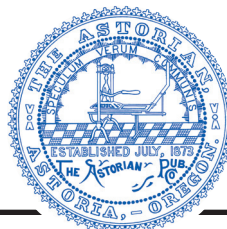


OPINION



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OUR VIEW

A remarkable American life

Martin Luther King Jr. Day commemorates a remarkable American life. It also reminds us of a transformational moment in recent American history. The federal holiday is especially full of meaning at a time when American politics have deteriorated on the matter of race.

Racism is always with us. The question is what our leaders do with it. The South during the 1950s and '60s was marked by a set of Jim Crow laws that codified racial segregation. Through a set of poll taxes and other barriers, blacks were intimidated away from registering to vote. There was also a virulent culture of lynching.

Dr. King rose above this and focused on what was possible to make America a better place.

The movement that he led caused changes that made life better for African Americans. He also liberated the South from a debilitating way of life. Though large parts of it are still less successful than the U.S. as a whole, desegregation, voting rights and other initiatives partially weaned Southerners of all races from a crippling adherence to outmoded economic and social patterns.

There was a backlash to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which King's movement inspired. Oregon State University political scientist Bill Lunch discovered it during interviews he did with an Oregon Republican right-wing splinter group in 1986. One of the group's adherents' dominant motivations was repeal of the Civil Rights Act, as it pertained to the advancement of blacks as well as women.

In his rise to power and as president, Donald Trump has appealed to those resentments.



Colin Murphey/The Astorian
People lighted candles in front of the Liberty Theatre ahead of a walk downtown for Martin Luther King Jr. Day in 2018.

America crossed an important line in 1964. We began rejecting the politics of racial division and set course for a future where every child can aspire to greatness.

There is a biblical aspect to that liberation. There is also a psychological side. Living without hate is healthier than carrying it around with you.

The important historical comparison is between Trump and President Lyndon Johnson. The most interesting historical characters are those who move beyond the bounds of the culture that spawned them. When Johnson in December 1963 told a joint session of Congress that he wanted a civil rights bill, he rose above being a member of the Southern bloc, in which he had toed the line on civil rights. He closed that speech with a line borrowed from the civil rights movement. "We shall overcome," he

said.

Johnson found the vision and courage to move beyond the world of Jim Crow politics in which he had risen. Many other Southern leaders lacked his moral clarity. Johnson observed in 1964 that any time a Southern politician felt threatened, he would resort to vilifying African Americans with a spiteful litany about the purported misdeeds of the "nigra, nigra, nigra."

The language of mainstream racism tends to be more subtle now. But we find ourselves in an era of concerted efforts that seek to undercut African American political empowerment via gerrymandering, manipulation of voter rolls and other underhanded strategies.

Some even fear a rollback of Brown vs. Board of Education, the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court decision that ended state-sanctioned

racial segregation in public schools. Although a clearcut repudiation isn't likely — even Trump appointee Brett Kavanaugh calls it "inspirational" and "the single greatest moment in Supreme Court history" — there is a risk that its safeguards face erosion from Trump appointees to lower-level federal judgeships. Some of these appointees have signaled ambivalence by refusing to say during confirmation hearings that they consider it to have been correctly decided. Their decisions will be governed by Supreme Court precedent, but there is danger of much mischief at the margins.

With his appeals to white nationalism, President Trump generates concern about the future of aspiring to racial equality. His chaotic speeches at campaign rallies feed our nation's most corrosive, worst and base instincts. He makes it difficult to believe his disavowals of racism. Pandering for the sake of power, he gives voice to dark undercurrents in American society that most of us hoped lingered only in forgotten backwaters, if at all.

This throwback to wicked times will not long prevail. We are not going back to a nation where bigotry is set in statute.

The truth is that American blacks will not return to servility, nor will women become passive, nor will gays return to the closet. Those trains have been out of the station and down the tracks for a long time.

There is a reason why the memory of Dr. King matters and why Johnson mattered. They rose above the world into which they were born. Their dreams are our true future. So far, Trump has missed that opportunity.

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY

'I Have A Dream'

Excerpts from Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech at the March on Washington on Aug. 28, 1963.

I am happy to join with you today in what will go down in history as the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation.

Five score years ago, a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of their captivity.

But one hundred years later, the Negro still is not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize a shameful condition.

In a sense we have come to our nation's capital to cash a check. 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 a 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 ...

It would be fatal for the nation to overlook the urgency of the moment. This sweltering summer of the Negro's legitimate discontent will not pass until there is an invigorating autumn of freedom and equality. Nineteen sixty-three is not an end, but a beginning. Those who hope that the Negro needed to blow off steam and will now be content will have a rude awakening if the nation returns to business as usual. There

will be neither rest nor tranquility in America until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights. The whirlwinds of revolt will continue to shake the foundations of our nation until the bright day of justice emerges.

But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred.

We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all white people, for many of our white brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their freedom is inextricably bound to our freedom. We cannot walk alone ...

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

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."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the 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



Associated Press
Martin Luther King Jr., head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, addresses marchers during his 'I Have a Dream' speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.

will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sis-

ters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and 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.

This is our hope. This is the faith that I 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. With this faith we will be able to transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood. With this faith we will be able to work together, to pray together, to struggle together, to go to jail together, to stand up for freedom together, knowing that we will be free one day.

This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with a new meaning, "My country, 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside, let freedom ring."

And if America is to be a great nation this must become true. So let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania!

Let freedom ring from the snowcapped Rockies of Colorado!

Let freedom ring from the curvaceous slopes of California!

But not only that; let freedom ring from Stone Mountain of Georgia!

Let freedom ring from Lookout Mountain of Tennessee!

Let freedom ring from every hill and molehill of Mississippi. From every mountain, let freedom ring.

And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"