

Thursday, January 15, 2004

## EDITORIAL

# King's Dream, goal of unity are timeless

*Editor's note: In 1983, President Ronald Reagan signed a bill codifying into law an annual remembrance of Martin Luther King Jr. In memory of King, the Emerald is reprinting an editorial originally run Monday, Jan. 20, 1986, the first national celebration of the holiday. Much has changed since his time, and indeed, since 1986, but King's message of tolerance, equality and human rights is timeless.*

Today marks the first celebration of a national holiday honoring slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Newspapers have been full of recounts of King's life, and administration officials and others have been busy praising King in speeches around the country. On campus, the Black Student union sponsored a speech by civil rights activist Vincent Harding in King's honor.

Establishing a national holiday and organizing events to remember King are excellent ways to honor the man and his accomplishments. But remembering King is only a start. It is not enough to recognize that he was a great man. It is not enough to praise his speeches. It is not enough to honor condemnation of violence.

If anything King taught is to make a real difference, we must strive to live by the codes King preached. And we must strive to make his dream a reality. King fueled the modern fight to end black oppression in America, but the struggle is far from over.

During King's famous "I Have a Dream" speech, he said, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal.'"

But the dream is still only a goal. The "whites only" signs are gone. Blacks can vote in every state. Blacks cannot be refused service. Blacks cannot be refused access to real estate purchase. But blacks have a long way to go before reaching economic and employment parity with white Americans. The unemployment rate for blacks, 15.5 percent, is almost twice that for whites. And 42 percent of black Americans live in poverty.

A report released June 3, 1985, revealed black children are three times as likely as white children to be poor, four times as likely not to live with either parent and five times as likely to be on welfare. The study found that the poverty rate for black single-parent families headed by women, about 70 percent, is about 30 percent higher than for white single-parent families headed by women.

Racism has not been extinguished. Black family members in a white Philadelphia neighborhood recently were terrorized out of their home. Membership in white supremacy groups such as the Ku Klux Klan, Aryan Nations and the Posse Comitatus is growing. And the Ku Klux Klan will march today in Pulaski, Tenn., in protest of the holiday honoring King.

And though President Reagan has been full of kind words for King this past week, it is his administration that is dismantling affirmative action policies. It is his administration that has failed to vigorously enforce civil rights codes such as fair housing practices. And it is he who opposed the Civil Rights Act in 1964, and it is he who initially opposed establishing a national holiday for King.

Take time today to remember King. And in his memory, take time to remember American blacks who struggle against racism, South African blacks who must fight for even fundamental human rights, starving Ethiopians cast out by their government and oppressed people throughout the world. And in King's memory, make a commitment to take action against racism and oppression.

## EDITORIAL POLICY

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses can be sent to letters@dailyemerald.com. Letters to the editor and guest commentaries are encouraged. Letters are limited to 250 words and guest commentaries to 550 words. Authors are limited to one submission per calendar month. Submission must include phone number and address for verification. The Emerald reserves the right to edit for space, grammar and style.



Steve Baggs Illustration

## Distorting the Dream

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stood before the Lincoln Memorial and delivered the keynote address for the March on Washington, D.C., he couldn't have realized that a single sentence from his speech would come to encapsulate his entire career in the collective consciousness of white America:

"I have a dream 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!"

We're all familiar with this quote. We were taught these words in high school. A mural with these words greets us in the foyer of the EMU. The majority of Americans know nothing about Dr. King except for his "I Have a Dream" speech. It is quite possibly the most beloved speech of all time.

As a young, black man I have learned to hate Dr. King's dream.

Or rather, white America has made it near impossible for younger generations of blacks to love the dream in the same way as the older generations. Because, for us, Dr. King's dream of America has been twisted into America's dream of Dr. King, a dream that has nothing to do with the reality of the man or the substance of his message.

Conservatives for years have ripped the words "content of their character" away from its context in order to suggest that Dr. King would be against affirmative action programs.

Last year in our University's own conservative journal of opinion, the Oregon Commentator, Colin Elliott wrote, "Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a patriotic, rational American activist, put it best when he hoped for a world where his children 'will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.' Dr. King knew that character, not race, was more important."

Let us forgive Elliott for describing the greatest civil rights leader in American history as "rational," which could be interpreted as a tad condescending. What bothers me is that Elliott knows nothing about



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Critical mass

Dr. King's life or else he realized that he could exploit his audience's ignorance and advance this blatant lie.

I'll let Dr. King defend himself: "If a city has a 30 percent Negro population, then it is logical to assume that Negroes should have at least 30 percent of the jobs."

And: "It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American society if we do not do something special for him now, in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on a just and equal basis?"

White America doesn't want to remember the Dr. King who advocated quotas and special privileges for blacks. White America doesn't want to remember Dr. King the anti-war activist who said, "We have committed more war crimes than any other nation, and I will continue to say it."

That is not the hero white America feels comfortable appropriating. They need the patient, long-suffering Dr. King who was a champion of conservative values like color-blindness and personal responsibility as defined by the religious right. That is the Dr. King they want to remember and celebrate in January: The Dr. King of their dreams; the Dr. King who never existed.

The same year as the "I Have a Dream" mural went up in the EMU, Jesse Jackson wrote an essay about protecting the history of Dr. King.

"We must resist this the media's weak and anemic memory of a great man," he wrote. "To think of Dr. King only as a dreamer is to do injustice to his memory and to the dream itself. Why is it that so many politicians today want to emphasize that King was a dreamer? Is it because they want us to believe that his dreams have become reality, and that therefore, we should celebrate rather than continue to fight? There is a struggle today to preserve the substance and the integrity of Dr. King's legacy."

The first thing we at the University can do to preserve the substance of Dr. King's legacy is to paint over the mural in the EMU that repeats the oft-repeated words so beloved by the enemies of the man.

I call on the Black Student Union to demand that the mural be replaced with a quote from Dr. King that is more characteristic of his message and more relevant to the realities of present-day America.

I have a suggestion, from Dr. King's Letter from the Birmingham City Jail:

"I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in the stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klaner, but the white moderate who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; ... who paternalistically feels that he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by the myth of time and who constantly advised the Negro to wait until a 'more convenient season.'"

"Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection."

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