

Awaiting MLK Memorial, Black Leaders Say ‘Dream’ Realization is Still Woefully Short

Written by Hazel Trice Edney
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WASHINGTON – There is much fanfare surrounding the long-anticipated unveiling and dedication of the Dr. Martin Luther King Memorial on the National Mall on August 28.

That 11 a.m. Sunday program will no doubt emanate all the euphoria, powerful emotions and spiritual prowess as a traditional Sunday morning worship service. But, as some Black civil rights leaders gear up to participate in the unveiling, they acknowledge the reality this week that the dream of which Dr. King preached has still fallen woefully short.

“The Dedication promises to be a historic event for the U.S. and nations around the world, as Dr. King’s vision and timeless beliefs continue to resonate with people of all lands,” says **Harry E. Johnson Sr.**

, president and CEO of the National Memorial Project Foundation, on www.dedicatethedream.org. “World leaders, civil rights pioneers, citizens who remember the hard days of segregation and those leading the next generation closer to Dr. King’s dream, will assemble together for the long-awaited celebration and remembrance.”

According to responses to questions from the Trice Edney News Wire this week, minds of civil rights leaders will also be focused on one of Dr. King’s most famous questions: “Where do we go from here – chaos or community?”

“We have made very real and significant progress since the March on Washington, but we have a long ways to go before we could say that what Dr. King envisioned is a reality,” says **John A. Payton,**

president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund. “The 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the 1968 Fair Housing Act, the 1991 Civil Rights Act and much more – all came after the march. Those were all significant human rights achievements. Their enforcement has made the entire country more just. However, even as we celebrate what has been achieved, we must recognize what remains to be accomplished.”

He then ticked off the progress and the lack thereof on several key issues:

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Education: Public schools in most inner cities are in crisis, with graduation rates for Black kids below 50 percent in some urban areas causing an educational deficiency that cripple the possibilities for many Black youth, Peyton said.

Criminal Justice: "In 1963 there were some 200,000 persons in prison in the United States, and there was a small racial gap in that prison population. Today, there are over 2.5 million people in prison and about half are Black and Latino. While participation in illegal drug use occurs at the same rate for white and Black people, the arrest and incarceration rate for black people is seven times that of white people. That is a huge racial gap," he said.

Economic Justice: "We still see significant and often structural racism affecting job opportunities in hiring and promotion."

Voting: "This one seemingly bright spot is the only bright because of the presence of the Voting Rights Act, which is constantly under challenge. Two years ago it was sustained by the Supreme Court in a case that the Legal Defense Fund argued, but it is again under constitutional challenge and is likely to go back to the Supreme Court. The achievements are real but the remaining challenges are also real."

Wade Henderson, president and CEO of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, says conditions in America are the reason he has decided to join the Aug. 27 march, the day before the dedication. Led by Rev. Al Sharpton and radio personality Tom Joyner, the march and rally will call for jobs in commemoration of King's 1963 March for Jobs and Freedom.

"Some have asked why we plan yet another demonstration on this important anniversary," Henderson said. "Our nation is today, as it was in Dr. King's time, at a crossroads of extraordinary significance. We face massive economic upheaval exceeded only by the Great Depression in its impact. We are mired in two wars which sap our strength both in lives and treasure. And finally, we suffer a new level of partisan extremism which elevates political interests over the national interest, and threatens the very existence of our democracy as we know it."

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Two-and-a-half years ago, America celebrated with great awe, the election of its first African-American president. But, it took only a few months to see that that feat gave rise to as much racism as it did to racial healing. Race experts, such as the Southern Poverty Law Center, identified clear racial animus toward President Obama. Federal law enforcement reported more death threats against him than any of his predecessors. Coupled with the reality that Dr. King was killed by an assassin's bullet April 4, 1968 while fighting for civil rights, the Secret Service has taken no chances. Obama has had a tighter security force than any other president in history, indicating that America has yet to overcome.

"Dr. King's dream of justice for all has yet to be realized," says **Charles J. Ogletree Jr.**, professor at Harvard Law School and founding director of Harvard's Charles Hamilton Houston Institute for Race and Justice. "We have made great progress, but there is no time to rest. The struggle for racial justice must continue even now."

Melanie Campbell, president and CEO of the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, agrees.

"The 48th Anniversary of the March on Washington of 1963 is a reminder that the struggle for jobs and justice (freedom) is not something we win and then move on to something else," Campbell says. "The struggle for jobs and justice is a lifelong fight for those who believe in inclusion. It is the responsibility of each generation to continue the fight against those who believe in exclusion based on race, class, political ideology and sexual orientation."

She said, "The biggest challenge America faces to progress as a nation is to learn from the lessons of the past and build on past and current movements of inclusion including: equal pay for women, voting rights, disability rights, fair housing, health care for all and environmental justice."

Meanwhile, organizers of the August 28 celebration hold out hope that the unveiling and the memorial itself will stand as a permanent reminder and impetus for movement toward complete fulfillment of the dream of true equality.

"Dr. King was a profound teacher, whose lessons were anchored in the primacy of human dignity. He enacted irreversible social change and led our country forward, relying exclusively

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on non-violent means," says Johnson, president of the Memorial Project Foundation. "The Memorial will be a lasting tribute to Dr. King's legacy and will forever serve as a monument to the freedom, opportunity and justice for which he stood."

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