

## Remembering Dr. King . . . & the First Amendment

By Sam Chaltain

April 3, 2008

This week, Americans will pay tribute to the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s untimely death by honoring his legacy with school assemblies, community programs and national tributes. Yet few if any of us will, at this crucial time in our nation's history, directly connect Dr. King's heroism and accomplishments to his faith in - and use of - our primary tools of democracy, the freedoms of the First Amendment.

This is a missed opportunity. More so than any other part of our Constitution, our laws or our civic principles as a nation, the five freedoms of the First Amendment - religion, speech, press, assembly and petition - embody what it means to be an American. Properly understood and applied, they allow us to expand the promise of freedom more fairly and fully to succeeding generations of Americans, and forge unity in the interest of our diversity, instead of at the expense of it.

Despite its importance, most Americans pay the First Amendment little mind. In fact, based on the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation's Future of the First Amendment survey (<http://firstamendmentfuture.org/>), nearly three-fourths of students say they either don't know how they feel about the First Amendment or take it for granted. The First Amendment Center reports that roughly four in ten Americans cannot name a *single* freedom. And many of us believe the First Amendment exists solely to protect our right to say whatever we want.

This week, the anniversary of Dr. King's death provides an opportunity to remember both what the First Amendment demands of us as citizens, and also what is possible when we exercise those rights responsibly in the cause of justice and freedom for all.

Consider the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, the iconic 1963 rally that introduced King's "I Have a Dream" speech to white America - he had delivered those lines to black audiences many times before - and produced the most poignant petition for redress of grievances in our nation's history. Nearly every American is familiar with King's

speech that day. Many of us were asked to memorize it as students. But few if any of us were also taught about that day - and the movement - in the specific context of our democratic principles as a nation.

Recall that the march occurred as Congress was wrestling with whether or not to pass President Kennedy's civil rights program. Recall that young people across the country were being jailed for peacefully assembling to protest the South's policies of institutional racism. And recall that the quality of our national conversation was still so rudimentary that in the days and weeks before the march, white journalists peppered black commentators with what today seems like a shockingly naïve question - "What is it that Negroes really want?"

King and the other leaders of the movement understood that the best way to counter such naïveté and willful ignorance was by utilizing their First Amendment freedoms to appeal to the nation's conscience. So on August 28 they presented a program that celebrated America's commitment to religious liberty, beginning with an invocation from the Archbishop of Washington and featuring remarks from the president of the American Jewish Congress; they relied on the press to broadcast images of the massive assembly - ABC and NBC even broke away from their regularly scheduled afternoon soap operas to join CBS and broadcast King's speech in its entirety; and they petitioned for change with emotional appeals to, in the words of Abraham Lincoln, "the better angels of our nature."

Nearly a decade of protest and activism reached its symbolic pinnacle when hundreds of thousands of Americans of all colors gathered in the shadow of Lincoln, in the centennial year of the Emancipation Proclamation, to petition the Congress to establish 1963, in the words of organizer Roy Wilkins, "as the year racial discrimination was ended."

The rest is history, and yet both the glory of that day and its unfulfilled promise provide powerful mandates for principals, parents and teachers. As King said forty years ago today - the night before he was struck down by a sniper's bullet at the age of 39 - the future of democracy is always only as secure as the commitment of its youngest citizens. "In 1960," he preached, "when students all over the South started

sitting-in at lunch counters... I knew that as they were sitting in, they were really standing up for the best in the American dream, and taking the whole nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution."

As much or more than anyone in recent American history, King had a profound understanding of the principles found in this nation's "great wells of democracy." And at the heart of his work was an appeal to all Americans to live up to our nation's guiding principles and ideals.

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