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Museum Musings
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Remembering King Speak at K-State: Part 4

In one of his last public addresses, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke to an audience of more than 7,000 at Kansas State University on Jan. 19, 1968, about "The Future of Integration." This portion of his speech reviews three myths that he identified about American society: the myth of time, the myth that "you cannot legislate morals," and the myth of the boot-strap philosophy.

King defined "the myth of time" as "the notion that only time can solve the problem."

"I know there are those sincere people who say to civil rights leaders and persons working for civil rights, 'You are pushing things too fast; you must slow up for a while,'" King said. "And then they have a way of saying: 'Now just be nice and be patient and continue to pray, and in a hundred or two hundred years the problem will work itself out, because only time can solve the problem.'"

King pointed out that time is neutral, and so it can be used either constructively or destructively.

"Somewhere, we must come to see that human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless effort and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God. Without this hard work, time itself becomes an ally of the primitive forces of social stagnation."

The law was another myth holding back social progress. King defined this myth as "the notion that legislation has no role to play in establishing justice and in moving toward an integrated society. The argument here is that you must change the heart of man and you cannot change the heart through legislation."

King disagreed with that notion.

"I would be the first one to say that hearts must be changed," he declared. "I believe in the changing of hearts. I realize that, if we are to have a truly integrated society, white people are going to have to treat Negro people right — not just because the law says it, but because it is natural, and because it is right, and because the Negro is the white man's brother. ...

"But after saying that, I must point out the other side. It may be true that morality can not be legislated. But behavior can be regulated. It may be true that the law cannot change the heart. But it can restrain the heartless. It may be true that the law can not make a man love me. But it can restrain him from lynching me, and I think that is pretty important, also."

The third myth he reviewed was a caricature of the "bootstrap philosophy."

People say to the Negroes: 'You must lift yourself by your own boot straps.' So often I hear people saying: 'The Irish, Italians — and they go right down the line of all other ethnic groups — came to this country and faced problems. They had difficulties, and yet they lifted themselves by their own boot straps. Why can't and why won't the Negro do this?'

"It does not help the Negro for unfeeling, insensitive whites to say to him that ethnic groups that voluntarily came to this country 150 years ago have now risen beyond the Negro, who has been here more than 344 years but was brought here in chains involuntarily. The people who

project this argument never seem to realize that no other ethnic groups have been slaves on American soil. They do not stop to realize that America made the Negro's color a stigma."

These myths, King said, prove a hindrance to social progress and the need for real change.

"There is need for civil rights legislation all over the country in various areas — in the economic area, still in the educational area, and in the housing area.

"There is a great problem facing our nation today, and we see it in almost every city in the country. It is the constant growth of predominately Negro central cities, ringed by white suburbs. If the pattern continues, it will invite social disaster. The only way this problem can be solved is through fair housing bills. Right here in the state of Kansas this issue is being dealt with, but there are still recalcitrant forces seeking to defeat a fair housing bill which this state desperately needs. ... Every state in this Union needs a fair housing bill that will make it possible for people to live together and not face discrimination in housing.

"The Negro was freed from the bondage of physical slavery in 1863 through the Emancipation Proclamation. But the Negro was not given any land to make that freedom meaningful. ... In 1863 America just said 'You are free'; and he was left penniless, illiterate, with nothing.

"Here is the story that is not often told. At the same time America refused to give the Negro any land, by Act of Congress she was giving away millions of acres of land in the West and the Midwest, which meant that America was willing to undergird her white peasants from Europe with an economic floor. Not only did the nation give the land, it built land-grant colleges to teach these people how to farm. It provided county agents to further their expertise in farming. It provided low interest rates so that they could mechanize their farms. And today many of these people are being paid through federal subsidies *not* to farm.

"These are the very people who, in many instances, are saying to the Negro that he should lift himself by his own boot straps. I guess this is all right to say to a man that he should lift himself by his own boot straps, but it is a cruel jest to say to a bootless man that he should lift himself by his own boot straps.

"The nation has a debt that it must pay. The longer it refuses to pay that debt, the more problems there will be — the more we will see the crises in our cities, developing and developing. There should be a massive program, a kind of Bill of Rights for the disadvantaged, that will really grapple with the slums, the economic problem generally, and all the things that I have tried to outline. We have the resources as a nation to do that. The question is whether America has the will. I am afraid that we have such mixed-up priorities nationally that without hard work we will not respond to this crisis...."

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