoping when they put him in Good Friday they had checked back there Easter Sunday morning and he would have been gone. That would have shook up a lot of people, wouldn't it?

[laughter]

I don't know how much faith you have in newspapers, but I read an article in the paper a couple days ago, where the Russians - did you see this, they gave it a lot of space - the Russians claim they found Hitler's head. Well I want to tell you that's not true. You want to find Hitler's head, just look right up above Bull Connor's shoulders. *[laughter]* To be honest with you, I don't know why you call him 'Bull Connor.' Just say bull, that's half of it. Couple of them hep sisters over there in the corner.



I don't know, when you stop and think about it, I guess little by little when you look around, it kind of looks like we're doing alright. I read in the paper not too long ago, they picked the first Negro astronaut. That shows you so much pressure is being put on Washington, these cats just reach back and they trying to pacify us real quickly. A lot of people was happy that they had the first Negro astronaut, well I'll be honest with you, not myself. I was kind of hoping we'd get a Negro airline pilot first. They didn't give us a Negro airline pilot; they gave us a Negro astronaut. You realize that we can jump from back of the bus to the moon?

[laughter]

That's about the size of it. I don't know why this cat let 'em trick him into volunteering for that space job, they not even ready for a Negro astronaut. You have never heard of no dehydrated pig's feet.

I never would have let them give me that job, myself. No, I wouldn't, that's one job I don't think I could take. Just my luck, they'd put me in one of them rockets and blast it off, we'd land on Mars somewhere. A cat'd walk up to me with 27 heads, 59 jaws, 19 lips, 47 legs and look at me and say, "I don't want you marrying my daughter neither." Oh I'd have to cut him.

So I don't know, when you stop and think about it, we're all confused. I'm very confused-I'm married, my wife can't cook. No, it's not funny. How do you burn Kool-Aid? *[laughter]* You know, raising kids today is such a difficult task. These kids are so clever. They're so hip. My son walked up to me not too long ago, he said, "Daddy, I'm going to run away from home. Call me a cab." *[laughter]* I remember when I was a kid, I told my father the same thing, I said, "Pa if you don't give me a nickel, I'm leaving home." He said, "Son I'm not gonna give you one penny and take your brothers with you." *[laughter]* I remember when I was a kid, if my parents wanted to punish me, it was simple, they told me, "Get upstairs to your room," which was a heck of a punishment because there was no upstairs.

[laughter]

And I just found out something not too long ago I didn't know. You don't walk into a kid's room anymore. You have to knock first. My daughter told me, "I'm three years old, I've got rights." What do you mean you have rights? You haven't even got a job. I said, "Honey, you don't know how fortunate you are: you have a room by yourself, a bed by yourself." I said, "Honey, do you realize when I was three years old, so many of us slept in the same bed together, if I went to the washroom in the middle of the night, I had to leave a bookmark so I wouldn't lose my spot." *[laughter]* She said, "Daddy aren't you happy you're living with us now?"

[laughter]

Let me tell you about this daughter of mine. Last Christmas Eve night, I walked into my daughter's room, I said, "Michelle, tonight's Christmas Eve, it's 11:30, you're three years old, go

to bed and get ready for Santa Claus." She said, "I don't believe in Santa Claus." I said, "What in the world you mean you don't believe in Santa Claus and I'm picking up the tab?" She said, "Daddy, I don't care what you picking up, I don't believe in Santa Claus." I said, "Why?" She said "Because you know darn good and well there ain't no white man coming into our neighborhood after midnight." *[laughter]* So you see, we have problems.

I'd like to say, it's been a pleasure being here. A lot of people wonder, why would I make a decision to go to Greenwood, Mississippi? Why would I make a decision to come to Birmingham? When I lay in my bed at night and I think if America had to go to war tonight, I would be willing to go to any of the four corners of the world; and if I am willing to go and lay on some cold dirt, away from my love ones and my friends and take a chance on losing my life to guarantee some foreigner that I've never met equal rights and dignity, I must be able to come down here.

You know it is such a funny thing how the American mind works-and this is white and Negro alike - how many on both sides of the fence say, "Well did he go down for publicity?" One, I don't need publicity. But the amazing thing is if I had decided to quit show business and join the Peace Corps and go to South Vietnam, nobody would have said anything about publicity. Only when you decide to help us, you get a complaint.

You people here in the South are the most beautiful people alive in the world today. The only person in this number one country in the world, that knows where he's going and have a purpose, is the Southern Negro - bar none. When you break through and get your freedom and your dignity, then we up North will also break through and get our freedom and our dignity. Because up North we have always been able to use the South as our garbage can. But when you make these white folks put that lid on this garbage can down here, we are going to have to throw our garbage in our own backyard, and it's going to stink worse than it stinks down here.

[applause]

One of greatest problems the Negro has in America today is that we have never been able to control our image. The man downtown has always controlled our image. He has always told us how we're supposed to act. He has always told us a nigger know his place-and he don't mean this, because if we knew our place he wouldn't have to put all those signs up. *[applause]* And if you think we know our place, let one of us get \$2 uptight on our rent and 50 cents in our pocket and we'll kick the hinges off them doors downtown to open up.

But we have never been able to control our image. He's always told us about a Negro crime rate, to the extent that you have finally decided to believe it. This is the bad part about not being able to control your image. I've always said, "What Negro crime rate?" Look at it, we not raping three-year-old kids. We haven't put forty sticks of dynamite in mother's luggage and blew one of them airplanes out the sky. And I don't care what they say about us, we've never lynched anybody *[applause]*. So what Negro crime rate? If you want to see a true Negro crime rate,

watch television. Look at all them gangster movies, you never see us. Of course now, you can look at TV, week in and week out and look at all those doctor series they have on television and you'd be led to believe a Negro never gets sick.

[laughter]

For some reason, not being able to control our image has made us almost ashamed of us. Because anything he decides to tell us, about us, we believe it, and become ashamed of it. Negro crime rate? Sure, a lot of us get arrested. Why? The answer is right out there in the street, every day. You got a Southerner out there in the police department that is probably the lowest form of man walking the earth today. Now here's a man out there, didn't like you in the first place, now he's got a gun. What is your crime rate supposed to look like?

They have gotten to the point where they've made you ashamed of relief. "Don't talk to so and so, she's on ADC." I was on relief twenty years, back home. It wasn't funny, but I wasn't ashamed of it, because had they gave my daddy the type of job he deserved to have, we wouldn't have needed no relief. And the day this white man - not only in the South, but in America - gives us fair housing, fair jobs, equal schools and the other things the Constitution say we supposed to have, we will relieve him of relief. *[applause]* Until that day rolls around, let him pay his dues. The check ain't much, but it's steady.

And then you read a lot and hear a lot about Negro women with illegitimate kids. Oh this really makes you ashamed. Each time you pick up one of them newspapers, one of them magazines, reading about Negro women with illegitimate kids, check the article out and see who wrote it. Some chick living in a neighborhood where they've got abortion credit cards.

Never been able to control our image, all at once we're ashamed. Talked about us for so long, we started believing it. Talked about our hair for so long, for a hundred years now we've been trying to straighten our wig out. Wouldn't it be wild if you find out one day that we had natural hair and there was something wrong with theirs?

Every time you look around, they're talking about a Negro with a switchblade to the extent we don't want to carry switchblades no more. Well I keep me a switchblade. I got a deal going with the white folks, I don't say nothing about their missiles and they don't say nothing about my switchblade. *[laughter]* Here's a man who owns half the missiles in the world and want to talk about my switchblade. I don't know one Negro in America that manufactures switchblades - now he going to sell me some and then talk about it after I get it.

He made a lot of mistakes and had all you older people been able to figure out the mistakes he made like the younger people figured them out, we would have had this a long time ago. *[applause]* Yep, he made a lot of mistakes. Here's a man that got over here and didn't even know how to work segregation. Didn't even know how prejudice worked. He just wanted to try it. He said, "We got a bunch of them niggers, let's try it" and he messed up. 'Cause any clown knows

that if you want to segregate somebody and keep them down forever, you put them up front. They made the great mistake of putting us in the back; we've been watching them for 300 years. *[applause]* Yeah, that was a big mistake they made. We know how dirty they get their underwear, because we wash them for them. They don't even know if we wear them or not.

They made a couple of mistakes. It is beginning to catch up with them now. One of the biggest mistakes they made, is that white lady. All at once they think all we want is a white lady. And they don't understand why we want one. It's their fault. Bufferins can't advertise Bufferins without one of them white ladies and so we feel we need a white lady to get rid of our headache. *[laughter]* Every year General Motors advertise them Cadillacs with them blonds and know we gonna get one of them cars. Every time I go to the movie, I can't see none of them pretty little chocolate drops in them dynamite love scenes-show me one of them white ladies. Every time I look at Miss America, I can't see no Mau Mau queens-show me one of them white ladies. So what am I supposed to watch? But I'll make a deal with the good white brother, yes, if he let me turn on television and see some of my women advertising some of them products we use so much of, if he let me go to the movie and see some of my folks in some of them good scenes, and if he let me turn on television this year and see seven of us on Miss America to make up, then anytime he see me with a white woman I'll be holding her for the police.

[laughter]

Again, I'd like to say it is completely and totally my pleasure being here. I don't know how many of you in the house have kids that was in jail. Four days I was in jail. Had you been there, as I was, walking through, listening, it was really something to be proud of, really something to be proud of. And if something ever happens and you have to do it again, don't hesitate. *[applause]* Because the only thing we have left now that's gonna save this whole country and eventually the world is us. He taught us honesty and he forgot how it worked himself. Nothing wrong with that white man downtown-we just have to teach him how to act. He don't know how to be fair. He don't know-we'd never complain if he was fair. "Keep me a second-class citizen, but just don't make me pay first-class taxes. Send me to the worst schools in America, if you must, but when I go downtown to apply for that job, don't give me the same test you give that white boy." Now we are going to have to teach him how to be fair and the only thing we have to do it with is ourselves.

This is it, this is all we have. He has all the police, all the dogs; never thought I'd see the day the fireman would turn water on us in summertime and make us hotter, but they did. What these white folks don't realize is a terrific amount of police brutality that I have witnessed down here, what they fail to realize is when you let a man bend the law and aim it at us, he'll aim that same law at you.

[applause]



These are the problems that we have. Again, I am as far away from you as Delta Airline is; anytime there is any problem, I will be back. Thank you very much and God bless you.

[applause]

1. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954-63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 711; 756-802.
2. Delores Nicholson, *Notable Black American Men* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Research, 1999), 1025-27.
3. Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 808-11.

