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### Repetition and the Individual's Subconscious

Simplicity and repetition of phrases have been used in marketing, politics, as well as in song to influence an individual's action and affect their emotional grasp of their goals. Repetition is the backbone of many powerful songs of protest; one song in particular was popularly embraced by the youth activists of the African American civil rights movement. Rooted in African American hymns of the early twentieth century, "We Shall Overcome" inspires individuals to come together and overcome obstacles. <sup>The</sup> President during the civil rights movement, Lyndon B. Johnson <sup>also</sup> used the phrase "We Shall Overcome" in his March 15, 1965 speech before congress — addressing the need for the passage of the then pending civil rights bill (Scott 2). Over the course of the song's history, "We Shall Overcome," and its variations, has been used as a song of protest for activists to overcome their obstacles through unity; this song is deeply rooted in the spiritual tradition, and people have drawn upon the marrow of its meaning to strengthen the beliefs in their hearts. <sup>OK</sup>

"We Shall Overcome," <sup>explain</sup> and its variations, brings forth a unifying message in lifting the spirits of individuals. The song first appeared as a protest song during a "1945-1946 labor strike against American Tobacco in Charleston, South Carolina" (McCollum 1). One of <sup>labor's</sup> the main demands was a call for "higher pay and integration of the factory floor. [The workers] earned ten



cents an hour and were asking for thirty cents. The company offered them fifteen” (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 23). Standing up to their powerful employees took a lot of courage for the protesters, because “some people [feared] that they couldn’t afford to [protest] without pay” (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 22). Employers sought to break the worker’s spirits by hiring thugs to initiate violence and instill fear into them (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 22). As the protesters walked the picket line, they sang “I’ll Overcome” in order to maintain their morale and enthusiasm (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 23). One of the protesters, Lucille Simmons, “gave the song a powerful sense of solidarity by changing the ‘I’ into ‘We’ as [she and her fellow protesters] sang together (McCollum 1). By simplifying the song to suit a labor union, the significance of the line “We’ll walk hand in hand” (8) in “We Shall Overcome” becomes more powerful as the song evolves into a song of protest. The song was no longer about one person trying to overcome; it was about a group of protesters attempting to overcome their obstacles through unity.

In addition to unifying individuals towards a common goal, “We Shall Overcome” assists in overcoming intimidation and fear. In 1946, following the American Tobacco Company strike, “some African American members of the Charleston union came to Highlander Folk School” and taught “We Will Overcome,” an earlier rendition of “We Shall Overcome,” to farmers and participants attending desegregation workshops (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 25). The song was sung to participants at the workshops and these participants “carried [the song] back to their own labor strikes and union meetings” (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 25). One night, in 1960, county deputies raided the Highlander Folk School and cut the electricity. “Inside, nearly one hundred students from nineteen states had gathered to discuss ways to end segregation” (Finlayson 8). These youth activists, and thousands of others like them all around the United States, were a



powerful force in the civil rights movement, which was actively protesting against racial injustice. Abe Sloan, a Tennessee lawyer, "led the deputies into the school carrying guns and clubs." In order to maintain morale, the activists began to sing together (Stotts, Terrance and Pete 33). In an attempt to avoid fear and panic, Jamila Jones was the first to hum a tune that she learned from the workshops. Then, "the words slipped out of her mouth: 'We shall overcome/ We Shall overcome/ We Shall Overcome someday/' One by one the students joined her" (Finlayson 8). The activists began to sing louder when one of the police said, "If you have to sing, do you have to sing so loud?" The police left subsequently after this act of perseverance, and every individual had experienced "the power of the song to help in a dangerous time" (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 33). They returned to their communities with the story of how they had faced the deputies with nothing more than their own dignity and courage; by singing "We Shall Overcome" that night, the activists overcame the fear and intimidation brought forth by the deputies.

Furthermore, the lyrical presence of the lines "We shall overcome some day" (3) indicate that there will be pain and suffering for protesters. A year following the standoff at Highlander, on May 20, 1961, twenty-year-old Bernard Lafayette Jr. stood with a small group of civil rights workers at a bus station in Montgomery, Alabama (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 1). The civil rights workers, blacks and whites alike, were determined to make a change in society. "They called themselves the Freedom Riders. They boarded buses together, and the white riders deliberately sat in the back, while the black riders sat in front, challenging the federal government to uphold the law" (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 2). LaFayette situated himself in the terminal, while white mobs were ready to storm through it, and he and the Freedom Riders joined hands in a circle and sang "We Shall Overcome." LayFayette "knew the danger he and the other freedom Riders faced, and he knew how afraid they all were. But he also knew they had to find the strength to go



on" (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 3). LayFayette explains that the song "was a prayer, a song of hope that [he and his fellow Freedom Riders] would survive, and that even if [the] group did not survive, then we as a people would overcome" the racial discrimination brought forth by the southern community (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 3). Although violence and injuries did befall <sup>cut?</sup> upon the Freedom Riders that day in the terminal, their "strength and perseverance paid off. More activists came to support the movement, national newspapers and television networks covered the story, and the entire country witness the violence." (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 4) Soon afterward, the federal government deployed the National Guard to further enforce the integration of buses in the south (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 4). The beliefs of the Freedom Riders' hearts were strengthened by the spiritual power and truth of the song, "We Shall Overcome;" as the song title suggests, they overcame the violence and persisted in the fight for equality.

Also, "We Shall Overcome" has played a crucial role in guiding the spirits of the demonstrators during one of the largest marches in American civil rights history. One of the Freedom Riders, John Lewis, led a march from Selma <sup>alabama?</sup> to Washington in order to make a stand for voting equality (Boyd 195). The fifty-four mile march to Washington <sup>verb tense?</sup> demonstrates the African American's demands for "the abrogation of every law which makes a distinction in treatment between citizens based on religion, creed, color or national origin...[and] the enforcement of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments...so that all barriers in the exercise of the suffrage are eliminated" (Meltzer 242). On Sunday, March 7 1965, a date infamously known as Bloody Sunday, police clubbed and tear-gassed the Selma demonstrators (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 41). Lewis "was clubbed on the left side of his head" and "suffered contusions and a fractured skull" (Boyd 196-197). Despite the violence and injuries, Lewis still <sup>verb tense?</sup> believed that



singing "We Shall Overcome" was "one of the most powerful and at the same time sacred moments" through the oppression and intimidation by the pro-segregation community. In Stuart Stott's *We Shall Overcome A Song That changed the World*, Lewis stated:

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fume → Especially if you have been beaten, arrested, and jailed, and thrown into a paddy wagon, thrown into some waiting area ..., ["We Shall Overcome"] gave you a sense of faith, a sense of strength, to continue to struggle, to continue to push on. And you would lose your sense of fear. You were prepared to march into hell's fire. (41)

During the Selma marches, it is apparent that the demonstrators <sup>draw</sup> have drawn upon the marrow of the song's meaning to a point where they want immediate change. At one of the civil rights marches in Selma, Alabama, some activists felt that the word "someday" in the lyrics of "We Shall Overcome" was too vague. "So a leader would call, 'What do we want?' and the crowd would respond 'FREEDOM!' Then the leader would ask, 'When do we want it?' and the crowd would shout, 'NOW!'" (Stotts, Terrance, and Pete 41). Eventually, the Selma marches did accomplish their main goal: voting equality. Four years following the Selma marches, "on August 6, 1965, the president signed the Voting Rights Bill. One of the most significant provisions of the bill was the guaranteed presence of federal examiners at elections" (Boyd 201). This act eliminated the barriers that kept African Americans from voting. In his speech, President Lyndon B. Johnson said:

→ It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves the full blessings of American life. Their cause must be our cause, too. Because it's not just Negroes, but really it's all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and injustice. And we...shall...overcome" (qtd in Boyd 43).



“We Shall Overcome” has played a key role throughout the Selma marches. The simplicity and repetition of the chorus reiterates the strengths and beliefs of the demonstrators; “We Shall Overcome” brought forth a unifying force – the civil rights activists – and made a change in the political and economic life in favor for the African Americans. <sup>of (?)</sup>

In summation, the usage of “We Shall Overcome” in the American civil rights era represents a historical milestone in humanity’s effort to achieve unity and peace. The lyrical repetition grounds the meaning as well as solidifies the effectiveness of the lyrics, “Deep in my heart/ I do believe / we shall overcome someday” (4-7) in that only through unity can individuals make a stand for what they believe in. According to *Romans 10:9*, “our words have more of an effect on our lives than any other words can.” In any case, many activists and demonstrators have placed themselves at great risk for the ideals of equality and fair treatment. The song, “We Shall Overcome,” in particular, helped <sup>?</sup> assisted them to find strength in their struggle for a better world.

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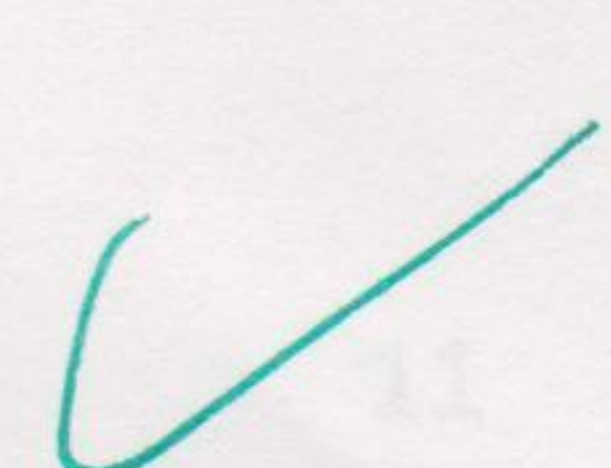
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font?

We Shall Overcome

(Guy Carawan)

We shall overcome

1

We shall overcome

2

We shall overcome some day

3

*Chorus:*

Oh, deep in my heart

4

I do believe

5

We shall overcome

6

Some day

7

We'll walk hand in hand

8

We'll walk hand in hand

9

We'll walk hand in hand some day

10

*Chorus*

We shall all be free

11

We shall all be free

12

We shall all be free some day

13

*Chorus*

We are not afraid

14

We are not afraid

15

We are not afraid some day

16

*Chorus*



We are not alone 17

We are not alone 18

We are not alone some day 19

*Chorus*

The whole wide world around 20

The whole wide world around 21

The whole wide world around some day 22

*Chorus*

We shall overcome 23

We shall overcome 24

We shall overcome some day 25

*Chorus*