



IN THEIR OWN WORDS:

**HARRY S.
TRUMAN**

1947

Annual Message to the Congress on the State of the Union, January 6

“We have recently witnessed in this country numerous attacks upon the constitutional rights of individual citizens as a result of racial and religious bigotry. Substantial segments of our people have been prevented from exercising fully their right to participate in the election of public officials, both locally and nationally. Freedom to engage in lawful callings has been denied.

“The will to fight these crimes should be in the hearts of every one of us.

“For the Federal Government that fight is now being carried on by the Department of Justice to the full extent of the powers that have been conferred upon it. While the Constitution withholds from the Federal Government the major task of preserving peace in the several States, I am not convinced that the present legislation reached the limit of federal power to protect the civil rights of its citizens.

“I have therefore, by Executive Order [9808], established the President’s Committee on Civil Rights to study and report on the whole problem of federally secured civil rights, with a view to making recommendations to the Congress. ”

Remarks to Members of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, January 15

“You have a vitally important job. We are none of us entirely familiar with just how far the Federal Government under the Constitution has a right to go in these civil rights matters.

“I want our Bill of Rights implemented in fact. We have been trying to do this for 150 years. We are making progress, but we are not making progress fast enough. This country could easily be faced with a situation similar to the one with which it was faced in 1922. That date was impressed on my mind because in 1922 I was running for my first elective office—county judge of Jackson County [Missouri]—and there was an organization in that county that met on hills and burned crosses and worked behind sheets [i]. There is a tendency in this country for that situation to develop again, unless we do something tangible to prevent it.

“I don't want to see any race discrimination. I don't want to see any religious bigotry break out in this country as it did then.

“You people can, I think, make a real contribution here, with the assistance of the Attorney General and the Office of the President, that will give us tangible results. Your willingness to undertake the job shows that your hearts are in the right place.

“I appreciate highly your willingness to spend your time on a matter of this kind. You may get more brickbats than bouquets. Your willingness to undertake the job shows that your hearts are in the right place.

“I know you will go to work in earnest and I hope that you will bring me something tangible by which we can accomplish the purposes which we have been trying to accomplish for 150 years ever since the adoption of the Constitution.

“I am sure it will be. I have been very much alarmed at certain happenings around the country that go to show there is a latent spirit in some of us that isn't what it ought to be. It has been difficult in some places to enforce even local laws. I want the Attorney General to know just exactly how far he can go legally from the Federal Government's standpoint. I am a believer in the sovereignty of the individual and of the local governments. I don't think the Federal Government ought to be in a position to exercise dictatorial powers locally, but there are certain rights under the Constitution of the United States which I think the Federal Government has a right to protect. It's a big job. Go to it!”

Truman, “Remarks to Members of the President's Committee on Civil Rights, 1/15/47.” Peters and Woolley, The American Presidency Project. <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=12883>.

[i] The Ku Klux Klan

Address Before the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, June 29

“I am happy to be present at the closing session of the 38th Annual Conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The occasion of meeting with you here at the Lincoln Memorial affords me the opportunity to congratulate the association upon its effective work for the improvement of our democratic processes.

“I should like to talk to you briefly about civil rights and human freedom. It is my deep conviction that we have reached a turning point in the long history of our country’s efforts to guarantee freedom and equality to all our citizens. Recent events in the United States and abroad have made us realize that it is more important today than ever before to insure that all Americans enjoy these rights.

“When I say all Americans, I mean all Americans.

“The civil rights laws written in the early years of our Republic, and the traditions which have been built upon them, are precious to us. Those laws were drawn up with the memory still fresh in men’s minds of the tyranny of an absentee government. They were written to protect the citizen against any possible tyrannical act by the new government in this country.

“But we cannot be content with a civil liberties program which emphasizes only the need of protection against the possibility of tyranny by the Government. We cannot stop these.



“We must keep moving forward, with new concepts of civil rights to safeguard our heritage. The extension of civil rights today means, not protection of the people against the Government, but protection of the people by the Government.

“We must make the Federal Government a friendly, vigilant defender of the rights and equalities of all Americans. And again I mean all Americans.

President Harry S. Truman speaks from a rostrum on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, as he addresses the closing session of the 38th annual conference of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). June 29, 1947. Harry S. Truman Library & Museum, Frank Pace Papers. Photograph. Accession 73-2561. <https://www.trumanlibrary.org>.

“As Americans, we believe that every man should be free to live his life as he wishes. He should be limited only by his responsibility to his fellow countrymen. If this freedom is to be more than a dream, each man should be guaranteed equality of opportunity. The only limit to an American’s achievement should be his ability, his industry, and his character. These rewards for his effort should be determined only by those truly relevant qualities.

“Our immediate task is to remove the last remnants of the barriers which stand between millions of our citizens and their birthright. There is no justifiable reason for discrimination because of ancestry, or religion, or race, or color.

“We must not tolerate such limitations on the freedom of any of our people and on their enjoyment of basic rights which every citizen in a truly democratic society must possess.

“Every man should have the right to a decent home, the right to an education, the right to adequate medical care, the right to a worthwhile job, the right to an equal share in making the public decisions through the ballot, and the right to a fair trial in a fair court.

“We must insure that these rights—on equal terms—are enjoyed by every citizen.

“To these principles I pledge my full and continued support.

“Many of our people still suffer the indignity of insult, the narrowing fear of intimidation, and, I regret to say, the threat of physical injury and mob violence. Prejudice and intolerance in which these evils are rooted still exist. The conscience of our nation, and the legal machinery which enforces it, have not yet secured to each citizen full freedom from fear.

“We cannot wait another decade or another generation to remedy these evils. We must work, as never before, to cure them now. The aftermath of war and the desire to keep faith with our Nation’s historic principles make the need a pressing one.

“The support of desperate populations of battle-ravaged countries must be won for the free way of life. We must have them as allies in our continuing struggle for the peaceful solution of the world’s problems. They may surrender to the false security offered so temptingly by totalitarian regimes unless we can prove the superiority of democracy.

“Our case for democracy should be as strong as we can make it. It should rest on practical evidence that we have been able to put our own house in order.

“For these compelling reasons, we can no longer afford the luxury of a leisurely attack upon prejudice and discrimination. There is much that State and local governments can do in providing positive safeguards for civil rights. But we cannot, any longer, await the growth of a will to action in the slowest State or the most backward community.

“Our National Government must show the way.

“This is a difficult and complex undertaking. Federal laws and administrative machineries must be improved and expanded. We must provide the Government with better tools to do the job. As a first step, I appointed an Advisory Committee on Civil Rights last December. Its members, fifteen distinguished private citizens, have been surveying our civil rights difficulties and needs for several months. I am confident that the product of their work will be a sensible and vigorous program for action by all of us.

“We must strive to advance civil rights wherever it lies within our power. For example, I have asked the Congress to pass legislation extending basic civil rights to the people of Guam and American Samoa so that these people can share our ideals of freedom and self-government. This step, with others which will follow, is evidence to the rest of the world of our confidence in the ability of all men to build free institutions.

“The way ahead is not easy. We shall need all the wisdom, imagination and courage we can muster. We must and shall guarantee the civil rights of our citizens. Never before has the need been so urgent for skillful and vigorous action to bring us closer to our ideal.

“We can reach this goal. When past difficulties faced our Nation we met the challenge with inspiring charters of human rights -- the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Emancipation Proclamation. Today our representatives and those of other liberty-loving countries on the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, are preparing an International Bill of Rights. We can be confident that it will be a great landmark in man’s long search for freedom since its members consist of such distinguished citizens of the world as Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt.

“With these noble charters to guide us, and with faith in our hearts, we shall make our land a happier home for our people, a symbol of hope for all men, and a rock of security in a troubled world.

“Abraham Lincoln understood so well the ideal which you and I seek today. As the conference closes we would do well to keep in mind his words, when he said:

“ ‘ . . . if it shall please the Divine Being who determines the destinies of nations, we shall remain a united people, and we will humbly, seeking the Divine Guidance, make their prolonged national existence a source of new benefits to themselves and their successors, and to all classes and conditions of mankind. ’ ”

**Statement by the President
Making Public a Report of the
Civil Rights Committee, October
29**

“The President’s Civil Rights Committee has just submitted its report. I am going to read and study this report with great care and I recommend to all my countrymen that they do the same thing.

“I created this Committee with a feeling of urgency. No sooner were we finished with the war than racial and religious intolerance began to appear and threaten the very things we had just fought for.

“In times past, when our American freedoms were threatened, groups of our citizens banded together and set out on paper the principles they felt would preserve freedom and the kinds of action that would defend freedom.



“The Declaration of Independence was that kind of document, and I notice that the title of this report is taken from the Declaration of Independence. I hope that this Committee has given us as broad a document as that—an American charter of human freedom in our time.

“The need for such a charter was never greater than at this moment. Men of good will everywhere are striving, under great difficulties, to create a worldwide moral order, firmly established in the life of nations. For us here in America, a new charter of human freedom will be a guide for action, and in the eyes of the world, it will be a declaration of our renewed faith in the American goal—the integrity of the individual human being, sustained by the moral consensus of the whole Nation, protected by a Government based on equal freedom under just laws.

“The members of this Committee are busy men and women. We all owe them a debt of gratitude. I feel I am speaking for all Americans when I thank them for their unselfish, devoted service. ”