

Joseph renews perspectives on Martin Luther King

Editor's note: The following is a condensed version of a speech commemorating the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., given last week by Richard Joseph, senior lecturer in government and Afro-American studies at the College. The speech was edited by the author due to space limitations.

A special duty is thrust upon me on this day, 15 January 1980. I must try and revive for you the struggle and the vision of Brother Martin. I must also consider the distance we have travelled, as members of this educational institution, and as a people still striving to realize the vision, the dream, that Dr. King revealed so eloquently to the nation and the world during the famous March on Washington in August 1963. Finally, I must try and indicate why I feel we are still so far from that goal, and how we must prepare ourselves for an even more difficult struggle during the coming decade.

With your indulgence, I shall give you four glimpses of the heyday of Dr. King seen through the eyes of a young Dartmouth undergraduate, who spent his first day on this campus, in September 1961, wondering if he had made an incredible mistake in coming to spend four years in a place where no other Black face could be seen. I was wrong. There were other Blacks on this campus, about twelve in all. Nearly half of these were made up by the five black members of my class of 1965, which had a total of over 800 students. I must spell that out for you, present-day Black students, so that you can first understand how far we have travelled since that time, but also to help you take heart in confronting the problems we still face as a people on this campus.

1956 to a mere 39 at his death in 1968.

At the time of the March from Selma, a brutal killing of some civil rights workers had recently occurred. The expectation was widespread that it would take only one spark to set loose a wave of unprecedented violence in the South. A day or so before the marchers arrived in Montgomery, they were camped outside the city, and being entertained by performers such as Harry Belafonte. At one moment an urgent message arrived for Dr. King, and it was thrust into my hand to deliver to him. When I arrived to where he had been staying, I saw a car driving off with him in the back seat together with some of his close aides. I ran and waved the car to a halt, and told Dr. King through the window about the message which he then took from my hand. The car drove off. As I walked back to my post, I could not help thinking of how vulnerable Dr. King had been at that moment to anyone carrying, not a genuine message as I was, but a weapon.

The other detail of this episode I shall give you today concerns the final march through the streets of Montgomery. As was the custom at the time, Dr. King would walk together with other civic leaders, white and black, at the head of the procession with their arms linked. He had already been struck by a stone on one such occasion. This time, as I watched them going by, I saw from close up the face of Brother Martin which on television screens and newspapers throughout the nation and the world reflected determination and forthrightness. For myself, I saw absolute courage, the courage needed to walk unarmed into the valley of the shadow of death, where from any corner, any tree, any window a shot could ring out — and it would be all over for his mortal

This was an increasing reaction among young militant Blacks at the time. Dr. King's message of brotherhood and non-violence was no longer in keeping with the anger that was then seething through the black communities. In my case, I switched off the radio when I heard Dr. King say that if there was any blood flowing in the streets, let it be the blood of the people who were peacefully demanding and asserting their rights. Well, many of us did not perceive ourselves as needing to shed any more of our blood without dire retribution being visited immediately against our attackers. Other voices were beginning to be heard among Afro-Americans. Stokely Carmichael raised the cry of Black Power during the Selma to Montgomery march, and many of the marchers picked it up. Malcolm X was increasingly arousing our interest, respect and later support for telling it like it really was, and speaking to our need for racial pride and the need to assert our humanity, not by turning the other cheek, but by meeting blow with blow.

It is necessary for me to indicate to you the vision, the achievements, and the courage of Martin Luther King, but also to try and put the man and his movement in the broader perspective of our struggle as a people for political, economic and social freedom in this country. The condition of Black people in America today is one of enjoying nearly all the constitutional liberties which Dr. King considered our birthright. But, in a broader and deeper political, economic and social sense, we are still unfree in this country, and in the institutions to which we belong like Dartmouth College. We are unfree for the basic reason that we are a powerless people.

I never fully understood the tragedy of the Black experience in the United States

Here at Dartmouth, a senior personage of this institution could declare only three months ago that "Dartmouth has responded to accommodate the new social environment." He went on to say that "the special or single interest elements (namely Us) ... must reinforce the unique spirit of Dartmouth, not dilute it." When I read that statement, I immediately underlined it, because I felt it was very condescending. Black Americans did not suddenly become part of the American environment which had to be accommodated in the 1970s. We have been around even before this College was founded. It is institutions like Dartmouth which had to accommodate themselves to the centuries-old realities of America, instead of continuing to function as *de facto* preserves of white middle-class America. It is wrong to see the choice before minority groups on this campus as simply one of either reinforcing or diluting a so-called "unique spirit of Dartmouth." Don't we have anything from our homes, our communities, our culture that has not been Dartmouth, or any similar institution, and whose absence has rendered such institutions in the past — despite their



The very first time I saw our Leader, Dr. King, was in this very same room, 105 Dartmouth on May 23rd, 1962. He had been invited here by the College — an act which stands in contrast to the absence of any official action to mark this important date for Afro-Americans on this campus today.

“We understood the message he had for us: ‘It’s your struggle too, even though you are ensconced in the lap of middle-class White America.’ ”

As Dr. King waited to be introduced to the audience, his eyes scanned the auditorium. I was up in the balcony (which no longer exists). I knew what he was looking for: US!

We understood the message he had for us: It’s your struggle too, even though you are ensconced in the lap of middle-class White America. That is a message, sadly, which we have to carry continually to many of our brothers and sisters on this campus today, who believe that if they make believe they are not black, they would be able to waltz around this campus, and in and through American society, undelugno. Well they won’t! They are just deluding themselves.

My second encounter with Dr. King took place during the Selma to Montgomery March in support of the pending Voting Rights Act of 1965. From that whole experience I want to isolate just one aspect of Dr. King’s life and message, namely his incredible courage. Those of us who have been in situations where we felt an increased threat to our mortal existence never really forget what lonely, fragile, vulnerable creatures we suddenly perceived ourselves to be. Well, Dr. King was faced with such threats throughout the years he spend at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement, from the age of 27 in

existence.

The third and fourth perspectives on Dr. King can be considered jointly as demonstrating his triumph and his tragedy. First, we must recall Dr. King’s opposition to the Vietnam War.

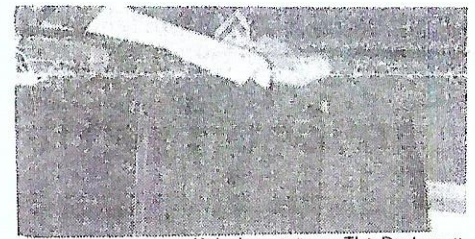
The summer of 1965 saw the intensification of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. It also saw the first participation of young civil rights workers in what was to develop as the historic Anti-War Movement. This development represented a great challenge to Dr. King. If he had acted according to past practices of the older Civil Rights leaders, he would have avoided displeasing the coalition of religious, labor, business and other civic groups which had contributed so generously in time, money and energy to the cause. But Dr. King rose to the challenge. He became increasingly vocal in his opposition to the war.

The U.S. Government, however, chose to disregard such reasoned opposition as that of Dr. King, and continued what he had called “an immoral war” with even greater intensity, leading not only to further unnecessary death and carnage but also, as we are witnessing today, the near-destruction of the Cambodian people and nation. America could tolerate Dr. King’s struggle as long as he kept it within the bounds of fighting for internal civil rights. As his involvement in the Anti-War Movement mounted in 1967-68, however, so did his continued activities become intolerable to a wider and more influential section of the population. They, whoever they are, cut him down in April 1968. It is well to ponder what happened to Malcolm X after he travelled abroad and developed a perspective on foreign affairs. We should therefore be grateful that Andrew Young was only fired from his job in 1979.

My final reflection today on Dr. King’s leadership concerns a moment during one of my visits to the South in the mid-sixties when I suddenly switched off a radio broadcast of an interview with Dr. King.

until I spent a few months, the summer of 1967, in Ruleville, Sunflower County, smack in the Mississippi Delta. (It should be indicated that this was between the first and second year of my Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University, England). There, for over a century before the Emancipation Proclamation, Black men, women and children had produced the cotton which stood at the center of an economic complex, beginning with the slave ships along the west coast of Africa, to the plantations in the southern states, to the mills in northern England, which had generated the massive capital that led to the revolutionary expansion of industrial power in the European and North American world. But what did I see in 1967? Wherever you looked for miles in any direction were the large plantations owned by Whites, like Senator James Eastland. And the Blacks? Shacks, Shacks, wooden shacks along dirt roads with pictures of Jesus Christ and John Kennedy pinned up on the wall.

Today our powerlessness is evident everywhere. Although I was away from the U.S.A. for several years before last fall, I could have started shouting the moment I stepped off the plane. Bedford Stuyvesant, the Black community in Brooklyn in which I first lived as a child, reminded me upon seeing it again of photographs of western Europe after World War II: a lot of empty, gutted houses. But we are in a worst position than postwar Europe for many reasons, one of which is that our people are defeated, not physically, but in spirit. We are able to elect a number of Black mayors up and down the country; but who believes that political power really resides in city hall? We have seventeen determined Congressmen, about 4 per cent, in a House of Representatives of 435. We have no senators. Presidential candidates treat us like fishes you can hook at election time; but when the votes are counted we can be thrown back in to swim or flounce around as best we can.



Nate Levenson — The Dartmouth

Senior Lecturer Richard A. Joseph recalls King’s dream.

prestige and affluence — deprived, provincial and unbalanced environments?

The Dartmouth I hope to see develop is not the Dartmouth of some Americans — and I can add some few Americans — that I joined in the 1960s. I wish to see, and hope to see, a new Dartmouth of all Americans in the 1980s. And I do believe that we have what is needed to create such a community. Here we have many committed educators and administrators — I can see a number of you with us today. We also have at Dartmouth a tradition of moral and social concerns. I was so surprised when I returned to the campus to find that the ABC program is still going strong, and has extended to other localities in the country. I was one of the first tutors in that program at Dartmouth, the summer of 1964. Finally, we have an absence of the kind of negative community pressures which elsewhere resist the implementation of progressive programs. (The efforts exerted to make affirmative action a truly affirmative and not negative program on this campus must be cited).

In conclusion, let me return to the purpose and theme of our gathering here today — to pay homage to our brave, eloquent and challenging leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. He died in the way that freedom fighters prefer to die: with their boots on, going forward to meet the enemy wherever he chooses to make a stand against progress and social justice. Rev. King declared that “there will be neither rest nor tranquillity in America

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King

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until the Negro is granted his citizenship rights." We have recovered, through his efforts and, that of other leaders who should not be overlooked like James Farmer of CORE, many of these rights. Yet no one should delude him or herself that there is either peace or tranquillity between White and Black in America. This is why we must look at other things Dr. King said. "One hundred years after the Emancipation Proclamation," he declared in 1963, "the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity."

Finally, Rev. King's dream was that the children of slaves and of slave-owners would one day live in brotherhood. He understood that both Blacks and Whites in America are products of slavery. Indeed, we remain in a number of respects a post-slavery society. This lecture is therefore just one of many efforts I hope to see on this campus to assert, and make manifest,

the vision of Dr. King, despite the many who cling to the memory of when such a vision seemed to apply to such faraway places like Birmingham and Watts, but not to others like Hanover, New Hampshire.

When the next anniversary of Martin Luther King's birthday comes around, I hope to see some sign that the College acknowledges — not as another grudging concession to "the new social environment" — but from the hearts of its senior officials, that the birthday of this man who gave his life to making all of us more human, more just, more respectful and loving towards each other, should not be allowed to pass unnoticed, without obliging us to conclude that we are, regrettably, not yet as human, as just, as respectful or loving towards each other, as he dreamed we would become.

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