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The
Conservative
Virtues of
Dr. Martin
Luther King

*By Robert Woodson and
William J. Bennett*



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202/546-4400

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Adam Meyerson, Vice President for Educational Affairs: We gather today to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who did so much to bring America closer to the ideal of our Pledge of Allegiance: One nation under God, with liberty and justice for all. We thank Dr. King for his love of country, his love of peace and non-violence, his love of his fellow man. We thank Dr. King for the healing he brought to the wound of racial hatred in our national soul. We thank him for his righteous indignation, his insistence that all Americans be allowed to enjoy the rights secured by our Declaration of Independence—the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We thank Dr. King for his dream that some day our children will be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.

Conservatives did not, and do not, agree with all of Dr. King's political positions. In particular, we think Dr. King looked too much to government, too much to the welfare state, and not sufficiently to entrepreneurial capitalism, to win economic opportunity for African-Americans. But there was a deeply conservative message throughout Dr. King's life and work, and we are fortunate today to have with us two distinguished speakers who will talk about the conservative virtues of Dr. King.

Both of our speakers were active in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. Both are active today in the next stage of the civil rights revolution—the rebuilding of America's families and communities.

Our first speaker, Robert Woodson, was Vice President of the NAACP in West Chester, Pennsylvania when Dr. King was assassinated. As riots were breaking out all over the country, Mr. Woodson worked with the police, the National Guard, and community leaders to help stop a riot in West Chester and make sure the protest was structured and non-violent. During the 1970s Mr. Woodson headed the Administration of Justice Division of the National Urban League. In 1981, he founded the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise, and has been its president ever since.

The National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise is one of the most inspiring organizations in America today. It does more than any other organization I know of to help successful grass-roots organizations that are stopping crime and drug abuse, keeping families together, fostering ownership of property, building small businesses, and otherwise making a difference in low-income communities.

Our second speaker, William Bennett, was teaching philosophy at the University of Southern Mississippi when Dr. King was killed. Mr. Bennett, in front of his colleagues, held a teach-in in honor of Dr. King that night, and he expressed the views that he has consistently held to this day—America should be a color-blind society in which we do not discriminate or give preference

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They spoke at The Heritage Foundation on January 14, 1994.

ISSN 0272-1155 ©1994 by The Heritage Foundation.

It is Dr. King's attempt to bring forward this message that I remember most. Many of the civil rights leaders who have followed him no longer refer to the gospel of Jesus Christ as the basis of their message. Instead, they have embraced poverty programs. Instead, they have secularized the movement. They have told young people that they should be exempt from responsibility: It is OK to become fathers and mothers before you become women and men, because you have been a victim of discrimination. It is OK for you to kill and maim one another—after all, you are a victim of society. As a consequence of this drumbeat of despair—this drumbeat of victimization—we have the kind of decline and despair that exists today.

If Dr. King were alive today, he would stand here and in pulpits throughout this country and give a message of redemption to young people. He would say to them that the victimizer might have knocked you down, but it is the victim that has to get up. And the most successful programs around this country are not what people on the right would lead you to believe; that is, all we have to do is have the right set of economic policies and proper economic incentives, because this is going to heal families. This is not the case. I do not know of anybody who sacrifices his life on foreign soil for reduction in the capital gains tax rate. No one. That is not the primary basis that motivates people. Nor do I know of anybody who has sacrificed his life so that he can get another government welfare check.

Remember the old adage: When bull elephants fight, the grass always loses. We need to understand that the fundamental basis upon which we will deliver this nation is to confront this cultural challenge—the crisis in values which Bill Bennett talks so eloquently about. This is the next battlefield upon which we must fight. That is the legacy of Dr. King. If he were alive today, he, too, would have had a best-selling book on virtues.

William J. Bennett: That was great. Let me add to what Adam said about Howard Stern and give you even better news. I read that Howard Stern does not allow his children to listen to his show. And he would not allow them to read his book. This is the reverse of the Washington phenomenon. In Washington you are very familiar with people's private lives being a good deal worse than their public persona. But good for Howard Stern. This is the classic definition of hypocrisy. He understands. He knows what is important, because he knows what he will let his kids see and what he will not. So we congratulate him on that score.

On my getting beaten up in Mississippi, you may wonder how many guys it took to beat me up. I wish I could tell you it was a lot. Here is what happened. Not after the Martin Luther King teach-in, at which I read from King's works, I found a note on my door from one of my students saying, "Go back to Moscow, you big radial." And I wondered why this guy was calling me a tire. He meant radical; he just couldn't spell. I think that was the last time anybody called me a radical—from the left anyway. But there is a point to that: If you said in 1968 that you should judge people by the content of their character, not the color of their skin, that you should be color-blind, you were a liberal. If you say it now, you are a conservative. It is in that sense that Martin Luther King today is a conservative.

But my getting beaten up wasn't about Martin Luther King, it was about Bob Gibson. Bob Gibson was a great pitcher in baseball. The year I was in Mississippi, the Cardinals went to the series and Gibson was pitching. I was watching the game in a redneck bar in Hattiesburg when this guy said, "Gibson will choke, that *#\$&\$*#" (He used a racial epithet). Gibson then proceeded to strike out fourteen people in a row. I said, "Great choke, huh?" And he said, "It will come, it will come. These guys just don't have the character, you know." I said, "You are an idiot." He said, "You are some kind of yankee boy aren't you?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "Why don't you call me a redneck?" I said, "All right, you are a redneck idiot." The guy I was saying it to didn't hit me, but his friend who was standing nearby took a round, a full body blow

right into the chin. It knocked me right off my chair. That was it. I had maybe a beer and a half already, so I had a head start and that put me out. They hit me a couple more times and that was it. And then they were very polite. They threw water in my face, picked me up, and said, "You know we don't agree with you, but we admire a guy who stands up for what he believes in."

I was in Baton Rouge yesterday and Biloxi the day before, and in Jackson, Mississippi. That society is essentially transformed on these issues. It is remarkable. King himself said he was much more fearful in Illinois than he was in Alabama. And he had good reason to be. In my view, this society has changed dramatically. Whenever I go back to Hattiesburg, it is a much better and more integrated society than most of our northern cities. It is remarkable.

There are two bigotries remaining in American life. One is the bigotry against religious people. The second is the bigotry of some people in the North and Los Angeles and other places toward the South. You need to go there and see that in many ways the South is far beyond those northern enclaves where they have a sense of moral superiority.

Lots of people will be invoking the memory of Dr. King this weekend and Monday. And they will be invoking him as a kind of saint. He is a saint, but one wants him to be more than a saint. And that is, to take him seriously. He will be talked about in the next three days as a source of inspiration, but my guess is, by many who say they speak for him, he will be regarded as a source of inspiration rather than a source of wisdom. And they will talk about the figure of Dr. King, and what he meant and started, but they won't take his words seriously today. I think that he still has a lot to teach us. That is why I put two of his major speeches in my book.

I think people should continue to read what he has to say on three issues—race, education and the Western tradition, and the spiritual in life. On race, Dr. King said, "I have a dream 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." A color-blind society.

Well, Dr. King, we're not going to make it with your children, maybe your grandchildren, maybe your great-grandchildren. We are further away from being color-blind today than we were when Dr. King said these words, because race-norming, counting by race, reverse discrimination, racial identification, talking about oneself and one's identity in terms of race is much more popular and much more a part of the intellectual and political mainstream than it ever was. But to remind people of what King said I think is still a moral obligation. I took it seriously. I taught it to my students in Mississippi, and I continue to quote it.

But it is interesting how the so-called civil rights establishment reacts when you quote it. Just two quick examples. A few years ago, during a television discussion with Eleanor Holmes Norton, I quoted this line from King about the content of character not the color of skin. She angrily banged the desk and said, "Stop quoting dead saints." And I said, "What kind of saint should I quote?" What is the objection here, the sainthood or the dead? If we are limited to living saints we have a real problem. What is the objection? These words somehow rankle much of our leadership.

And then I used King's quote during a discussion with the Reverend Jesse Jackson and he accused me of "intellectual terrorism" for using those words. And I said, "I don't understand." He said, "Let me explain. King was a context theologian." This made a murkier comment murkier yet. I didn't understand the explanation of the explanation.

Again, this wasn't supposed to be said. What is objectionable about it? Is it wrong? Is it wrong for a white person to say it? It would be odd if it were true that we should be judged by the content of our character rather than the color of our skin, but it is somehow improper for a white person to say it. That would be sort of self-refuting, wouldn't it?

If King's statement is true, it doesn't matter who says it. If it is true, it is true. Indeed, everyone should say it. Everyone of all races should say it.

But today the modern agenda is one that insists on counting by race, skin pigmentation, quotas, racial gerrymandering, set-asides, and race-norming. We are moving further from Dr. King's vision on this issue.

A second issue that is very much in the news and in discussion is about education, particularly about the role of Western culture and Western civilization, and the citizenship of black Americans in the culture and tradition of the West. Here is a quote you will not see very often. Who said this? "The Negro is an American. We know nothing of Africa." That was the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Martin Luther King, as a student, immersed himself in the intellectual tradition of the West. No pusher of Afrocentric studies was Martin Luther King.

According to Arthur Schlesinger, a distinguished historian, "Martin Luther King did pretty well with Thoreau, Gandhi, and Reinhold Niebuhr as models. And remember, after all, whom King and his father were named for. The record hardly shows that Eurocentric education had such a terribly damaging effect on the psyche of black Americans. Why deny it to black children today?" Martin Luther King embraced the West, the philosophical tradition of the West, the universalism of Western philosophy, and believed that that tradition was the tradition that led to the liberation of black men and white men and black women and white women.

From Morehouse to Crozer Theological Seminary, where King studied, King immersed himself in the writings of the great philosophers, "from Plato and Aristotle," I see he wrote later, "down to Rousseau, Hobbes, Bentham, Mill and Locke." Here, with these teachers, was planted the seed not of a contemplative life, but of a life of action, a life of thoughtful devotion to political reform, to the pursuit of justice—in the broader sense, equality, liberty and dignity of all people.

King turned to the great philosophers because he needed to know the answers to certain questions: What is justice? What should be loved? What deserves to be defended? What can I know? What should I do? What is man? As a result of the way in which King answered those questions, out of and through the Western tradition, Jim Crow was destroyed and American history was transformed. I have no objection, in case anybody is interested, to students studying cultures that are not Western. I think that is fine. But they should not be denied access to the best and greatest philosophical tradition in the world, the one that has transformed society around the world, the one that is the intellectual and moral and political currency not only of the world that developed in the West, but for all people. And students, black or white, would all be better to imitate what Martin Luther King did, rather than this trend coming out of some curriculum boards.

As the Secretary of Education of the United States, I was invited to go to Stanford University, theoretically one of the best universities in America, to defend Western civilization. Did you need me to fly across the country to defend Western civilization? What in God's name is going on out there? Can't anybody out there do it? Well, we are not sure; we are having a faculty meeting.

So I went, because a group of students and faculty had gathered and paraded up and down saying, "Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Civ. has got to go." And many found that a convincing argument. So we went out to make the case.

The irony was that two years earlier, as Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, I had given grants to Stanford, which involved a course in non-Western civilization for students in their sophomore year, once they had taken Western Civ. in their freshman year. Again, Martin Luther King would be a great source of wisdom.

