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TIME

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Martin Luther King Jr: Architect of the 21st Century

By Jon Meacham

It was not going well, or at least not as well as Martin Luther King Jr. had hoped. The afternoon had been long: the crowds massed before the Lincoln Memorial were ready for some rhetorical adrenaline, some true poetry. King's task now was to lift his speech from the ordinary to the historic, from the mundane to the sacred. He was enjoying the greatest audience of his life. Yet with the television networks broadcasting live and President Kennedy watching from the White House, King was struggling with a text that had been drafted by too many hands late the previous night at the Willard Hotel. One sentence he was about to deliver was particularly awkward: "And so today, let us go back to our communities as members of the international association for the advancement of creative dissatisfaction." King was on the verge of letting the hour pass him by.

Then, as on Easter morning at the tomb of the crucified Jesus, there was the sound of a woman's voice. King had already begun to extemporize when Mahalia Jackson spoke up. "Tell 'em about the dream, Martin," said Jackson, who was standing nearby. King left his text altogether at this point--a departure that put him on a path to speaking words of American scripture, words as essential to the nation's destiny in their way as those of Abraham Lincoln, before whose memorial King stood, and those of Thomas Jefferson, whose monument lay to the preacher's right, toward the Potomac. The moments of ensuing oratory lifted King above the tumult of history and made him a figure of history--a "new founding father," in the apt phrase of the historian Taylor Branch.

"I say to you today, my friends ... even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream," King said. "It is a dream deeply rooted in the American Dream"--a dream that had been best captured in the promise of words written in a distant summer in Philadelphia by Jefferson. "I have a dream," King continued, "that one day this nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.'"

Drawing on the Bible and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee," on the Emancipation Proclamation and the Constitution, King--like Jefferson and Lincoln before him--projected an ideal vision of an exceptional

nation. In King's imagined country, hope triumphed over the fear that life is only about what Thomas Hobbes called the war of all against all rather than equal justice for all. In doing so, King defined the best of the nation as surely as Jefferson did in Philadelphia in 1776 or Lincoln did at Gettysburg in 1863.

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

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...

I have a dream today.

Fifty years on, no matter where one stands on the political spectrum, it's all too easy to be glib about the meaning of the March on Washington and the movement's victories: the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. For some conservatives, the civil rights movement belongs to a kind of antiquity. In striking down a key section of the 1965 voting-rights legislation (a bill consistently renewed by Congress, including as recently as 2006 for an additional 25 years), Chief Justice John Roberts wrote that "our country has changed" and that the discriminatory world where African Americans were blocked from the ballot box no longer exists. On the other extreme, there are liberals who believe that racial progress has been so glacial--never mind gradual--that the shooting of a young man like Trayvon Martin (and the subsequent acquittal of his killer) is all too often the rule rather than the exception in America.

The prevailing reality--and a crucial legacy--of King's speech to the nation 50 Augusts ago may have been best captured this summer, in the wake of the Martin verdict, when a particular African American calmly enumerated the daily acts of racism that still shape our national life. "There are very few African-American men in this country who haven't had the experience of being followed when they were shopping in a department store. That includes me. And there are very few African-American men who haven't had the experience of walking across the street and hearing the locks click on the doors of cars. That happens to me, at least before I was a Senator. There are very few African Americans who haven't had the experience of getting on an elevator and a woman clutching her purse nervously and holding her breath until she had a chance to get off. That happens often."

A gloomy report. And yet, and yet: the black man making these observations in the James Brady Briefing Room of the White House was the 44th President of the United States, Barack Obama, who was a toddler when Martin Luther King Jr. stepped up to the podium at the march in 1963.

The most obvious observation about life since August 1963 is also the most accurate: we have traveled far, but not far enough. Revisiting King's speech, the religiously infused culture from which it sprang and the

political moment in which he delivered it suggests that he, for one, wouldn't be especially surprised by the ambivalent state of affairs in the America of 2013. Like our more familiar founders (Washington, Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson), he was a practical idealist, a man who could articulate an ideal but knew that human progress, while sometimes intoxicatingly rapid, tends to be a provisional enterprise. The march, he said that day in Washington, was not an end; it was but a beginning. We live in a world King helped create. We do not yet live in the world he helped all of us dream of.

It is tempting to romanticize the words King spoke before the Lincoln Memorial. To do so, however, cheapens the courage of the known and the unknown nonviolent soldiers of freedom who faced--and often paid--the ultimate price for daring America to live up to the implications of the Declaration of Independence and become a country in which liberty was innate and universal, not particular to station, creed or color. The true honor we can give to King and his comrades is not to render them as fantastical figures in a Manichaeian struggle but to see them as human beings who summoned the will to make the rest of us be the people we ought to be.

The death of Jim Crow is an epic story, but it is no fairy tale, for the half-century since the March on Washington has surely taught us that while African Americans are largely living happier lives, no one can sensibly say that everyone is living happily ever after. The dream of which King spoke was less a dream to bring about on this side of paradise than a prophetic vision to be approximated, for King's understanding of equality and brotherhood was much likelier to be realized in the kingdom of God than in any mortal realm. In Washington to demand legislative action, King spoke as a minister of the Lord, invoking the meaning of the Sermon on the Mount in a city more often interested in the mechanics of the Senate.

However unreachable King's dream seems to be on this side of paradise, though, we must try. Like the promises of the Declaration of Independence or the Gettysburg Address or FDR's First Inaugural ("The only thing we have to fear is fear itself"), the promises of King's "I Have a Dream" sermon can be kept only if the nation is mindful of what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature." In his words to the March on Washington, Martin Luther King Jr. gave us a standard against which we could forever measure ourselves and our nation. So long as his dream proves elusive, then our union remains imperfect.

A WEDNESDAY IN WASHINGTON

White Washington had expected mayhem. Few bureaucrats or lawyers who worked downtown in the capital showed up for work on Wednesday, Aug. 28, 1963. That many blacks? In one place? Who knew what might happen? Even the ordinarily liberal New York Times was wary. "There was great fear there would be rioting," recalled the Times' Russell Baker, who was assigned a front-page feature on the march, "so the Times chartered a chopper." Boarding the helicopter early in the day, Baker grew so bored by the peaceable spectacle that he asked the pilot to fly over his house so he could check on the condition of his roof. "Finally," said Baker, "I had him land at National Airport and went to the Lincoln Memorial."

It was, it turned out, not only orderly but also integrated. Baker wrote of Bob Dylan, Charlton Heston and Marlon Brando; the paper took note of the series of speeches and songs, including Jackson's "I Been 'Buked and I Been Scorned," a spiritual delivered with such power that Baker reported Jackson's voice seemed to echo off the far-off Capitol. Speaker after speaker--the young John Lewis, the aged A. Philip Randolph--made the case for racial justice. "For many, the day seemed an adventure, a long outing in the late summer sun--part liberation from home, part Sunday School picnic, part political convention, and part fish-fry," James Reston wrote in his piece for the Times the next day.

Watching King's speech in the White House, Kennedy listened with appreciation, then readied for a meeting with the march's leadership to discuss the practical steps ahead to push legislation through a Congress still dominated by white-segregationist Democrats. The ensuing session did not produce much in the way of progress. Kennedy feared moving too quickly, and as they had said again and again all afternoon, the civil rights delegation from the Mall believed the time for action was at hand. Yet King, who craved forward motion, had spoken of delay and of dreams deferred. The pilgrimage would be long, he had told his listeners, and the pilgrims had to maintain the moral high ground they had so effectively claimed through nonviolence. "And that is something that I must say to my people who stand on the worn threshold which leads into the palace of justice," King had told the crowd. "In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds ... We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline." If the politicians were too slow, well, that meant there had to be yet more dignity and yet more discipline.

The Times' Reston, a reliable barometer of Establishment opinion, however, believed the day had in fact accomplished something, even if JFK was less than enthusiastic late that afternoon. "The demonstration impressed political Washington because it combined a number of things no politician can ignore," wrote Reston. "It had the force of numbers. It had the melodies of both the church and the theater. And it was able to invoke the principles of the founding fathers to rebuke the inequalities and hypocrisies of modern American life."

FREEDOM--SORT OF--AT LAST

Kennedy had not met with King and his comrades alone on the afternoon of Aug. 28. In the President's party was his generally unhappy Vice President, Lyndon Johnson.

It's a tragic irony of American history that a people enslaved by white men finally became equal before the law not because of the nonviolent courage of millions of people of color but because of the murder of a single white man. The horror of the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., on Sept. 15, 1963--an attack executed by Klansmen that killed four young girls--loomed large in the national consciousness, particularly when the violence of the crime was contrasted with the nonviolence of the March on Washington. Yet there is no escaping the fact that the moral case King made before the nation in August 1963 was given legislative force only after the assassination of Kennedy in Dallas three months later elevated Johnson to the presidency. The passage of the landmark bills of 1964 and 1965 was possible

because LBJ was determined--but a determined realist. "Even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over," he said after Selma in March 1965 as he proposed voting-rights legislation.

It would, though, be a battle won. From the Brown school-desegregation decisions in 1954 and 1955 through the Great Society bills of the mid-1960s, Jim Crow was fatally wounded--so much so that the phrase is now anachronistic. Long-term research cited by Stanford's Gavin Wright shows that educational integration in the South has produced positive economic results for African Americans, including increases in "graduation rates, test scores, earnings and adult health status, while reducing the probability of incarceration."

That's the good news. "One generation removed from the civil rights movement, we went from a country where a majority of the people believe in racial hierarchy, believed in the idea that there was one type of person who was fully deserving of citizenship, to a country where a majority of people reject that idea," says Sheryll Cashin, a Georgetown law professor and former clerk for Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall. "Because of the civil rights movement, we became a country where a majority of people really embrace the idea of equality as an American ideal. It's seen as un-American to be discriminatory or racist. That's a major achievement, despite the fact that we still have inequality."

A LEGACY AT RISK

In a new report, the national Urban League is using the mark of 50 years since the march to measure the state of black America. In terms of education, the league notes that the high school completion gap has closed by 57 points, the number of African Americans in college has tripled, and there are now five college graduates for every one in 1963. When it comes to standards of living, the percentage of African Americans living in poverty has fallen 23 points (the figure for black children is 22%), and homeownership among blacks has increased 14%.

Then there are the all-too-familiar failures. "In the past 50 years," the Urban League reports, "the black-white income gap has only closed by 7 points (now at 60%). The unemployment-rate gap has only closed by 6 points (now at 52%)." (Only at 100% will the gap have disappeared.) Overall, the racial unemployment ratio is unchanged since 1963, at "about 2-to-1--regardless of education, gender, region of the country or income level." These numbers, as well as enduring inequalities in the criminal-justice system and the recent Supreme Court ruling on voting rights, suggest that neither the march nor the movement is really done.

The end of Jim Crow did not mark the beginning of what John Lewis, since 1986 a Congressman from Atlanta, calls "the beloved community"--a philosophical ideal of a world that transcends racial, ethnic, economic and gender barriers and is suffused by love. "Citizenship and equality are broader conceptions" than civil rights alone, says Darrell Miller, a professor at Duke Law School. "The civil rights movement was about ending segregation but also about being able to enjoy the fruits of being an equal citizen in all aspects of life, both public and private."

On that August Wednesday, on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial--the spot on which he stood is marked there now, a sacred slab hidden in plain sight in the middle of the capital of the most powerful nation the world has ever known--King drew from Scripture as he joined the ranks of the founders. In the beginning of the Republic, men dreamed big but failed to include everyone in that dream, limiting liberty largely to white men. Speaking in 1963, King brilliantly argued for the expansion of the founders' vision--nothing more, but surely nothing less. In doing so, a preacher from the South summoned a nation to justice and won his place in the American pantheon. "I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and every mountain shall be made low. The rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight. And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together." He paused, then pressed on: "This is our hope. This is the faith that I will go back to the South with. With this faith we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope." Transforming that hope into history remains the work at hand, this August and always.

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