



Honoring Our Sacred Obligations

By ALEX MIKULICH, Ph.D.

The question of the “State of the Dream” is often raised at annual celebrations of the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday. I heard the question yet again at a recent panel discussion held at Dillard University. Dominant U.S. society, I responded, has never embraced Dr. King’s “dream” or the goals of the 1963 March on Washington.

Dr. King began his speech to marchers by marking the 100th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, citing the great promises made in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution. This is the promise that all people would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. King stated:

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check: a check which has come back marked ‘insufficient funds.’

As the United States passes the 152nd anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, have we, as a nation, honored our sacred obligations to the promises of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?

The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom stands as one of the most successful mass mobilizations in U.S. history, drawing over a quarter-million participants. A. Philip Randolph, who had been advocating for civil and economic rights since 1917, first launched the March on Washington movement in 1941. Randolph and his co-organizer Bayard Rustin organized a wide-ranging coalition that included factory workers, domestic workers, public employees, and farm workers as the primary marchers.¹

While we celebrate equal access to public accommodations, laws against racial discrimination in employment, and black voting rights attained through the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (although these are under assault today), the key economic, housing, and education goals of the 1963 March on Washington remain unrealized (see *Unfinished March*).²

When the Southern Regional Asset Building Coalition (SRABC) met in September 2014 in New Orleans, the conference highlighted persistent racial disparities in wealth. Economist Meizhu Lui, former director of the Closing the Racial Wealth Gap Initiative, exposed how the so-called “American dream” relies on a myth. “The notion persists,” Lui explained, “that hard work is rewarded with the prosperity of the American dream, but that is not true for all racial groups.”

Lui and other SRABC speakers highlighted how wealth disparities are due to historical and enduring structural inequalities. Wealth disparity is not primarily due to individual behavior. Federal housing policy, in cooperation with banking and insurance companies, redlined African-

American neighborhoods, effectively preventing home and small business loans from boosting the economic development of black communities in the mid-20th century.

Simultaneously, the most beneficial housing and business loan terms stimulated white flight and suburbanization. Add the removal of a substantial urban tax base through white flight, suburbanization, and federal and state defunding of cities, and the economic underdevelopment of black urban communities should not surprise us. It is too often forgotten how white Americans capitalized on *economic affirmative action* throughout the 20th century.

Whereas redlining denied home and small business loans to African-American communities in the 20th century, reverse redlining now extracts resources from African-American and other communities of color. African-American and Latino borrowers are more likely to receive sub-prime loans than white borrowers, even when studies are controlled for legitimate risk factors.³ Too often, predatory payday lenders locate their shops in the most economically vulnerable communities of color.⁴

Housing segregation is intimately interconnected to another critical demand of the March on Washington for truly universal, integrated education. Although the U.S. Supreme Court decided that school segregation was unconstitutional and “inherently unequal” in 1954, a national study finds that “nationwide, the typical black student is now in a school where almost two out of every three classmates (64 percent) are low-income, nearly double the levels of school of the typical white or Asian student (37 and 39 percent respectively).”⁵

The case of Tuscaloosa, Alabama, is instructive. As Nikole Hannah-Jones reports in a 2014 study of “Segregation Now,” Tuscaloosa was successful in integrating its two major high schools. Due to this success, Tuscaloosa was released from federal court oversight of its school system in 2000. Yet today, “nearly one in three black students attends a school that looks like *Brown versus Board of Education* never happened.”⁶

ProPublica found that, “In 1972, due to strong federal enforcement, only about 25 percent of black students in the South attended intensely segregated schools in which 9 out of 10 students were racial minorities.” However, in districts released from federal court orders between 1990 and 2011, “53 percent of black students attend such schools.”⁷

Last, and certainly not least, the March on Washington demanded a national minimum wage of \$2 per hour—which is \$13 per hour in today’s dollars. After adjusting for inflation, the minimum wage today—\$7.25—is worth \$2 dollars *less* than in 1968 when Dr. King was advocating for the sanitation workers in Memphis. Since Dr. King was assassinated, the income gap between blacks and whites has narrowed by just

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3 cents on the dollar. At this rate of progress, income equality will not be achieved for 537 years.⁸

In his Special Report, “Too Much for Too Many: What does it cost families to live in Louisiana?” Ali R. Bustamante, M.A., shows that 228,000 Louisiana families do not make enough wages to achieve a minimally decent living.⁹ In 2013, over 39 percent of Louisiana workers made less than \$13 per hour. That is over 772,000 of 1.9 million employed workers in Louisiana. The March on Washington demand of \$13 per hour would give these workers an automatic raise, lift them to a more decent standard of living and help grow our economy.

The work of the March on Washington to honor our sacred obligations for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness of all Americans remains before us.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 William P. Jones, “The Forgotten Radical History of the March on Washington,” *Dissent* (Spring 2013) available online at www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-forgotten-radical-history-of-the-march-on-washington
- 2 www.epi.org/unfinished-march/?utm_source=Economic+Policy+Institute&utm_campaign=fad864b352-News_from_the_Economic_Policy_Institute_16_2015&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_e7c5826c50-fad864b352-55874345
- 3 William P. Jones, op.cit., p. 75.
- 4 In Texas, 75 percent of payday stores are located in communities where median income is under \$50,000 per year. See www.americanprogress.org/issues/economy/report/2013/08/20/72591/predatory-payday-lending/
Interactive maps of Louisiana demonstrate payday stores located in African American and economically vulnerable communities: www.labudget.org/lbp/paydaylending/
- 5 Gary Orfield, John Kucsera, and Genevieve Siegel-Hawley, “E Pluribus...Separation: Deepening Double Segregation for More Students,” The Civil Rights Project, 2012, available online at civilrightsproject.ucla.edu/research/k-12-education/integration-and-diversity/mlk-national/e-pluribus...separation-deepening-double-segregation-for-more-students
- 6 Nikole Hannah-Jones, “Segregation Now,” *ProPublica*, (April 16, 2014) available online at www.propublica.org/article/segregation-now-full-text
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Dedrick Muhammad, *40 Years Later: The Unrealized American Dream* (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Policy Studies, 2008), p. 5.
- 9 Ali Bustamante, “Too Much for Too Many: What does it cost families to live in Louisiana?” *JustSouth Quarterly* (Winter 2014), available online at www.loyno.edu/jsri/sites/loyno.edu/jsri/files/JSRI%20SPECIAL%20REPORT%20Too%20Much%20for%20Too%20Many.pdf

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