

“I Have a Dream,” 50 Years Later

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Fifty years ago today, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered “I Have a Dream,” one of the most stirring and memorable speeches in American history. In the five decades since he laid out his dream at the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, our country has made great progress toward racial equality by destroying Jim Crow, expanding voting rights, and more thoroughly integrating our society. Today, black people hold seats in Congress, the Cabinet, Fortune 500 company boardrooms and, of course, the Oval Office. The United States has come a long way in fifty years, but many of King’s complaints are still relevant today. These inequities are impediments to the personal liberty of millions of Americans.

But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination.

De jure segregation is past, but de facto segregation is very much alive and well in cities all over the country. Neighborhood segregation often leads to effectively segregated public schools—and those majority black schools often underperform against regional and national benchmarks. Although graduation rates have increased for black students across the board over the years, black academic performance still lags behind whites on net. This academic disparity effectively puts young blacks at a disadvantage as they enter college, the workforce, and the global economy.

The Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land.

Policies such as New York City’s so-called Stop and Frisk effectively suspend the Fourth Amendment for young black men. Even though the program is facially colorblind, testimony from New York police officers, interviews with New York City residents, and the NYPD’s own statistics show the discriminatory outcome of the policy. Touted by Mayor Michael Bloomberg as an anti-gun measure, the more than four million stops have resulted in approximately 8,000 guns recovered, rendering the policy not only discriminatory and invasive, but highly ineffective.

Other policing practices further alienate young blacks, especially young black men. The concentration of drug enforcement and other aggressive police tactics exacerbates an antipathy between the police and those whom are supposed to ‘serve and protect,’ to the point that police and the policed alike feel like they’re in a war zone. Outside black neighborhoods, black youths

are often the target of police contact or harassment in shopping malls, open air hangouts, or walking down the street. It is unimaginable for many Americans to feel so alien in their own hometowns, but to many young blacks who venture out of their neighborhoods, they're treated as if they don't belong there.

I am not unmindful that some of you have come here out of great trials and tribulations. Some of you have come fresh from narrow cells. Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality.

The state of American criminal justice has been so punitive to people of color that it has been dubbed the New Jim Crow. Though I don't compare the two, it is undeniable that the criminal laws—especially drug laws—have been disproportionately inflicted upon blacks and Latinos. Despite drug use rates comparable to whites, America's prisons are almost literally overflowing with people of color, hundreds of thousands of whom are serving long sentences for non-violent drug offenses. Families have been destroyed, lives have been ruined, and yet the illicit drug trade continues virtually unabated.

The enforcement of these laws have grown increasingly militarized, causing violent—and sometimes abusive—interactions between police and putative suspects. People who live in heavily policed black neighborhoods, are regularly subject to police misconduct, police corruption, and traumatizing raids and interrogations, whether they are guilty of a crime or not. Despite being facially race-neutral laws, the segregated nature of our cities and the concentrated policing efforts in those areas—known as 'Broken Windows' policing—the front lines of the drug war are most often found in black and Hispanic neighborhoods.

Go back to Mississippi, go back to Alabama, go back to Georgia, go back to Louisiana, go back to the slums and ghettos of our northern cities, knowing that somehow this situation can and will be changed.

Black Americans, like all Americans, want to be treated with dignity and the equal protection of the laws so they too may pursue happiness. The problem, however, is that although blacks have grown up hearing about the same American Dream as whites and others, experience didn't match up with the lofty goals and ideals of justice and equality.

For much of our nation's history, even after being freed of literal chains, blacks were shut out of markets, jobs, accommodations, education, and myriad other social and professional associations. Blacks were hunted by bands of terrorists, often with implicit or direct help from law enforcement, and the courtrooms provided, at best, inconsistent redress to black victims.

The fundamental tenet of "equality under the law" is that the rules apply to everyone equally. This isn't just about doing good for the sake of goodness, but rules that are applied equally encourage participation in mutual prosperity. A system that seems rigged to an outsider is, conversely, likely to lead to a rejection of that system. King's Dream is an exhortation for full inclusion in the American Dream and a rejection of the half-measures and arbitrary exclusions of the time.

While Jim Crow was effectively killed by the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts, all was not suddenly perfect in American race relations, and the gap between the American Dream and American reality remained a wide one.

Let us not wallow in the valley of despair.

How likely are you to move to a place where random street harassment by police authorities is commonplace? How likely are you to move where xenophobia is the norm and you'll be treated as an outsider as long as you live there, nearly entirely based on the color of your skin? It will be harder for you to get a job for these same reasons, and thus harder to get out of the ghetto you'll live in. Now imagine this happens in your native country, in your hometown.

This is what it's like for many to be young and black in America.

“Free markets,” “equality,” “liberty,”: three concepts that form the core of libertarianism and undergird the American Dream, but have, ironically, been cruel and hollow words to black people for the majority of our nation's history. This is simply because the rules under which those concepts operate didn't apply to black people. What is a free market when you can't even sit at the lunch counter to buy a sandwich, let alone apply for a job? What is equality when all your schools and school supplies are substandard? What is liberty when you're harassed by a police officer for being the wrong color in the wrong place?

I say to you today, my friends, that in spite of the difficulties and frustrations of the moment, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

We can eat where we want now and stay in any hotel we can pay for, but our public schools are failing and they fail black kids especially. Black unemployment rates were already higher than all other American ethnic groups during good economic years and are devastating during down years. American policing is misguided in focus and often discriminatory in practice. That Bull Connor is no longer in the streets siccing dogs is progress, but pre-dawn commando raids are not the hallmarks of justice.

These concepts are the essence of freedom and are fundamental to the American Dream, but they must truly apply to all Americans for Dr. King's Dream to become a reality.

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