

COMMENTARY: WILLIAM KASHATUS

# King's dream not fully realized

On Aug. 28, 1963, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his "I Have A Dream" speech from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. It was the defining moment of the American Civil Rights movement.

While his prophetic words continue to stir the nation half a century later, his vision has yet to be fully realized.

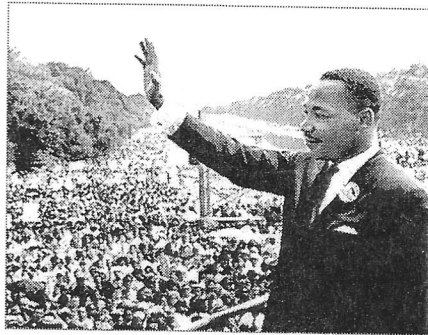
To be sure, King would be happy that a black man has been elected president of the United States. He would be pleased that the arts, sciences, politics, sports and many other careers previously dominated by white males have opened their doors to blacks. And he would be pleased with the emergence of a significant black middle-class.



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At the same time, King would be disappointed that the American Dream of economic prosperity and educational opportunity has not been extended as fully to minorities. "The Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity," he said in his historic speech. "Now is the time to make real the promises of democracy."

For King, America had "defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color (were) concerned." Instead of honoring a "sacred obligation" America had given minorities "a bad check, a check which (had) come back marked insufficient funds." He refused to believe that "the bank of justice (was) bankrupt" or that there were



"insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation."

But 50 years later, economic inequality and a lack of financial progress among minorities suggest that King's dream is unfulfilled. Although the economic downturn of the last decade has taken a toll on all Americans, it has hit non-whites especially hard, exacerbating the income and wealth gap. A recent report from Pew Research Center revealed a 53 percent decline in total wealth for black families from 2005 to 2009 — a period in which wealth in white households declined by a more modest 16 percent. The differences in overall dollar amounts are more glaring. The average white household has wealth (assets minus debts) totaling \$113,149 compared with total wealth of only \$5,677 in the typical African-American household.

Those very large gaps are not new. Four years before, approaching the peak of the housing boom, the typical white household was worth \$134,922 and the typical black household \$12,124. Total wealth in Hispanic households has suffered even more, down 66 percent from 2005 to 2009. The Pew report identifies the disproportionate number of Hispanics living in states that suffered

the brunt of the housing market collapse (California, Florida, Nevada and Arizona) taking an outsized toll on Hispanic family wealth.

For King, economic equality was closely tied to educational opportunity. He believed that education was essential to narrowing the significant wealth gap between the races as it resulted in economic and social mobility. Instead, race discrimination eliminated educational opportunity for blacks, condemning them to a life of poverty or crime. Part of King's dream was that black 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."

Half a century later, when African and Hispanic Americans are targets of racial profiling, police brutality and discriminatory hiring practices, it's difficult to believe that they are judged by the content of their character. Just as difficult to accept is the fact that in a society that values education, African-American boys and African-American girls are typically undereducated and ill prepared to become productive members of society.

In fact, black male students are twice as likely to drop out of high school, and their math, reading and basic skills scores are consistently much lower than their white male counterparts. As King said in his "I Have a Dream" speech that summer day 50 years ago, we all have to realize that our destinies are tied together: "We cannot walk alone."

Until white America and the power structures that govern it embrace this fact, King's dream will go unfulfilled.

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