

USA, fifty years later: The Misremembering of Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream'

Sunday 18 August 2013, by [YOUNGE Gary](#) (Date first published: 14 August 2013).

Fifty years after the March on Washington, Dr. King's most famous speech, like his own political legacy, is widely misunderstood.

When Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. took the podium on August 28, 1963, the Department of Justice was watching. Fearing that someone might hijack the microphone to make inflammatory statements, the Kennedy DOJ came up with a plan to silence the speaker, just in case. In such an eventuality, an official was seated next to the sound system, holding a recording of Mahalia Jackson singing "He's Got the Whole World in His Hands," which he planned to play to placate the crowd.

Half a century after the March on Washington and the famous "I Have a Dream" speech, the event has been neatly folded into America's patriotic mythology. Relatively few people know or recall that the Kennedy administration tried to get organizers to call it off; that the FBI tried to dissuade people from coming; that racist senators tried to discredit the leaders; that twice as many Americans had an unfavorable view of the march as a favorable one. Instead, it is hailed not as a dramatic moment of mass, multiracial dissidence, but as a jamboree in Benetton Technicolor, exemplifying the nation's unrelenting progress toward its founding ideals.

Central to that repackaging of history is the misremembering of King's speech. It has been cast not as a searing indictment of American racism that still exists, but as an eloquent period piece articulating the travails of a bygone era. So on the fiftieth anniversary of "I Have a Dream," "Has King's dream been realized?" is one of the two most common and, to my mind, least interesting questions asked of the speech; the other is "Does President Obama represent the fulfillment of King's dream?" The short answer to both is a clear "no," even if the longer responses are more interesting than the questions deserve. We know that King's dream was not limited to the rhetoric of just one speech. To judge a life as full and complex as his by one sixteen-minute address, some of which was delivered extemporaneously, is neither respectful nor serious.

Regardless, any contemporary discussion about the legacy of King's "I Have a Dream" speech must begin by acknowledging the way we now interpret the themes it raised at the time. Words like "race," "equality," "justice," "discrimination" and "segregation" mean something quite different when a historically oppressed minority is explicitly excluded from voting than it does when the president of the United States is black. King used the word "Negro" fifteen times in the speech; today the term is finally being retired from the US Census as a racial category.

Perhaps the best way to comprehend how King's speech is understood today is to consider the radical transformation of attitudes toward the man who delivered it. Before his death, King was well

on the way to being a pariah. In 1966, twice as many Americans had an unfavorable opinion of him as a favorable one. Life magazine branded his anti-Vietnam War speech at Riverside Church “demagogic slander” and “a script for Radio Hanoi.”

But in thirty years he went from ignominy to icon. By 1999, a Gallup poll revealed that King was virtually tied with John F. Kennedy and Albert Einstein as one of the most admired public figures of the twentieth century among Americans. He ranked as more popular than Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Pope John Paul II and Winston Churchill; only Mother Teresa was more cherished. In 2011, a memorial to King was unveiled on the National Mall, featuring a thirty-foot-high statue sited on four acres of prime cultural real estate. Ninety-one percent of Americans (including 89 percent of whites) approved.

This evolution was not simply a matter of ill feelings and painful memories eroding over time. It was the result of a protracted struggle that sheds light on how the speech for which he is best known is today understood. The bill to establish King’s birthday as a federal holiday was introduced just a few days after his death, with few illusions as to its likely success. “We don’t want anyone to believe we hope Congress will do this,” said union leader Cleveland Robinson at a rally with King’s widow in 1969. “We’re just sayin’, us black people in America just ain’t gonna work on that day anymore.”

Congress would pass the bill, but not without a fight. In 1983, the year Ronald Reagan grudgingly signed Martin Luther King Day into law, he was asked if King was a communist sympathizer. “We’ll know in thirty-five years, won’t we?” he said, referring to the eventual release of FBI surveillance tapes.

The country’s acceptance of King came with its eventual consensus—won through mass marches, civil disobedience and grassroots activism—that codified segregation had to end. “America was like a dysfunctional drug addict or alcoholic that was addicted, dependent on racial segregation,” says Clarence Jones, who wrote the draft text of King’s “I Have a Dream” speech. “It had tried other treatments and failed. Then comes along Martin Luther King with his multistep program—recovery, nonviolence, civil disobedience and integration—and forces America to publicly confront its conscience. And that recovery program enabled America to embark on the greatest political transformation in history.”

By the time white Americans realized that their dislike of King was spent and futile, he had created a world in which admiring him was in their own self-interest. They embraced him because, in short, they had no choice.

The only question remaining was what version of King should be honored. To remember him now as a leader who sought greater government intervention to help the poor, or who branded the United States “the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today,” as he did at Riverside Church in 1967, would sacrifice posterity for accuracy. He did stand for those things. But those issues, particularly at a time of war and economic crisis, remain live, divisive and urgent. To associate him with them would not raise him above the fray but insert him into it, leaving him as controversial in death as in life.

But remembering him as the man who spoke eloquently and forcefully against codified segregation presents him as an accordant figure whose principled stand rescued the nation in a moment of crisis.

“The speech is profoundly and willfully misunderstood,” says King’s longtime friend Vincent Harding, who drafted the Riverside Church speech. “People take the parts that require the least inquiry, the least change, the least work. Our country has chosen what they consider to be the easier way to work with King. They are aware that something very powerful was connected to him, and he

was connected to it. But they are not ready to really take on the kind of issues he was raising even there.”

Instead, the country has chosen to remember a version of “I Have a Dream” that not only undermines King’s legacy but also tells an inaccurate story about the speech itself. King made explicit reference in his oration to both the limits of legal remedy and the need for economic redress to confront the consequences of centuries of second-class citizenship.

“One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination,” he said (emphasis mine). “One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity.”

“We refuse to believe,” he said later in the speech, “that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation.”

No reasonable reading of this can limit King’s vision to just that of doing away with Jim Crow. Only by willfully conflating codified segregation with racism, and ignoring not just what King had said elsewhere but also the ample contrary evidence in the speech, could one claim he was arguing that the answer to America’s racial problems lay in merely changing the law.

When it comes to assessing the political content of the speech, the distinction between segregation and racism is crucial. To the extent that King’s words were about bringing an end to codified, legal segregation, then the dream has been realized. “Whites Only” signs have been taken down; the laws have been struck. Since 1979, Birmingham, Alabama, has had only black mayors. If simply being black—as opposed to the historical legacy of racism—was ever the sole barrier to economic, social or political advancement, that obstacle has been officially removed.

But to the extent that the speech was about ending racism, one can say with equal confidence that its realization is not even close. Black unemployment is almost double that of whites; the percentage of black children living in poverty is almost triple that of whites; black male life expectancy in Washington, DC, is lower than in the Gaza Strip; one in three black boys born in 2001 stands a lifetime risk of going to prison; more black men were disenfranchised in 2004 because they were felons than in 1870, the year the Fifteenth Amendment ostensibly secured their right to vote.

Many of the images King evoked in his dream refrain were simple—“little black boys and black girls [joining] hands with little white boys and white girls”—even if descriptions of how we might reach that promised land were intermittent and vague. (“Go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana...knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.”) But the speech was clearly more about wider racism than just segregation. By fudging the distinction between the two—or by actively misinterpreting them—it is possible to cast racism as an aberration of the past, as the Supreme Court effectively did when it gutted the Voting Rights Act this past spring. Only then can the vast, enduring differences in the material position of blacks and whites be understood as the failings of individuals rather than the consequences of ongoing institutional, economic and political exclusion. Only then does the emphasis on a single line of the speech—in which King aspired to see new generations who would “not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character”—make any sense.

This particular misreading is most glaring today in discussions of affirmative action. King was a strong proponent of taking race and ethnicity into account when making appointments for jobs and for college admissions, in order to redress historical imbalances. “It is impossible to create a formula for the future,” he wrote, “which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years.”

Yet the right has come to rely on the “content of their character” line to use King as anti-racist cover for its opposition to affirmative action. In 1986, Reagan said: “We are committed to a society in which all men and women have equal opportunities to succeed, and so we oppose the use of quotas. We want a colorblind society. A society that, in the words of Dr. King, judges people not by ‘the color of their skin but by the content of their character.’”

Such distortions in turn explain the ambivalence voiced by those like Harding and a significant element of the black intelligentsia when discussing “I Have a Dream.” It’s not the speech itself about which they are reticent, but rather the way King has been co-opted and his message corrupted. King’s elevation to a patriotic mascot praising America’s relentless and inevitable progress to better days often rankles.

* * *

So when it comes to divining the meaning of King’s speech, there is substantial disagreement. Ironically, given its theme of racial unity, those differences are most pronounced in terms of race.

In a Gallup poll taken in August 2011, the month the King memorial was opened, a majority of blacks said they believed both that the government has a major role to play “in trying to improve the social and economic position of blacks and other minority groups” and that “new civil rights laws are needed to reduce discrimination against blacks.” The figures for whites were 19 percent and 15 percent, respectively. Conversely, over half of whites believed that civil rights for blacks had “greatly improved” in their lifetime, compared with just 29 percent of blacks. Whites were almost six times more likely than blacks to believe that Obama’s policies would “go too far...in promoting efforts to aid the black community,” while blacks were twice as likely as whites to believe they wouldn’t go far enough. Other polls show that whites are four times as likely as blacks to believe that America has achieved racial equality. In short, as the racially polarized responses to George Zimmerman’s acquittal revealed, black and white Americans have very different lived experiences. While the de jure enforcement of segregation has been banned, the de facto experience of it remains prevalent. Any journey through a US city, where widely recognized geographical boundaries separate the races, will bear this out. Blacks and whites are less likely to see the same problems, more likely to disagree on their root causes, and unlikely to agree on a remedy.

“For those who concentrate so much on that one line about ‘the color of their skin’ and ‘the content of their character,’” says Harding, “I wonder how, with the resegregation of our schools and communities, do you get to know the content of anyone’s character if you’re not willing to engage in life together with them?”

There is pretty much only one question on which the views of black and white Americans do coincide, and that is whether they believe King’s dream has been realized. Whenever this question has been asked by major pollsters over the past seven years, the discrepancy between blacks and whites has rarely topped 10 percent. If they agree about the extent to which the problems King invoked have been solved, but disagree on what they are, the inevitable conclusion is that, even as they listen to the same speech, blacks and whites hear very different things.

It is implausible to imagine that, were King to be raised from the dead, he would look at America’s jails, unemployment lines, soup kitchens or inner-city schools and think his life’s work had been accomplished. Whether one believes that these inequalities are caused by individuals making bad choices or by institutional discrimination, it would be absurd to claim that such a world bears any resemblance to the one King set out to create.

Nor is there anything to suggest that view would have been much altered by the presence of a black

man in the White House. The claim that Obama's election has a connection to King's legacy has some substance. As Obama himself has often conceded, his election would not have been possible without the civil rights movement, which created the conditions that allowed for the arrival of a new generation of black politicians. But the aim of the civil rights movement was equality for all, not the elevation of one.

There's no questioning the symbolic value of electing a black president. Yet the fact remains that African-Americans are no better off materially as a result, even if they may have been worse off had he lost, and that the economic gap between blacks and whites has grown under his presidency. The ascent of America's first black president has coincided with the descent of black Americans' standard of living. Reasonable people may disagree on the extent to which Obama is responsible for that. But the fact is undeniable.

Symbols should not be dismissed as insubstantial, but they should not be mistaken as substance either. The presence of underrepresented people in leadership positions only has any significantly positive meaning if it challenges whatever obstacles created the conditions for that underrepresentation. To believe otherwise is to trade equal opportunities for photo opportunities, whereby a system looks different but acts the same.

In the final analysis, to ask whether King's dream has been realized is to misunderstand both his overall politics and the specific ambition of his speech. King was not the kind of activist who pursued a merely finite agenda. The speech in general, and the dream sequence in particular, are utopian. Standing in the midst of a nightmare, King dreamed of a better world where historical wrongs had been righted and good prevailed. That is why the speech means so much to me, and why I believe that, overall, it has stood the test of time.

* * *

I was raised in Britain during the Thatcher years, at a time when idealism was mocked and "realism" became an excuse for capitulation to the "inevitability" of unbridled market forces and military aggression. To oppose that agenda was regarded, by some on the left as well as the right, as impractical and unrealistic. Realism has no time for dreamers.

True, we can't live on dreams alone. But the absence of utopian ideas leaves us without a clear ideological and moral center and therefore facing a void in which politics is deprived of any liberatory potential and reduced to only what is feasible at any given moment.

In the summer of 1963, with a civil rights bill pending and the white population skittish, King could have limited his address to what was immediately achievable and pragmatic. He might have spelled out a ten-point plan, laid out his case for tougher legislation, or made the case for fresh campaigns of civil disobedience in the North. He could have reduced himself to an appeal for what was possible in a time when what was possible and pragmatic was neither satisfactory nor sustainable.

Instead, he swung for the bleachers. Not knowing whether building the world he was describing was a Sisyphean task or merely a Herculean one, he called out in the political wilderness, hoping his voice would someday be heard by those with the power to act on it. In so doing, he showed it is not naïve to believe that what is not possible in the foreseeable future may nonetheless be necessary, worth fighting for and worth articulating. The idealism that underpins his dream is the rock on which our modern rights are built and the flesh on which pragmatic parasites feed. If nobody dreamed of a better world, what would there be to wake up to?

Ari Berman writes that, fifty years after King's historic march, the struggle for racial justice faces

unprecedented challenges.

Gary Younge

P.S.

* August 14, 2013 | This article appeared in the September 2-9, 2013 edition of The Nation.

<http://www.thenation.com/article/175764/misremembering-i-have-dream?page=0,0#axzz2cOHk0h00>

* Gary Younge, the Alfred Knobler Journalism Fellow at The Nation Institute, is the New York correspondent for the Guardian and the author of *No Place Like Home: A Black Briton's Journey Through the Deep South (Mississippi)* and *Stranger in a Strange Land: Travels in the Disunited States* (New Press). He is also a contributor to The Nation.

* Please support our [The Nation] journalism. Get a digital subscription for just \$9.50!