

Letter from Jackie Robinson on Civil Rights



Time and Setting of the Letter

[Jackie] Robinson responded to Presidential civil rights comments amid continuing controversy over school desegregation efforts in Little Rock, AR, and the South. In September 1957, Governor Orval Faubus had ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent entry of nine African American students into that city's Central High School. President Eisenhower reluctantly sent U.S. troops to enforce the school's integration. (National Archives and Records Administration, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, Abilene, Kansas)

Copy of the Jackie Robinson Letter

May 13, 1958

The President

The White House

Washington, D.C.

My dear Mr. President:

I was sitting in the audience at the Summit Meeting of Negro Leaders yesterday when you said we must have patience. On hearing you say this, I felt like standing up and saying, "Oh no! Not again."

I respectfully remind you sir, that we have been the most patient of all people. When you said we must have self-respect, I wondered how we could have self-respect and remain patient considering the treatment accorded us through the years.

17 million Negroes cannot do as you suggest and wait for the hearts of men to change. We want to enjoy now the rights that we feel we are entitled to as Americans. This we cannot do unless we pursue aggressively goals which all other Americans achieved over 150 years ago.

As the chief executive of our nation, I respectfully suggest that you unwittingly crush the spirit of freedom in Negroes by constantly urging forbearance and give hope to those pro-segregation leaders like Governor Faubus who would take from us even those freedoms we now enjoy. Your own experience with Governor Faubus is proof enough that forbearance and not eventual integration is the goal the pro-segregation leaders seek.

In my view, an unequivocal statement backed up by action such as you demonstrated you could take last fall in dealing with Governor Faubus if it became necessary, would let it be known that America is determined to provide - in the near future - for Negroes - the freedoms we are entitled to under the constitution.

Respectfully yours,

Jackie Robinson

Source: "Featured Document: Jackie Robinson's Letter to President Eisenhower." *U.S. National Archives and Records Administration*, accessed January 29, 2014.

http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/featured_documents/jackie_robinson_letter/index.html

Excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from the Birmingham City Jail

by Martin Luther King Jr.



In April of 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights leaders in Birmingham, Alabama, began the Birmingham Campaign. The Birmingham Campaign was a series of protests against segregation laws in Birmingham. The city of Birmingham responded by banning the protests. King was then arrested for continuing to protest. He was placed in solitary confinement in the Birmingham City Jail, where he wrote his Letter from the Birmingham City Jail.

You may well ask, Why direct action? Why sit-ins, marches, etc.? Isn't negotiation a better path?" You are exactly right in your call for negotiation. Indeed, this is the purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and establish such creative tension that a community that has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. I just referred to the creation of tension as a part of the work of the nonviolent resister. This may sound rather shocking. But I must confess that I am not afraid of the word tension. I have earnestly worked and preached against violent tension, but there is a type of constructive nonviolent tension that is necessary for growth. Just as Socrates felt that it was necessary to create a tension in the mind so that individuals could rise from the bondage of myths

and half-truths to the unfettered realm of creative analysis and objective appraisal, we must see the need of having nonviolent gadflies to create the kind of tension in society that will help men rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and brotherhood. So the purpose of the direct action is to create a situation so crisis-packed that it will inevitably open the door to negotiation. We, therefore, concur with you in your call for negotiation. Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in the tragic attempt to live in monologue rather than dialogue...

We must use time creatively, and forever realize that the time is always ripe to do right. Now is the time to make real the promise of democracy, and transform our pending national elegy into a creative psalm of brotherhood. Now is the time to lift our national policy from the quicksand of racial injustice to the solid rock of human dignity.

Vocabulary

dramatize

verb

definition: to make exciting or dramatic, sometimes by exaggerating.

She dramatizes her problems.

Spanish: dramatizar, exagerar

forms: dramatized, dramatizes, dramatizing

negotiation

noun

definition: (often plural) discussions meant to help people agree on something.

Negotiations between the two countries led to a peace treaty.

Spanish: negociación, gestión

tension

noun

definition: physical, mental, or emotional strain.

I could feel the tension in the exam room.

Massage can help reduce muscle tension.

Spanish: tensión

1. Before you start reading...

Here are the vocabulary words that will be in this reading. Let's see how well you already know them.

Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

| | Don't know it | Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning | Know something about its meaning | Know it well |
|-----------------------|---------------|--|----------------------------------|--------------|
| administration | | | | |
| negotiation | | | | |
| tension | | | | |

2. Word Matcher

Every word has other words that have similar meanings or even the exact same meaning (these are called synonyms!). Draw a line from each similar word or synonym to the vocabulary word that it matches!

leadership

chiefs

executives

bargaining

summit

administration

negotiation

tension

agreement

stress

anxiety

strain

3. After reading and exploring the words through some activities...

Do you know these words better? Check the box that shows how well you know each word. It's ok if you don't know them yet (this is not graded)!

| | Don't know it | Have heard of it but not sure of its meaning | Know something about its meaning | Know it well |
|-----------------------|---------------|--|----------------------------------|--------------|
| administration | | | | |
| negotiation | | | | |
| tension | | | | |

Name: _____ Date: _____

Use the article "Excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from the Birmingham City Jail" to answer questions 1 to 2.

1. According to Martin Luther King Jr., why does nonviolent direct action seek to create a crisis?
2. Why does Martin Luther King Jr. think it is necessary to create "constructive nonviolent tension" in society?

Use the article "Letter from Jackie Robinson on Civil Rights" to answer questions 3 to 4.

3. Jackie Robinson heard President Eisenhower suggest that black Americans must have patience. What did Jackie Robinson feel like doing when he heard this?
4. The word "forbearance" means patient self-control. Why does Jackie Robinson feel that the President is crushing the spirit of freedom in African Americans by urging them to have forbearance? Use evidence from the text to support your answer.

Use the articles "Excerpt from Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from the Birmingham City Jail" and "Letter from Jackie Robinson on Civil Rights" to answer questions 5 to 6.

5. Both Jackie Robinson and Martin Luther King Jr. wrote letters that express their views on how to fight for equality for African Americans. How are their views similar? Use information from both letters to support your answer.
6. Read this paragraph from Jackie Robinson's letter: "17 million Negroes cannot do as you suggest and wait for the hearts of men to change. We want to enjoy now the rights that we feel we are entitled to as Americans. This we cannot do unless we pursue aggressively goals which all other Americans achieved over 150 years ago." How might Martin Luther King Jr. respond to this statement? Use evidence from his letter to support your answer.