

## *Introduction*

Had he not departed from his prepared text and spoken so eloquently about his “dream” of racial justice in America, the speech given by Martin Luther King, Jr., at the March on Washington on August 28, 1963, might still have been a landmark in American history. It might still have played an indirect role in the historic civil rights legislation passed soon thereafter—the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—and it might still have added to the renown that led to King’s being awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1964. Not least because it was the high point of what King rightly called in his opening words “the greatest demonstration for freedom in the history of our nation,” the speech would still be studied for its evidence of his unwavering belief that equal rights for African Americans entailed nothing more—and nothing less—than returning to the nation’s founding ideals.

Absent King’s reiterated affirmation of “I have a dream,” however, one may wonder whether the speech would have attained the iconic status that it enjoys today—“the greatest speech given since

[Abraham] Lincoln's time," according to Garry Wills, the very best of the one hundred best political speeches of the twentieth century, according to a survey of the leading scholars of public address. Where schoolchildren once recited Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, they now grapple with the Dream speech, just as Martin Luther King, Jr., Day now rivals Presidents Day in public consciousness. By the late 1980s, according to a study by the National Endowment for the Humanities, high school seniors more often correctly identified the source of "I have a dream" (88.1 percent) than the opening words of the Gettysburg Address (73.9 percent) or the Declaration of Independence (65.7 percent); by 2008 recognition of King's words among American teenagers had reached 97 percent. The speech's most famous lines have become shorthand not only for King's life but for the whole of the civil rights movement and even the 1960s itself—a kind of "rhetorical Woodstock," in the words of Greil Marcus—and it is incumbent upon preachers and politicians, especially presidents, to claim King's message as their own.

Along with the numerous biographies of King and studies of the civil rights movement, both scholarly and popular, that followed his assassination in 1968, memorial photographic compilations such as *I Have a Dream: The Story of Martin Luther King, Jr., in Text and Pictures* (1968) and collections of his words such as *"I Have a Dream": The Quotations of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1968) made remembrance of King synonymous with remembrance of his "dream." The speech and its best-known phrases were cited frequently during debates over the proposed federal holiday and helped to raise King into the ranks of great Americans. King insisted that America be "as good as its Declaration of Independence, as good as its Bill of Rights," said Representative Thomas P. ("Tip") O'Neill, who recalled hearing the Dream speech in person. Changing the nation "not by force of arms but by moral force," King asked us to "make the words of the Founding Fathers . . . come alive for all people." After President

Ronald Reagan signed the bill creating the holiday in 1983, despite his own reservations about King's loyalty to the nation, the commission charged with issuing guidelines for its first celebration in 1986 titled the results of its work "Living the Dream."

It quickly became evident, however, that there was no general agreement as to what King's dream actually was. On the occasion of the first holiday, Motown Records founder Berry Gordy placed a full-page laudatory ad in the *New York Times*: "By wisely choosing its heroes, a country shapes its destiny. Thank you Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for making an impossible dream come true." Yet on that same day Jesse Jackson lamented the nation's preoccupation with the Dream speech at the expense of King's more radical vision—his denunciation of economic inequality at home and abroad, his opposition to the Vietnam War, his advocacy of affirmative action—and implied that King had been murdered as part of an FBI or CIA conspiracy. "The so-called 'I Have a Dream' speech," declared Jackson, a former aide to King and recent presidential candidate, "was a speech describing nightmare conditions. . . . Dr. King was not assassinated for dreaming but for acting and challenging the government."

Notwithstanding his suspicions about King's death, Jackson remained true to King's vision of brotherhood and nonviolent social change. But King's values were by no means universally shared, even by African Americans. The slain King had been compared to Gandhi, Lincoln, and Christ, and canonized along with President John F. Kennedy, another assassinated "dreamer," in the pop singer Dion's hit "Abraham, Martin, and John." Within a matter of years, however, the outlaw heroes of black nationalism, especially Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali, had eclipsed King in popularity among many black youth—in fact, among American youth in general. The music video "Fight the Power," hip-hop anthem for Spike Lee's 1989 film *Do the Right Thing*, opened with familiar black-and-white newsreel

footage of the March on Washington, pausing on King's image before cutting to Public Enemy's combative lyrics accompanying a "Young People's March on Brooklyn to End Racial Violence," whose leader announced, "Word up, we ain't going out like that '63 nonsense." When Malcolm X merchandise flooded America's streets and malls amid the glamorization of black gangsters in the 1990s, King's dream seemed quaint.

In a 1997 CNN/*USA Today*/Gallup poll that asked how much of King's dream had been fulfilled, those responding *all of it* and *none of it* were tied at 1 percent each, while 20 percent thought *a great deal*, 53 percent *a moderate amount*, and 23 percent *not very much*, a nearly exact bell curve that revealed nothing at all, since the dream was undefined and, perhaps, indefinable. Appropriations of his image and words having long since been spread across the political and cultural spectrum, King himself had become a kind of Rorschach test on the meaning of racial equality in America. If true believers turned him into "Holy Martin," a figure beyond reproach, others turned him into an "elastic fetish" conveniently stretched to fit any cause.

For those on the political Left, King's dream became associated less with colorblind "equal opportunity," what was once the core value of democratic liberalism, than with race-based (and sometimes class-based) programs designed to achieve diversity, usually defined as proportionately equal outcomes, the new core value of democratic liberalism. The concept of King's dream and slogans such as "Keep the Dream Alive" were soon pervasive in educational and social programs aimed at minorities. In the case of the I Have a Dream Foundation, for example, low-income, predominantly black and Hispanic grade school students designated as "Dreamers" are adopted by sponsors who provide extra tutoring, mentoring, and counseling, then pay college expenses for those who graduate from high school, a program that has aided more than ten thousand stu-

dents to date. When *Newsweek* titled a 1995 article about the legal retreat from race-based affirmative action “Rethinking the Dream,” the editors seemed to find the content of King’s dream self-evident.

By the same token, those on the Right have routinely cited the Dream speech—specifically, King’s hope 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”—in support of an ideal of colorblind justice, and conservatives, no less than liberals, have presumed to know where King would stand on hot-button issues such as affirmative action, reparations for slavery, and school vouchers. Along the way, King has been recruited for causes that might have surprised him. Randall Terry, the head of Operation Rescue, which has employed tactics of civil disobedience and public protest to disrupt the operation of abortion clinics, cited his inspiration by King alongside the precedents of the Underground Railroad and those who rescued Jews from Nazis. During the 2006 midterm elections, the National Black Republican Association ran a short-lived radio ad claiming King as one of their own. Once the party of segregationist Dixiecrats, today’s Democrats have “bamboozled blacks” with racial preferences and an immoral social agenda said two women exchanging questions and answers, whereas King was “a real man”—a Republican.

Adaptations of King’s famous phrase automatically play upon his integrity, his idealism, his altruism for one or another cause. The fund-raising campaign for the Martin Luther King, Jr., National Memorial in Washington, D.C., goes under the banner “Build the Dream.” The slogan for the 2008 summer Olympics in China, “One World, One Dream,” is but one of many international adaptations of King’s phrase in recent decades, from South Africa to Poland to Pakistan. With the catchphrase “I Have a Dream . . . New Millennium, New Hope,” for instance, UNICEF’s Millennium Dream Campaign raises money for Ethiopian children orphaned or stricken

by HIV/AIDS. Appeals to King's legacy were quickly apparent in the 2008 Democratic presidential campaign. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton provoked a minor backlash when she remarked that "Dr. King's dream began to be realized when President Lyndon Johnson passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964," a comment some considered dismissive of King's own role. Appearing alongside Clinton's main opponent, Senator Barack Obama, Oprah Winfrey declared that "Dr. King dreamed the dream," but now people could "vote that dream into reality," which might have seemed a call for racial allegiance, rather than colorblindness, except for Obama's ability, as he put it in naming Lincoln and King as his predecessors, to traverse "the landscape of our collective dreams." No sooner had Obama clinched the nomination than pundits and op-ed cartoonists depicted the event as King's dream come true.

Not surprisingly, African Americans have been especially alert to the potentially acerbic ambiguity of King's phrase. When controversy erupted in 1996 over a proposal to teach "Ebonics"—vernacular black English—in the public schools of Oakland, California, a group known as Atlanta's Black Professionals ran a newspaper ad that borrowed from King's speech to condemn the plan: superimposed over the image of a well-dressed black man with his back turned to the viewer was the message, "I Has a Dream." The ad drove home its point by naming Malcolm X along with King among those who had "paid the price of obtaining our voice with the currency of their lives." Not just King's eloquence, which might have been written off as bourgeois by the proponents of Ebonics, but also that of Malcolm, the epitome of razor-sharp black nationalist discourse, was cited in contrast to the Oakland plan, which, according to the ad, would condemn black students to functional illiteracy and strip them of effective speech.

Solemnly recited on the King holiday and throughout Black History Month, the Dream speech is also routinely lampooned, whether

in the mock version appearing in the satirical newspaper *The Onion* (“I had a really weird dream last night. . . . Thank God, Almighty, I am awake at last”) or the blasphemous parody in Darius James’s 1992 novel *Negrophobia*, in which Walt Disney, as the American president, delivers a racist Dream oration in celebration of King’s assassination and the end of black culture in the United States. So deeply ingrained in national consciousness is the Dream speech, or at least fragments of it, that King’s words haunt even his most ardent enemies. Before being driven away in a brief storm of violence, Ku Klux Klan members protesting the King holiday with a 1998 rally in Memphis—they had to get permission to parade from a black mayor and request protection from a black chief of police—were thus treated to one speaker’s pathetically unimaginative mimicry of King: “I have a dream that one day little white boys and little white girls will be playing in the parks and segregation will rule once again in this country.”

Sound bites and misappropriations of the Dream speech are everywhere imaginable, sacred and meaningless, a surfeit of dreaming that led Michael Eric Dyson to propose a ten-year moratorium on listening to or reading the Dream speech and prompted the four-year-old son of a friend of mine to conclude, “No wonder they killed him. He kept giving the same speech over and over.”

King came of age along with television news, a medium he used to masterful effect. Because it was also an age in which celebrities became art (Andy Warhol’s silk screens of Marilyn Monroe, a recent suicide, appeared in 1962) and revolutionaries became celebrities (Che Guevara was featured in a *Look* magazine cover story and photo spread in 1963), it is no surprise that the martyred King and his speech soon became iconic means to mark a time of national transfiguration. In addition to its role in numerous civil rights documentaries and the 1978 television miniseries *King*, King’s speech has been inserted visually and aurally into films as various as *Ghosts*

of *Mississippi*, *JFK*, *Contact*, and *Undercover Brother*. Music inspired by King's dream is commonplace, ranging from Elie Siegmeister's 1967 cantata for mixed chorus and orchestra, *I Have a Dream*, to Josh Green's 1976 stage musical of King's life, *I Have a Dream*, starring Billy Dee Williams, to Max Roach's 1982 "The Dream—It's Time," in which excerpts from King's speech provide a counterpoint to Roach's solo drumming, to the rapper will.i.am's "Dream" in the 2007 film *Freedom Writers*. Commercial products imprinted with King's image and excerpts from his speech are not limited to baseball caps, T-shirts, coffee mugs, and cell phone ringtones but also include CafePress's pet apparel and the "Equality Martin Luther King Jr. Classic Thong," underwear for women and girls, featuring King's likeness and his famous line about his children being judged by "the content of their character."

Among more respectable commercial ventures, Apple Computer used King's image, along with those of Gandhi, Picasso, and Einstein, in its "Think Different" campaign, while a television ad for Alcatel Americas depicted King speaking to a vast empty space between the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument, accompanied by the words "Before you can inspire, before you can touch, you must first connect." One of the most ingenious adaptations of the Dream speech appeared in a promotional ad run by the *New Republic*. Using a widely reproduced photograph from the March on Washington, shot from inside the Lincoln Memorial and behind Lincoln's statue looking out through the glare of camera lights toward the speaker's podium and the crowd beyond, the ad relied on the instantly recognizable iconography of King's speech, without naming it or portraying him, to associate his message with the magazine's content: "There will always be an audience for a powerful idea" (figure 1).

The Apple and Alcatel ads, among others, were licensed by the King family, the late Coretta Scott King and her four children, who

not long after his death became intimately involved in protecting copyright to King's words and image—so much so, in fact, that controversy over their efforts to maintain private rights in one of the most “public” properties in modern history came to overshadow King's own legacy. The family filed successful suits against CBS and Henry Hampton, producer of the acclaimed documentary *Eyes on the Prize*, for using news footage of the Dream speech, and against *USA Today* for reprinting the text of the speech on its thirtieth anniversary. Even as the King family quarreled with the National Park Service over control of the visitors center in Atlanta's Martin Luther King, Jr., Historic District (comprising his birthplace; Ebenezer Baptist Church, where King and his father preached; and the Martin Luther King, Jr., Center for Nonviolent Social Change), their plan for a virtual reality interactive museum re-creating his role in the civil rights movement prompted the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* editorialist Cynthia Tucker, a frequent critic of the family's ventures, to ridicule the project as “I Have a Dreamland.” Whereas King's original speech inspired headlines such as “‘I Have a Dream . . .’: Peroration by Dr. King Sums Up a Day the Capital Will Remember” (*New York Times*) and “In Shadow of Abe Lincoln, a Voice Shouts for Freedom” (*Atlanta Constitution*), its merchandising has made it the subject of accusatory squibs such as “The Dream Defiled” (*Boston Globe*) and “The Dream—For Sale” (*Los Angeles Times*).

In purely rhetorical terms, the Dream speech may not have been King's best. His speech at the conclusion of the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965 was arguably his most commanding, in part because it capped two months of tension and violence that ended with a victorious march to the very steps of what was once the capitol of the Confederacy. The anti-Vietnam War speech he delivered at New York's Riverside Church in 1967, a stinging censure of his nation's foreign policy and one that cost King a good deal of prestige and support, was thought by some to be

his greatest. Ralph Abernathy, King's closest friend and longtime aide, believed that his wrenching, uncanny speech on the eve of his assassination in Memphis, raised to tragic intensity by the fate that awaited him, rivaled the Gettysburg Address and George Washington's Farewell Address. Yet Abernathy's reason for preferring the Dream speech was exactly right: it was "a prophecy of pure hope at a time when black people and the nation as a whole needed hope more than anything else."

King's greatness, as well as the greatness of his speech, lay in his ability to elevate the cause of civil rights and the cause of America at the same time. The nation had failed black Americans, no doubt, but it was not—contrary to the opinions of some raising the fist of Black Power—irredeemably corrupt and ripe for overthrow. Enlisting his audience in a crusade sanctioned equally by the Declaration of Independence and the Bible, King in no way rejected America's foundational values. Rather, he purified and consolidated those values by insisting that only when the revolutionary rights they guaranteed were shared by Americans of all colors, creeds, and nationalities would they truly *be* America's foundational values.

"All this probably hasn't changed any votes on the civil rights bill," said Senator Hubert Humphrey after the March on Washington, "but it's a good thing for Washington and the nation and the world." King's speech was indeed good for the nation and the world, but Humphrey may have underestimated its practical value. Although we will never know the fate of the civil rights legislation proposed by President Kennedy had it been he, rather than Lyndon Johnson, who fought to make it law, the Dream speech, which raised King to national stature and epitomized his leadership, set the stage in a way neither Kennedy nor Johnson could have done. Entering a convulsive debate about racial justice whose prime movers were the Supreme Court and Congress, King proved, through his catalytic personal witness in key civil rights campaigns and the majesty of his

words, especially at the March on Washington, that the conscience of a nation, and ultimately its laws, could be changed by a single citizen.

King, of course, did not act alone, as one after another history of the civil rights movement has made clear. Without determining to what extent King made the movement or the movement made King, however, we can be certain that he was truly its *icon*—that is, an *eikon*, a reflection of the *eidōs*, the *idea* of justice and equal rights driving the movement. He was rightly compared to Gandhi and Lincoln because, like them, he embodied, in transcendent distillation, the qualities of courage, compassion, and visionary idealism that had to be aroused in many in order for justice to prevail and equal rights to be achieved. On one occasion above all others, King put those qualities into timeless words.

*King's Dream* does not purport to tell the story of King's life or the civil rights movement, or even the March on Washington, except in broad outline. These subjects have been studied in searching detail by others, and, as I indicate in my reference notes, I have benefited enormously from previous biographies and histories. I have likewise benefited from a number of shorter commentaries on King's speech and from Drew Hansen's book *The Dream: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Speech That Inspired a Nation* (2003), which is especially important for its careful reconstruction of the circumstances in which the speech was written and the process of revision through which it went. Even though no study of King fails to pay at least some attention to the Dream speech, however, it is surprising nonetheless how little sustained attention it has received.

There is no substitute for hearing King or, better, watching and listening to him. Fortunately, numerous recordings and videos, as well as Internet postings, make it easy today to hear and study those features of his style which cannot be captured by description alone. I take note of the visual and aural dimensions of King's appearance at the March on Washington, but my first interest here is in the

significance of his words. Although *King's Dream* includes commentary on virtually every sentence of the speech, I do not provide a line-by-line analysis. My purpose instead is to place King's speech, through a series of interlocking essays that illuminate its vibrant range of historical and cultural reference, in both the context of the postwar civil rights movement and the context of American debates about issues of racial equality from the early republic through present-day Supreme Court rulings.

Insofar as King's articulation of his dream was by no means confined to his appearance at the March on Washington, this likewise entails looking for reflections and refractions of the Dream speech in other writings, sermons, and orations, while using them in turn to understand the magnificence of his single greatest oration. Notwithstanding the fact that he later spoke in a more radical voice, one can find in the Dream speech a nearly perfect lens through which to see King's lifelong philosophy. Through his overt or implicit reflections on the vital but unfulfilled promise made by the Founding Fathers, "the architects of our republic," in the Declaration of Independence; on the legacy of Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation in its centennial year of 1963; on *Brown v. Board of Education* and the question of states' rights; on the contemporary relevance of the Exodus, of the biblical prophets Isaiah and Amos, and of Daniel, an interpreter of dreams; on the power of Gandhian "soul force" in the face of fire hoses and attack dogs; on the meaning of national citizenship evoked by cultural artifacts as different as "America" and "I Thank God I'm Free at Last"; on the inspiring history of African American protest stretching from the days of slavery through the March on Washington, when King himself, not President Kennedy, would issue a "Second Emancipation Proclamation"—through all of this one can find in the Dream speech a panoramic account of the civil rights movement in its many dimensions.

Our challenge today is to recapture King's dream—not to relive,

nostalgically, the elation of August 28, 1963, nor to pretend that he could or would give the same speech today. Rather, our challenge is to understand how perfectly, in grand poetry and powerful elocution, Martin Luther King, Jr., told the story of African American freedom and with it the story of the nation.