

TRANSCRIPT OF STATEWIDE TV-RADIO TALK TO  
THE PEOPLE OF FLORIDA ON RACE RELATIONS

BY

GOVERNOR LEROY COLLINS

DELIVERED OVER STATEWIDE TV-RADIO

NETWORK 5:30 - 6:00 P. M.

SUNDAY, MARCH 20, 1960

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Hello, everybody. I first want to thank station WFGA and all the other broadcasting stations throughout the state for giving me this opportunity of coming into your living room this afternoon and talking to you about some problems about which I am very gravely concerned and that affect every man, woman and child in our state.

First, let me say though to all the people of Florida how deeply we feel regret about the losses and damages that high waters have occasioned so many of our citizens. We hope that damages can be minimized as best as possible, and, of course, all of us stand by as neighbors to render whatever help we can to these citizens and friends.

Well, I want to talk to you about race relations. Frankly, I had a group of my friends come over to see me yesterday and they said very frankly, "Governor, we don't think you should make this broadcast you are talking about tomorrow afternoon." I asked why and they said, "Well, you have less than a year now to serve in this office and certainly you know that whatever you say is going to make some people mad, and we just don't see the reason why you should stick your neck out or become involved in a discussion of that very explosive issue."

Well, frankly, I don't follow that sort of logic. I believe this is a very grave and serious matter facing the people of this state, affecting all of us, and I think the people of this state when their governor has convictions about a matter expect him to

express those convictions directly to them.

Now that's the policy I've been following as your governor. I know many times that I have taken stands that many people have not approved of. But I still believe that I have the respect of the people of Florida because I believe those people have felt I was sincere in my position and I think by and large where they have differed with me, they have come later to feel that there was considerable logic in the stand that I took in respect to them.

Now let me say this, I believe very deeply that I represent every man, woman and child in this state as their governor, whether that person is black or white, whether that person is rich or poor, or whether that person is influential or not influential.

A governor, if he is worth his salt, has a deep responsibility for all of the people and I feel that responsibility. I want to say this to you, too, that I am not a candidate for anything. It seems almost every time I speak out about anything these days and for some time past now, I am projected as being a candidate for vice-president or having some personal motives of some sort. Now that is absolutely -- there is nothing to that.

I believe that the face of Florida -- the image of Florida -- is not in its pine trees or in its palm trees or even in its orange trees, but in the people of this state. I believe that large star on our map of the United States that represents Florida stands for the people of Florida.

Now let me review briefly something of the history of this racial strife that we are contending with. It was on last February 1, that four Negro college students from a North Carolina college

went into a Woolworth store in Greensboro, N. C. They bought some tooth paste and other minor items at one of the counters, then turned over to the lunch counter and ordered a cup of coffee. The waitress there said, "I'm sorry, we do not serve colored people here!" One of the students said, "Why I have just been served here. I bought a tube of tooth paste over there." She said, "Well, we serve you over there, but we do not serve you here."

That was the first of these demonstrations. Many followed there in Greensboro involving hundreds of people. They spread throughout North Carolina on to Virginia, to South Carolina, to all of the other states of the South, including Florida.

And we have had many throughout our state and, unlike some people assume, not all of these demonstrations were sponsored by students; in fact, only a minority have been sponsored by students. But the worst of all, of course, has occurred, I think, as some of you know, in Tallahassee. And there it was largely sponsored by students from the Florida A & M University, our Negro institution, and Florida State University.

There the city of Tallahassee took a rather rigid and punitive position in respect to these demonstrations. And, of course, this gave the appearance of partiality or of non-objectivity and this caused the conditions to become aggravated and we finally developed conditions there in Tallahassee of which I am frankly ashamed.

Yesterday and the day before there was a tenseness about the atmosphere in Tallahassee that was disgraceful. We had armed patrolmen, state, county and city, patrolling every street because we have had the wildest rumors imaginable going on there about what was going to happen.

First a hundred Negro citizens were going to be brought in to augment local forces, then that grew as high as 6,000. First we had large numbers of White Citizens Council members who were coming in to augment the white forces and that grew up into the thousands. Of course, all that proved to be completely unsound, but our people got worried. They were calling me at night -- widows asking me if I thought they would be safe in their homes at night time.

An element of fear which is certainly an insidious and a dangerous thing to behold. When I was going back to my office just yesterday noon the highway patrolman who was driving me said, "Governor, I just got word that a bus load of students -- Negro students from Alabama -- has just pulled into the A & M University campus and they've got a lot of baseball bats and they're out to augment the local forces, to put on some sort of a demonstration."

I called the president of the university when I got to the office and he said, "It is true, Governor, we've got a bus load. For a year now we have had a ball game, a baseball game, scheduled with the institution up there in Alabama and the boys are here with their bats to play the ball game." And they played the ball game.

But there were wild rumors about runs on hardware stores for ammunition, about runs for baseball bats, about runs on stores for hammers, knives, screwdrivers and everything else. A perfectly absurd situation to develop here in our free America, in our free Florida and in our free Tallahassee.

But what is the legal situation about these so-called demonstrations?

First, I want to say this to everyone of you: that we are going to have law and order in this state.

I don't care who the citizen is, he is going to be protected in pursuing his legal rights in Florida.

And that goes for every place in Florida.

Now under our free enterprise system and under our laws a merchant has the legal right to select the patrons he serves. And certainly he is going to be protected in that legal right.

The customer, of course, has the legal right to trade or not to trade with any man he wants to -- and, of course, there is the right to demonstrate and the people should be protected in that right, too.

But I want to call your attention that the right to demonstrate in all cases is limited by the fact that if there is any clear and present danger that that demonstration will incite public disorder, it is ~~un~~lawful. And, of course, a situation of this kind could bring about that kind of condition in one community and not in another.

Now we have applied that rule. I called on our sheriffs two years ago to apply it against the Ku Klux Klan. While they were planning a perfectly lawful demonstration under normal circumstances, the information we had about the way they were going to conduct that, I felt would clearly incite disorder and danger and so we called upon the sheriffs to prevent demonstrations of that sort and they did.

But actually, friends, we are foolish if we just think about resolving this thing on a legal basis. In the first place, our merchants have much involved so far as their business prosperity -- not to have racial tensions of ~~this~~ order.

Boycotts can be extremely damaging and will be extremely damaging to their businesses. And, of course, any racial tension brings about depression in business and depresses generally the business spirit of any community.

But aside from that we've got some moral rights and we've got some principles of brotherhood that are involved in these issues that I want to talk with you just a little about.

I'm amazed at how different people react differently in this particular area. My own mother and father, I found the other day, don't fully agree on how they feel about race relations. I know my own wife and I have disagreements from time to time about race relations.

And so far as I am personally concerned, I don't mind saying that I think that if a man has a department store and he invites the public generally to come into his department store and trade, I think then it is unfair and morally wrong for him to single out one department though and say he does not want or will not allow Negroes to patronize that one department.

Now he has a legal right to do that, but I still don't think that he can square that right with moral, simple justice.

Now you may not agree with that. Strange things develop in respect to these relations. We have a department store there at home, for example, that has a counter where ladies go and buy patterns. Well, white and colored women have been seated, side by side, buying patterns at that counter for 20 years.

Our banks in Tallahassee -- and I think everywhere else -- have no discriminations whatever in respect to what windows their customers will use. One of our banks has recently initiated a program of serving coffee to all of its customers between 10 and

11 o'clock in the morning. And that service is provided without discrimination and there's no special place to sit because that institution feels an obligation to treat all of its customers alike.

The whole thing reminds me a little of that old Hindu story about the Blind Men and the Elephant. They didn't know what an elephant was like and so they wanted to find out and one blind man went up and felt the elephant's side and he said, "The elephant is like a wall." Another one went up and he touched the tusk and said, "The elephant's like a spear." The other one went up and he felt a leg and said, "The elephant is like a tree." The other one went up and he felt the ear and said, "The elephant is like a fan." The other one went up and he felt the tail and said, "The elephant is like a rope." And so each interpreted it as he felt it, but at the same time none of them had any real conception of what an elephant was actually like. Now none of us have all the answers to this situation, friends. I think all of us are part right and part wrong.

We must have more tolerance, more understanding, more christianity, less words and less demonstrations, I think, if we are going to find the answer ultimately.

I went to church this morning and I was amazed that the scripture -- the gospel -- for this third Sunday is Lent which the minister read includes this:

These words from the Master. "But he, knowing their thoughts, said unto them, every kingdom divided against itself is brought to desolation; and a house divided against a house falleth."

How appropriate that scripture was to me on this day be-



cause I firmly believe as I hope you will that every state divided against itself, every city divided against itself, every nation divided against itself is bound to come to desolation.

Now that is true for many reasons because when there is division there is suspicion, there is fear, there is distrust and ultimately there is hate and hate consumes and destroys.

Friends, we must find answers. There is absolutely nothing that can aid the Communists more at this time in establishing supremacy over the United States -- and that is their ambition -- than racial strife in this country.

I made that statement the other day and somebody said to me, "Yes, I think you are right about that. We understand how that injures our nation for the word to be passed along about our racial strife, but all this could be eliminated if the colored people would just stay in their place."

Now friends, that's not a Christian point of view.

That's not a democratic point of view.

That's not a realistic point of view.

We can never stop Americans from struggling to be free.

We can never stop Americans from hoping and praying that some day in some way this ideal that is imbedded in our Declaration of Independence is one of these truths that are inevitable that all men are created equal, that, that somehow will be a reality and not just an illusory distant goal.

How are we going to work and what are we going to do?

Next week I am going to announce the appointment of a bi-racial committee for this state to succeed the so-called Fabisinski committee which has been working with race relations,

but you will recall the unfortunate loss of Judge Fabisinski.

Mr. Cody Fowler of Tampa has agreed to serve as chairman of that new committee. The other members will be announced next week. Mr. Fowler, is an outstanding man and will bring to that service great competence. He was the president of the American Bar Association and he has long worked with inter-racial programs in the city of Tampa and was one of the early members of our old Fabisinski committee.

And I want local committees formed in this state. I appeal to those communities -- all communities -- here and now to establish among your citizens bi-racial committees that can take up and consider grievances of a racial character and that can honestly and sincerely and with a determined effort try to find solutions to these difficulties.

Now the fact that your community has not had any difficulties should not deter you in moving to form this committee because sooner or later you will. We are confronted with a great need in our state to intelligently and reasonably act and to do that I must have the cooperation of the people.

Florida needs you in this program.

We need more reason and less emotion. We need more love and less hate. We need more work and effort and less talk and less demonstrations.

Citizens, please do not fail this great challenge. We are here in the Easter Season.

About two years ago the distinguished playwright, Robert Sherwood, wrote a play for Robert Montgomery and it was presented on television. The title of it was "The Trial of Pontius Pilate!"

The title intrigued me because I had always thought of the events of those fatal times as working around the trial of Jesus and I never had thought in terms of Pontius Pilate being on trial.

But Sherwood is a very logical and in a very reasonable way pointed out in truth and in fact Pontius Pilate was the man who was on trial. Pontius was a great, big, strong, wonderful man at the court of the Caesars in Rome. He was a comer. Everybody expected him to do great things and to be given great assignments. His wife was one of his greatest boosters. She thought that he would be assigned as the procurator of Egypt which was the really choice post available at that time. But when the day came for Pontius Pilate to get his assignment, it was to the little insignificant country of Judea and Pontius was furious because he felt that his assignment was not measuring up to his capacity.

But he went on, of course, and undertook it just the same. You remember how the events developed towards the time of the crucifixion and when the Pharisees got Jesus and they were trying their best to pin something on him that the Romans, of course, would authorize his execution for and they were having a tough time of it and they were pounding on Pilate's door and trying to convince him that he should get this man and have him executed and you remember those early days how Pilate said, "But what's wrong with the man? I don't see, I don't hear anything treasonable about his conduct. Why should we be so disturbed?"

And they said, "Oh, Pontius Pilate, he's inciting people to riot and disorder. He's creating insurrection. He's a dangerous and he's an evil man." And Pontius said to them, "I was talking to a man who was with him down in the temple yesterday

and I asked him about what this man had said and he said that somebody showed him a coin and tried to trap him and said, 'What do you say about Ceasar?' And he said in response to that, 'Render unto Caesar the the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's.' Now what's wrong with that?" Pontius asked these advisers.

They said, "Oh, you can't understand this man's attracting a lot of people to follow him. He's creating distrust in your government and in your supervision. You've got to do something about it."

Pontius' wife, Claudia, came into the picture about that time and she said, "Pontius, think carefully about this thing. I was down on the street the other day and I saw this man teaching and I went up because I wanted to hear what he had to say and he said very distinctly that, "I came not to establish a kingdom on earth, but a kingdom in Heaven."

And Pontius said, "How could that be treasonable?" But they insisted and about that time they started hearing the cry of the mob outdoors. First it was a soft, "Crucify Him," and then it got stronger, "Crucify Him," and then it got stronger, "Crucify Him," and then something happened to that big, strong man.

He heard the cry of the mob. And he went out on the balcony and there they were just screaming and crying for blood. And that great big man started getting smaller and smaller and smaller. And he grew to be a little, insignificant dwarf. And he said, "Bring me a bowl of water." And when he got the water, he washed his hands in it.

And he said to that crowd, "I will not let the blood of this righteous man be on my hands. I wash my hands of it. See to

it yourself."

And they did see to it themselves. They crucified him.

Friends, we've got mobs beginning to form now, in this nation, in this Southland and in this state. The time requires intelligent, careful, thorough study of big problems, and the reaching of solutions that are going to be reasonable and sound and make good sense.

We cannot let this matter and these issues be decided by the mobs, whether they are made up of white people or whether they are made up of colored people.

And we in this state have this sort of situation; we have got extremists on one side and we've got extremists on the other. We've got this mob shouting here; we've got that mob shouting there.

But where are the people in the middle? Why aren't they talking? Why aren't they working? They must start working. They must start efforts that are going to bring about solutions if we are going to get over these problems and these troubles and keep our state growing as our state should grow.

You remember the little story about the song of the brook? It said, "Bring me men to match my mountains, bring me men to match my plains, men with empires in their vision and new eras in their brains."

We've got to have men with new eras in their brains. We've got a state to build. We've got a nation to save. And we've a God to serve. Thank you.

