

The Martin Luther King we remember

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A day committed to the honor of Dr. Martin Luther King is a day committed to the celebration and honor of the American Constitution and those who believed in it and lived by it.

—Daniel Patrick Moynihan

IT now seems like ancient history. Forty years ago this summer, Martin Luther King, Jr., stood at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial and delivered his “I Have a Dream” oration. Jim Crow still reigned supreme, the country was seething with racial tensions, and it was not yet clear whether the federal government would act. Into this morass stepped King, who pointed a way toward racial equality and national unity. Twenty years later, in 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation naming a federal holiday for King. But despite the holiday and the passage of time, King’s significance remains a point of contention. Do we really know what we are celebrating on the third Monday of every January?

During the congressional debates in 1983 over the pro-

posed holiday, a strange convergence in opinion occurred between liberals and conservatives. Democrats extolled King for his commitment to “social justice” and “applied equality,” and for his condemnation of the war in Vietnam. One Democrat called him “a native Gandhi” while another praised him for giving us “a new understanding of equality and justice.” They portrayed him more as a New Age guru than the Baptist preacher that he was. Many Republicans seemed to share this image of King as countercultural rebel, but in turn condemned him for it. They recalled his opposition to the Vietnam War and his alleged ties to communists, and accused him of espousing “action-oriented Marxism” and preaching radical liberation theology. Could this be the man we celebrate on Martin Luther King Day?

King and the historians

We are fortunate to have many extraordinary biographies and scholarly studies of King, but these have also contributed to the confusion over King’s significance. Unlike most other great public figures, King never enjoyed a period of grace. Instead, his biographers almost from the start decried his canonization and warned against hagiography. In the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Bearing the Cross*, for example, David J. Garrow criticizes the popular image of King as amiable national hero—an image that he believes “bears little resemblance to the human King or to the political King of 1965-1968.” Similarly, in the Penguin Lives series of biographies of famous historical figures, Marshall Frady complains that King “has been abstracted out of his swelteringly convoluted actuality into a kind of weightless and reverently laminated effigy of who he was.” Though the search for the “real,” flesh-and-blood King is well-intentioned and has added immensely to our knowledge of King and his times, it has also paradoxically obscured the King who mattered to us. In the recounting of his marital infidelities, acts of plagiarism, and ties to (former) members of the American Communist Party, we have lost sight of why he was lionized in his own day and is still remembered in our own—for his political achievements and rhetorical gifts.

Scholars can hardly be expected to skip over their subject's complexities and foibles. Nor can these matters be entirely avoided in the case of King, for they are part of the historical record. The FBI under J. Edgar Hoover's direction, and with the official authorization of Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy, wiretapped King's phones. Some of these records are still under government seal, but we already know a great deal about what the FBI unearthed, since the agency at the time shared its findings with journalists and congressmen. In its campaign against King, the FBI went so far as to send King a tape recording of one of his supposed trysts and a letter encouraging him to take his own life.

However, little of the damaging information was revealed publicly. In the 1950s and 1960s, journalists operated under certain unstated rules of decorum as well as a general sense of the inviolability of the private lives of public figures. Ironically, it is only as a result of the scholarship of well-meaning historians—all defenders of the King legacy—that today we know as much as we do about King's private life. The unheroic side of King's life must be examined, but if this were all we knew of King, or mainly what we knew of him, then we would know very little. The "real" King strived to keep his private life private, and was, by many accounts, deeply ashamed of his infidelities. The real King made his mark in American history not by being a countercultural rebel or by parading his "life style" before the public but through his oratory and politics. If we were to know only the "human" King, to borrow Garrow's locution, we would misunderstand King. We would also give Hoover a posthumous victory, for it was Hoover's most cherished aim to drown out King's public words and deeds under the shame of his private doings. Indeed, our fascination with King's intimate life may tell us more about ourselves, and our own sense of what is important, than it does about the "real" King and what he considered highest in life.

Frederick Douglass once said of Abraham Lincoln that "even those who only knew him through his public utterances obtained a tolerably clear idea of his character and

his personality. The image of the man went out with his words, and those who read them, knew him." Unfortunately, the near opposite rule has guided many of our historians in their search for the "real" King. It is argued that King's public utterances can obscure a true understanding of King the human being, and that a complete picture of King is to be found, as it were, *behind* what he said, not *in* what he said. We are led to believe that those who merely read his words cannot really know him.

Even were we to surmount this particular prejudice, however, another difficulty stands in the way of taking King's measure. This is the problem alluded to by David Garrow of which King we should remember: "the political King of 1965-1968" who began to speak out against the Vietnam War and who became increasingly pessimistic on racial matters, or the man who for the first 36 years of his life dreamed of racial comity. However, even in putting the question this way, we may be in error. The fact is often overlooked that King's earlier faith in America still lingered in the altogether different political climate of his last years. The relation between the two Kings—if there are two Kings—is an important matter for scholarly attention. Yet if the question is why we remember King and honor his name with a federal holiday, the accomplishments of the younger King should take precedence. By 1965, King had achieved his most lasting political victories: the surprising success of the Montgomery bus boycott that ushered in the modern civil rights movement, the Birmingham campaign that led to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Selma campaign that led to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. During these years too he delivered his memorable "I Have a Dream" address. In the last three years of his life, his emphasis shifted away from the struggles of blacks for civil rights and toward ending poverty in America and protesting the war in Vietnam. These were not unimportant issues, but the value of King's contribution here is less certain and his legacy less enduring.

We're getting ahead of ourselves, however, starting at the end rather than the beginning. Martin Luther King, Jr., built a movement for racial equality that at once drew

upon the country's secular principles and its religious sensibility. He was a reformer, to be sure. But not unlike Abraham Lincoln, it was a reform guided by old ideals rather than new idols—a fact not sufficiently appreciated by either his liberal admirers or his conservative critics.

Growing up Jim Crow

In his writings, Martin Luther King, Jr., does not reveal much about his inner life. But he does mention his awareness as a child of passing by places where blacks had been lynched, and he also recounts the first time he became conscious of racial segregation. When just a boy, two of his white friends were abruptly forbidden by their parents from playing with him. King went to his mother for an explanation, and she tried to tell him of slavery, the Civil War, Jim Crow, and racism, but at last simply blurted out, "You are as good as anyone."

In his *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B. Dubois called this moment in the life of every African American "the revelation." Sooner or later, the young black child discovered that he was different from his white fellows, that he was shut out from their world. The effects on the psyche could be devastating. Dubois noted that for many blacks their youth shrunk "into silent hatred of the pale world about them and mocking distrust of everything white; or wasted itself in a bitter cry, 'Why did God make me an outcast and a stranger in mine own house?'"

Yet for King such destructive and soul-wrenching despair did not come. If the child is father of the man, a foreshadowing of the future civil rights leader can be glimpsed in an incident from his youth. When 14 years old, King competed in an oratorical contest. The speech was entitled "The Negro and the Constitution" and included these lines:

We cannot have an enlightened democracy with one great group living in ignorance.... We cannot be truly Christian people so long as we flout the central teachings of Jesus: brotherly love and the Golden Rule....

Today thirteen million black sons and daughters of our

forefathers continue the fight for the translation of the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments from writing on the printed page to an actuality. We believe with them that "if freedom is good for any it is good for all," that we may conquer Southern armies by the sword, but it is another thing to conquer Southern hate, that if the franchise is given to Negroes, they will be vigilant and defend, even with their arms, the ark of federal liberty from treason and destruction by her enemies.

King seemed to intuit early in his life that progress—for blacks as well as for the nation as a whole—would only come about, paradoxically, by a return to older principles and traditional religious faith.

A religious education

King earned his B.A. in 1948 from Morehouse College, where he majored in sociology. Though he had intended to pursue law or medicine, he had a change of heart in college and decided to become a minister instead. Before graduation, he was ordained at his father's church and made an assistant pastor. He attended Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, where he graduated as valedictorian in 1951, and then Boston University, where he received his Ph.D. in systematic theology in 1955. In graduate school, King immersed himself in the modernist theology of the day, which attempted to accommodate Christianity to science and modernity, and was drawn to the Social Gospel, which sought to make Christianity relevant to the problems of industrial society. But if King drank deeply from both of these modern currents, neither quite satisfied him. The Social Gospel had gained ascendancy in the era of Jim Crow, but as was pointed out by Keith Miller in his book *Voice of Deliverance*, its progressive-minded leaders generally ignored the worsening plight of blacks. As for modernist theology, it was alien to the general temper of the black church—to the church King had grown up in, and which always remained his anchor. As Richard Lischer explains in his study *The Preacher King*, modern theology attempted to secularize the world, while black preachers sought to *sacralize* the world. Mod-

ern theology's abstract and historical methodologies held little appeal to King's fellow black congregants, of whom King once observed: "Scriptural admonitions were not abstractions that came to them from a distance across the centuries; they had a personal and immediate meaning for them today."

The most important intellectual influence on King may have been Reinhold Niebuhr, whose works he also studied in graduate school. His later speeches and sermons are peppered with references to Niebuhr, who clearly left a deep imprint on King's political thinking and religious sensibility. The admiration was mutual. Niebuhr would later describe King as "one of the great religious leaders of our time."

What was the source of affinity between the Southern black preacher and the Illinois-bred German-American theologian? Of utmost importance, Niebuhr had more deeply and more presciently analyzed the predicament of blacks in America than any other religious or secular thinker of his day. In his 1932 book *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, a book frequently cited by King, Niebuhr offered a perspicacious analysis of the race problem in America. Niebuhr argued that neither the good will of white liberals nor armed resistance by black radicals would crack the race problem in America. This was a problem whose complexity both punctured liberal hopes and mocked militant solutions. The typical liberal of that day held that racism and Jim Crow would gradually be eliminated by the solvents of education and racial dialogue. But as Niebuhr argued, "This faith is filled with as many illusions as such expectations always are." Whites could not simply be talked or reasoned out of their hatred of blacks, he maintained. But armed resistance was also not the answer, since this would lead to a race war—a war that blacks as a severely disadvantaged minority could not win.

The solution, as Niebuhr saw it, was the nonviolent method, which was based on neither pure idealism nor hard-boiled realism alone. Instead, nonviolent protest combined the two into a distinctively religious solution to the

problem of race hatred. As Niebuhr wrote in 1932 of the nonviolent philosophy:

The discovery of elements of common human frailty in the foe and, concomitantly, the appreciation of all human life as possessing transcendent worth, creates attitudes which transcend social conflict and thus mitigate its cruelties. It binds human beings together by reminding them of the common roots and similar character of both their vices and their virtues. These attitudes of repentance which recognize that the evil in the foe is also in the self, and these impulses of love which claim kinship with all men in spite of social conflict, are the peculiar gifts of religion to the human spirit. Secular imagination is not capable of producing them; for they require a sublime madness which disregards immediate appearances and emphasizes profound and ultimate unities.

One would be hard-pressed to find a more insightful description of the approach Martin Luther King would take less than 25 years later to the problem of segregation. Where many counseled patience and others armed resistance, King saw nonviolent protest as the only practical tool for achieving equality and dignity for blacks, and more importantly, as the only moral answer to the problem of racism. It took a rare temperament to grasp the possibilities of nonviolence, especially in an era that tended to favor extreme solutions. But in his person King combined, to borrow from Niebuhr's terminology, "the realistic wisdom of the statesman" with "the foolishness of the moral seer." This quixotic mix of religious idealism and political realism enabled King to succeed where others before him had failed.

Private and public faith

Upon finishing his studies at Boston University, King took a job as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. About a year after his arrival, Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man. King helped lead Montgomery's blacks on a year-long nonviolent boycott of the bus system, a boycott that was met by fury in Montgomery's white community and that brought national attention to the problem of segregation.

The boycott ended only when the U.S. Supreme Court intervened and declared Alabama's segregation laws unconstitutional. It was a harbinger of what was to come—nonviolent protest led by King followed by stubborn resistance in the white community, and eventually historic interventions by the federal government.

Progress did not come easily, however. King was a frequent target of violence. On multiple occasions he was physically assaulted, and his home was bombed several times by vigilantes. Almost daily he received death threats and hate mail. Yet he and the movement persevered. In no small part this was owing to King's religious faith and the religious content of the civil rights movement. We now know this thanks to a sizable body of literature, including important works by Kenneth Smith and Ira Zepp, Keith Miller, Richard Lischer, and King's various biographers, not to mention his own writings and statements.

King's personal faith was put to the test from the beginning. Awakened by the ringing of the phone one night in the midst of the Montgomery bus boycott, King picked up the receiver and was met by a barrage of racial abuse. It concluded with a death threat: "Nigger, we are tired of you and your mess now. And if you aren't out of this town in three days, we're going to blow your brains out, and blow up your house." Unable to fall back to sleep, King went to the kitchen to fix a cup of coffee, but still he found no respite. "I had reached the saturation point," he later recalled. He tried to think up ways to escape the spotlight without being branded a coward. What happened next, however, had a life-long effect on him:

I bowed down over that cup of coffee. I never will forget it ... I prayed a prayer, and I prayed out loud that night. I said, "Lord, I'm down here trying to do what's right. I think I'm right. I think the cause that we represent is right. But Lord, I must confess that I'm weak now. I'm faltering. I'm losing my courage. And I can't let the people see me like this because if they see me weak and losing my courage, they will begin to get weak." And it seemed at that moment that I could hear an inner voice saying to me, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo I will be with you, even until the end of the

world." I heard the voice of Jesus saying still to fight on. He promised never to leave me, never to leave me alone.

But if religion was for King a private source of strength, it was never only that. The religious side of his statesmanship—or the public dimension of his religious faith—can be confusing to us today. We tend to think of politics and religion as separate spheres, and we attempt to cleanse the public square of all traces of religion. Separation of church and state is, of course, a central part of the American political tradition, though not to the degree that it has been pursued of late—a degree that would have been incomprehensible to King.

The Christian springs of King's statesmanship are abundantly evident. With the successful end of the Montgomery bus boycott, King founded the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in order to take the civil rights struggle and his nonviolent message throughout the South. One of his most trusted aides urged him to drop the word Christian from the new organization. It was argued that such an explicit religious reference would alienate white Northern liberals, whose support would be crucial in the years ahead. King was adamant, however, and the word Christian remained. He also insisted that civil rights participants be guided by Christian principles. For example, volunteers in the Birmingham campaign were required to sign a "Commitment Card" that read in part:

I HEREBY PLEDGE MYSELF—MY PERSON AND MY BODY—TO THE NONVIOLENT MOVEMENT. THEREFORE I WILL KEEP THE FOLLOWING TEN COMMANDMENTS:

1. MEDITATE daily on the teachings and life of Jesus.
2. REMEMBER always that the nonviolent movement in Birmingham seeks justice and reconciliation—not victory.
3. WALK and TALK in the manner of love, for God is love.
4. PRAY daily to be used by God in order that all men might be free.
5. SACRIFICE personal wishes in order that all men

might be free.

6. OBSERVE with both friend and foe the ordinary rules of courtesy.

7. SEEK to perform regular service for others and for the world.

8. REFRAIN from the violence of fist, tongue, or heart.

9. STRIVE to be in good spiritual and bodily health.

10. FOLLOW the directions of the movement and of the captain on a demonstration.

In his speeches King drew heavily on Christian motifs. Against the charge made by segregationists of meddling, King appealed, as Lischer describes in *The Preacher King*, to the example of the Hebrew prophets and the Christian apostles: "Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'thus saith the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco-Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town." By so justifying his actions, King made clear that he was not a mere "spokesman for civil rights" but a gospeler for freedom. The Christian tincture would ennoble the toils of his followers, and could not help but make an impression on his antagonists.

After all, why did Southern whites become so enraged by King's tactics like his lunch counter sit-ins? Why did such seemingly inconsequential acts lead Southern officials into fits of anger? In Lischer's view, the genius of King's approach was to be found in its religious symbolism. His nonviolent tactics were in fact more than mere tactics; they were prophetic enactments of "some fragment of the future." Lischer speculates that "perhaps these Bible-believing southerners suspected what ancient Israel knew, that the actions of the prophets, just as surely as their words, are the signs of a new order that is rapidly approaching."

Over the course of King's public career, as he took his struggle from the South to the North, and as he became more militant, more concerned with poverty than

with civil rights, and more internationalist in his focus, the Christian character of his message arguably faded. Yet still discernible in his later speeches was the hope King had expressed in 1958: "to let the spirit of Christ work toward fashioning a truly great Christian nation."

From white racists to white liberals

Throughout the fifties and sixties, Martin Luther King, Jr., was a blur of activity. He gave hundreds of speeches a year, met with U.S. presidents and vice presidents, and traveled to Africa, India, and Europe. He helped plan and carry out civil rights campaigns in cities across the United States. His face was plastered on the cover of popular newsweeklies, and he was named *Time's* "Man of the Year" and was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964. Yet if King was principally a man of action, his actions are for the most part lost to us. Actions are by their nature evanescent. They take place in time and are witnessed but by a few, unless they are captured in newsreels or photographs or reconstructed in histories. In contrast, the words King spoke are as available to us today as the day he spoke them. For this reason, the best way of understanding King may be to study his words and the ideas they embody—to try to think through the problem of racism in a democratic republic as he thought about it.

Before we can see the problem as King saw it, however, we must remind ourselves of what he was up against—a part of the story that is all too often ignored. Only by recalling the arguments of those who opposed King will we be able to understand why King said what he did. King's task was formidable: He needed to overcome not only Jim Crow racism but also the lethargy of liberals. Not only did he need to rouse a passive black community to action, but he also had to counter those black leaders who favored armed violence and revolution. He was confronted both by quiet legions who were content with the status quo and by radical agitators who wished to overthrow it—or reinforce it—by any means necessary.

There is a tendency today to cast the civil rights struggle in psychological terms, as an effort to overcome irrational

prejudice, or in constitutional terms, as a battle over the meaning of federalism and states' rights. Certainly, the psychological and constitutional dimensions were not unimportant, but King was waging a more fundamental battle, over the very meaning of America. The oppression of blacks was justified in the name of certain ideas and a certain vision for the country as a whole, an understanding that rose above individual psychology and cut deeper than mere constitutional arguments for states' rights. Perhaps for this reason King rarely addressed the question of states' rights. He realized that in the end the argument was about larger questions, and in order to succeed he would have to convince America that his vision of America was the truer one.

The ideological core of the case against black equality can be glimpsed in the 1963 inaugural address of Alabama governor George C. Wallace, in which Wallace infamously declared: "Segregation now ... segregation tomorrow ... segregation forever." Parts of the governor's address covered constitutional arguments about the proper limits of federal power and the prerogatives of the states. But these legal arguments were underwritten by a more radical principle—the principle of racial or cultural freedom. Wallace used the case of religious pluralism in America to illustrate his point. Just as each religious denomination in America was free to worship the god of its choosing and to order its internal affairs as it saw fit, so too, he argued, should the races have such freedom. The "great freedom of our American founding fathers," Wallace declared, was that "each race, within its own framework has the freedom to teach, to instruct, to develop, to ask for and receive deserved help from others of separate racial stations." The "true brotherhood of America," he continued, is that "of respecting separateness of others." Thus were race and culture reified.

The argument for racial or cultural freedom was commonplace among white segregationists. For them, culture and race were indistinguishable. In 1956, in response to the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision against school segregation, nearly one-hundred Southern congressmen signed

onto "The Southern Manifesto." Principally the work of Senator Samuel J. Ervin of North Carolina, it rejected the *Brown* decision on grounds of federalism and states' rights. But, as was the case with Wallace's inaugural address, the manifesto's constitutional argument was underpinned by a racial-cultural thesis. The manifesto supported the doctrine of "separate but equal" on the grounds that it "confirmed their [white Southerners'] habits, customs, traditions, and way of life." Or as Senator James O. Eastland of Mississippi had put it two years earlier: "It is the law of nature ... that every race has both the right and the duty to perpetuate itself.... Free men have the right to send their children to schools of their own choosing ... to build up their own culture, free from governmental interference." The Southern defense of segregation when pushed to its furthest limits was grounded in this idea of cultural freedom. Segregation was the Southern way, and thus Southerners were entitled to it.

But blatantly antiliberal forces were not King's only nemeses. As he often remarked bitterly, "In all too many northern communities a sort of quasi-liberalism prevails, so bent on seeing all sides that it fails to become dedicated to any side." White liberals opposed Jim Crow and supported black equality, to be sure. But their "quasi-liberalism" stood in the way of a full understanding of the depth of the problem or of its resolution. By King's day, liberalism was undergoing a transformation. As early as 1953, a noted philosopher asked, "Does this nation in its maturity still cherish the faith in which it was conceived and raised? Does it still hold those 'truths [of human equality] to be self-evident'?" To a large extent, the answer was no. By the 1960s, if not earlier, elite liberal opinion had lost much of its vibrancy and become moribund, even relativistic. The old liberal faith, rooted in a kind of natural law, had been replaced by new and more modern creeds, from behavioralism to existentialism to economic laissez-fairism.

In some instances, these new "isms" came to the aid of blacks, as when the Supreme Court, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, explicitly appealed to the "modern authority" of behavioral psychology to find Jim Crow schools inher-

ently unequal and thus unconstitutional. Yet modern authority could also lead to the relativism of which King complained, and thus in his own speeches and writings King appealed instead to the nation's founding democratic creed. In regard to the *Brown* decision, for example, King readily acknowledged that "it came as a legal and sociological deathblow to the old *Plessy* doctrine of 'separate-but-equal.'" But King recognized what few liberals of his day were willing to acknowledge—namely, that the decision also "came as a reaffirmation of the good old American doctrine of freedom and equality for all people." Not "modern authority" but an "old American doctrine" would be King's star and compass.

From black passivity to black power

It was not only white America that King needed to win over but the black community as well. And here the problem was in its psychology, history, and politics almost impossibly complex. As described by King, African Americans teetered on the edge of two unhealthy extremes: acquiescence to racism on the one hand, and violent resistance on the other. The question was how to navigate a course between the two.

After so many years of oppression, a form of fatalism had sunk deep into the souls of American blacks. King illustrated the problem by comparing blacks to the children of Israel in Egypt. American blacks, like the ancient Hebrews, had come to "prefer the 'fleshpots of Egypt' to the ordeals of emancipation." King also used modern idiom to frame the issue, as when he observed that blacks suffered from "psychological slavery." He condemned such slavish acquiescence as "the way of the coward," and on numerous occasions he exhorted blacks to be prepared to give up even their lives for liberty's cause. The nonviolent method was not for the faint of heart: It "means a willingness to suffer and sacrifice," King wrote, "it may even mean physical death."

Servitude may be hateful, but it is in some respects easier to be a bondsman than to accept the burdens of freedom. King's polemic against black passivity was thus

also about the sources of human dignity. Blacks were fighting to gain certain basic legal rights, but their struggle was also for something at once less tangible and more fundamental. It was about recovering their pride as free human beings. Toward the end of his life, with the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act behind him, King would emphasize the importance of this larger struggle for human dignity: "And that's all this whole thing is about.... We are saying that we are determined to be men."

Yet if black passivity was one problem, the possibility of violent rebellion was another. Rather than turn the other cheek, blacks might choose to strike back in anger. Indeed, with the rise of the Nation of Islam and Malcolm X, the Black Power movement and Stokely Carmichael, and the outbreak of urban riots in the 1960s, this is exactly what happened. It was a possibility, however, that King had long foreseen and struggled to avert. As early as 1955, he pondered the "sobering dilemma" he faced as a black leader:

How could I make a speech that would be militant enough to keep my people aroused to positive action and yet moderate enough to keep this fervor within controllable and Christian bounds?... What could I say to keep them courageous and prepared for positive action and yet devoid of hate and resentment?

King's struggle to win civil rights for blacks was deeply informed by this dilemma. He wanted blacks to achieve their citizenship rights. But for King, the political struggle was never an end in and of itself. It was transcended by something larger, something that helped keep the political struggle within decent bounds. As he wrote in his 1967 book *Where Do We Go from Here*: "I am concerned that Negroes achieve full status as citizens and as human beings here in the United States. But I am also concerned about our moral uprightness and the health of our souls." Political success would only be meaningful if achieved by proper and acceptable means—that is, by nonviolence.

King's words and deeds must always be measured against this vast ideological backdrop. He would have to defeat

the white segregationists who argued that the United States was a nation of separate peoples and cultures; he would have to combat the moral slackness of liberals and to overcome their loss of faith in the nation's core ideals; and not least, he would have to prevail against both black lethargy and black militancy.

King's dream

Several of his biographers have commented that Martin Luther King, Jr., was not an "original thinker." Yet to look for originality in King is to misunderstand what he sought to accomplish. His was an effort not to formulate new principles but to reach back into America's past and reanimate its old democratic creed. And in this effort, which he doggedly pursued from the beginning of his public career to its end, he was *sui generis*. In a time when most of the nation's intellectuals and political leaders were embracing "modern authority" of one kind or another, King was seeking an older, more fundamental authority in the nation's founding principles. In an age when religion was thought to be on the wane—a 1965 issue of *Time* magazine ran a cover story with the headline, "Is God Dead?"—King sought to stoke old embers of religious conscience. And so if King was not an original thinker, he was certainly an untimely thinker.

The locus classicus of King's understanding of America is to be found in his address "I Have a Dream." It is one of the most quoted, best known American speeches of the twentieth century, though its very popularity has also deprived it of the serious attention it deserves. Some scholars have slighted the address, or they have praised it mainly for its "musical" qualities. King himself had anticipated this kind of analysis and warned against it. He once noted of the civil rights movement's "freedom songs" that commentators liked to "talk of their beat and rhythm, but we in the movement are as inspired by their words." If this was true of the songs of the civil rights movement, then it was all the more true of King's speeches.

King's address was delivered on August 28, 1963, on the occasion of the March on Washington for Civil Rights. The march took place against a darkening tableau of racial unrest and violence. The bloody events of Birmingham in the spring of 1963 had convinced President Kennedy that federal legislation was needed to advance the civil rights of blacks. In June, he introduced a bill to bring an end to discrimination in public accommodations, and in a nationally televised speech he defined "the heart of the question" as "whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities; whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated." These sentiments were met with an anger that is difficult to fathom today. Senator James Eastland of Mississippi thundered that Kennedy's legislation amounted to "a complete blueprint for a totalitarian state." In this polarized political climate, it was feared that the March on Washington might end in a blood bath or spark a race war. Kennedy himself tried to convince King and the march's other organizers to call it off.

As it happened, the march was peaceful and a tremendous success. It was nationally televised, with every network covering King's keynote address. Upwards of 400,000 marchers, about one-third of them white, gathered on the Washington Mall to hear King and others speak. Though reportedly cobbled together the night before the march, and edited by several of his close associates, King's address shows remarkable care in its crafting. It is neatly divided into several distinct sections, each devoted to a particular theme of the civil rights movement. In various places, King echoes or quotes from Abraham Lincoln, the Psalms, and the Hebrew prophets. Moreover, King did not stick to his prepared text; instead, he improvised in its last third, in the process changing in important ways the speech's meaning.

Justice

The speech is in the form of an ascent, from freedom and justice to brotherhood. Standing at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial, on the hundredth anniversary of Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, King began by in-

voking the words of the Great Emancipator: "Fivescore years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation." Modern historians have tended to take a jaundiced view of the proclamation, depicting it as limited and stingy, and as a cynical ploy by Lincoln to shore up the war effort. In contrast, King described it as "momentous," as "a great beacon light of hope," and as "a joyous day-break." Its supreme importance can be seen in comparison to another great event in American history, the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In his book *Where Do We Go from Here*, King quoted from Frederick Douglass's analysis of the two epochal events. The Fourth of July, Douglass had argued, merely celebrates the political birth of America, whereas the Emancipation Proclamation "concerns the national life and character, and is to determine whether that life and character shall be radiantly glorious ... or infamously blackened, forevermore." At the center of King's "I Have a Dream" speech is this question of the character of the American nation.

In the address's first half, the fundamental question of justice is raised. In *Federalist* 51, James Madison wrote: "Justice is the end of government. It is the end of civil society. It ever has been, and ever will be pursued, until it be obtained, or until liberty be lost in the pursuit." King similarly warned that "the whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges." But his call for justice was coupled with "something that I must say to my people": "In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds.... We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence." A cause is to be judged, in other words, not only by the ends sought but also by the means used, or as King put it on an earlier occasion, "The end is preexistent in the means." One might say of King that he sought justice for blacks but in such a way that justice might be obtained without destroying liberty and all else that is decent in its pursuit.

That black Americans had been denied justice was all

too painfully obvious. In his address, King went through the litany of ills—slavery, segregation, discrimination, and poverty—that had crippled blacks and made them exiles in their own land. In being deprived of justice, they had been made quite literally homeless. Yet this “shameful condition,” as King called it, did not lead him to despise his country or to lose faith in it. Quite the opposite, in fact. He warmly embraced and vigorously extolled the founding documents of the United States—its Constitution and Declaration of Independence—as the remedy. To Southern segregationists and left-wing radicals alike, these documents were not a source of justice or freedom for blacks but the very instruments of their oppression. If the far Right and extreme Left agreed on nothing else, they agreed on this: that when the Declaration asserted, “We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal,” blacks were manifestly and by design excluded from the ranks of men. King disagreed:

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was the promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In citing these words, King was not being naïve; he knew that black Americans had been handed a raw deal. And yet, he also knew that no higher judgment of American practice could be found than in America’s principles.

According to King, justice required that America deliver upon the “promissory note” of the Declaration of Independence—that all of its citizens be guaranteed their rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is our birthright as Americans to be secure in our persons and property, to be able to go about our proper business tranquil in the knowledge that we will not be molested, bothered, or abused. This is justice in its most basic American form.

Yet justice in America, King argued, means something more as well; it requires a willingness to see beyond the color of our skin. King made this point early in his ad-

dress with his subtle use of the third person plural, "we." The question has frequently been put to "the devotees of civil rights," King observed, "'When will you be satisfied?'" to which he responded with a series of refrains that began, "We can never be satisfied." The "we" seems at first to speak in the name of the white devotees of civil rights: "We can never be satisfied as long as the Negro is the victim of the unspeakable horrors of police brutality." Then the voice of civil rights' black devotees is heard: "We can never be satisfied as long as our bodies, heavy with fatigue of travel, cannot gain lodging in the motels of the highways and the hotels of the cities."

Yet as the address winds its way back and forth between black and white, the racial identity of the "we" becomes less and less clear. Finally, King declared: "We can never be satisfied as long as our children are stripped of their selfhood and robbed of their dignity by signs stating 'for whites only.'" At this point the "we" seems to beckon beyond black and white to us all. Such is the nature of American justice that distinctions between "my people" and "your people," between "we" and "they," or between "us" and "them" become suspect.

The first half of the address closes with a quotation from the prophet Amos, the Hebrew prophet who spoke most insistently of justice. "We will not be satisfied," King declared, "until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." From this point forward in the address, King spoke less of civil rights per se and more of brotherhood. The shift is all the more important in that it coincides with the point in the address where King abandoned his written text and extemporized.

Brotherhood

According to the written speech, after quoting the words of Amos, King was to make some rather bland comments about joining "as members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction" to push for a strong civil rights bill in Congress. It would have been the only place in the address where King took up such practical questions as civil rights legislation. Garrow

quotes King's explanation for why he altered the speech in midstream: "I started out reading the speech ... and all of a sudden this thing came to me that I have used—I'd used it many times before, that thing about 'I have a dream'—and I just felt that I wanted to use it here. I don't know why, I hadn't thought about it before the speech."

"That thing about 'I have a dream'" became the speech's climax, and what is most often recalled of it today. In the speech, King stated that his dream is "deeply rooted in the American dream," thus indicating that his dream is not entirely the same as the American dream. Traditionally, the American dream was taken to entail prosperity and liberty. It is tied to what King had earlier referred to as "the riches of freedom and the security of justice." It is the promise of the Declaration of Independence to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness—or what King called the American "creed." But King's dream for America is more than this, something very nearly extra-political: racial brotherhood.

King's dream is introduced in five refrains. Three of these specifically refer to the deep South—that in Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners "will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood"; that in Mississippi justice will triumph over injustice; and that in Alabama "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers." The central refrain, so often quoted and requoted to this day, but also frequently misunderstood, proclaims: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

What does it mean to judge people by the "content of their character"? The first thing to notice is that judgment is necessary. King abjured an easygoing live-and-let-live attitude. On a later occasion, he declared that the nation must "substitute an aristocracy of character for an aristocracy of color." For there to be an aristocracy of any sort judgments must be made, but what kind of judgments? The congressional debates over the proposed Martin Luther

King holiday illustrate a common error on this point. One senator suggested that we should judge "each individual on the basis of talent and ability regardless of race." In this parsing of King's famous line, ability substitutes for character, and meritocracy becomes society's goal. But when King spoke of character and his dream for America, he had a different meaning in mind. Character is not something we are born with, and is not measurable in an IQ score or talent contest. Rather, it is something we develop over a lifetime in the course of our moral education.

King's address concludes the discussion of brotherhood as the section on justice was brought to a close—with a quotation from one of the Hebrew prophets. The final refrain of the dream sequence quotes from the prophet Isaiah: "that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places shall be made plain, and the crooked places shall be made straight and the glory of the Lord will be revealed and all flesh shall see it together." Like the prophet Isaiah, King was a consoler. Isaiah had brought words of comfort to Jews of the Diaspora, promising them an unhindered return to the Holy Land. In "I Have A Dream," King's message is also one of comfort. He foresaw an America in which racial separation had been replaced by interracial justice and friendship, and believed that American greatness depended on it.

The day before King delivered his oration, W.E.B. Dubois died in Ghana, in self-imposed exile. Though an early champion of black civil rights, Dubois eventually soured on America, joined the Communist Party, and later left altogether for Africa. His death was announced over the loudspeakers during the March on Washington, but his name was reportedly met with only light applause. Yet it was Dubois who had once written, "There are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes." On that summer day in 1963, Martin Luther King proved Dubois right by making the spirit of the Declaration live once again for all Americans.

The legacy

King never wrote a political treatise, and so we would be mistaken to look for a definitive account of his view of America or to parse his words as closely as we might a philosopher's. However, scattered throughout his speeches and writings are a number of observations that help us to better understand his vision. He traced what was good in America back to its Founding Fathers and ultimately back to the natural rights theory of the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke and the country's Judeo-Christian roots.

How then are we to understand America's history of slavery, segregation, and racism? These are, King argued, "strange paradoxes in a nation founded on the principle that all men are created equal." In one of his later books, King summarized several theories of racism's progress in the New World, of how over time racism gained tremendous sustenance from the latest developments in modern science, history, and political science. King's belief that racism was not inherent in America's ideals, but that later intellectual advances had nurtured it, made him unreceptive to calls for revolutionary violence and new beginnings. He was critical, for example, of such left-wing radicals as Frantz Fanon who called for "new concepts." King's emphasis was not on the new but on the old, not on progress but return:

America has strayed to the far country of racism. The home that all too many Americans left was solidly structured idealistically. Its pillars were soundly grounded in the insights of our Judeo-Christian heritage: all men are made in the image of God; all men are brothers; all men are created equal; every man is heir to a legacy of dignity and worth; every man has rights that are neither conferred by nor derived from the state, they are God-given. What a marvelous foundation for any home! What a glorious place to inhabit! But America strayed away; and this excursion has brought only confusion and bewilderment. It has left hearts aching with guilt and minds distorted with irrationality. It has driven wisdom from the throne. This long and callous sojourn in the far country of racism has brought a moral and spiritual

famine to the nation.

But it is not too late to return home. [emphasis in original]

These words were written in 1967, well into King's putative radical phase. It is true that in the last several years of his life, from roughly 1965 to 1968, King would increasingly condemn the United States, questioning at times whether a return home was any longer the answer, even declaring that his dream had become a nightmare. With greater frequency, he would call for a fundamental restructuring of America's institutions and a reconsideration of its basic values. His later policy prescriptions included a guaranteed annual income and what later became known as affirmative action. He issued inflammatory comments about the U.S. government's conduct of the Vietnam War that were condemned by conservatives and liberals alike, as well as by colleagues of his from within the civil rights movement. Yet, even in these last years of his life, King never completely abandoned the old-time religion. He still maintained the faith of the 14-year-old boy who sought to remind Americans of their true democratic heritage. On the very eve of his assassination he could still bear powerful witness to the American dream. Preaching at the Mason Temple in Memphis, Tennessee, on April 3, 1968, King left us with these words:

And I want to say tonight, I want to say that I am happy that I didn't [die from an earlier assault on his life]. Because if I had..., I wouldn't have been around here in 1960, when students all over the South started sitting-in at lunch counters. And I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream. And taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution....

Well I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people will get to the promised land.

And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.

King was felled by an assassin's bullet the following day. The King we celebrate is the King who could so eloquently invoke the country's core civic and religious ideals.