

STILL, INSUFFICIENT FUNDS BY JULIANNE MALVEAUX

Had Dr. Martin Luther King lived until his birthday, January 15, he would be 81. It is interesting to speculate how the octogenarian might spend his time. If he is anything like some of his peers – Ambassador Andrew Young or Rev. Joseph Lowery – he'd still be involved in some form of activism, perhaps combining religious service with involvement in domestic and international affairs, perhaps with dimensions that included some involvement in commerce (such as Mr. Young's consulting company Good Works). What might Dr. King think or say about the state we find ourselves in today? A year since the inauguration of President Barack Obama, would he embrace the concept of post-racialism that some bandy about? Would he reflect on his words during the March on Washington and conclude that the dream he so brilliantly articulated had been realized? Or would he be forced to conclude that the check is still marked "insufficient funds".

I am sure there will be those who will quote Dr. King's dream that people would be judged by "the content of their characters, not the color of their skin". That's the easiest King quote to use, but it is not the most telling. In his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech he said, "I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, peace, dignity and freedom for their spirits." Have any of these things yet been attained? In the middle of our recession there are millions who go hungry. On Sunday, the New York Times reported that one in 50 American households have no income except food stamps. You can't pick up a single paper without reading of the foreclosure crisis, and the increasing economic dislocation, including homelessness, which goes with it.

Dr. King spoke of education, but the ways we fail to invest in education are shameful. Students graduate from college with staggering amounts of debt, and many enter college from inner city high schools that poorly prepare them for advanced study. Education and culture? Please. Our global competitors are investing so much more in education than we are that a nation that once led the world is now struggling to keep up with countries we once described as "developing." We have made the decision not to invest fully in education as the demographic pipeline to college has browned, suggesting that our investment decision has at least a little something to do with race.

Dr. Martin Luther King said we came to the nation's capital to cash a check, and he said, in 1963, "It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note in so far as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, American has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked 'insufficient funds'. We refuse to believe that there are insufficient funds in the great vaults of opportunity of this nation."

Actually there have been sufficient funds to bail out the financial sector, but insufficient funds to rewrite the mortgages of those they decimated, sufficient funds

to help the auto industry but not ailing Detroit or laid off auto workers. When Dr. King spoke of insufficient funds, he was speaking of the racial economic justice that we have not yet attained, and that we are unlikely to attain unless aggressive, corrective measures are taken.

The Congressional Black Caucus has been talking about corrective matters when they asked President Obama to consider targeting recovery programs toward the African American community that suffers from an extraordinarily high unemployment rate. President Obama has rightly said that he leads a nation, not a race, but if another group, say whites, experienced disproportionately high unemployment you can bet there would be a targeted program for them. Indeed, one can argue that while the bank bailout didn't happen on President Obama's watch, there was an economic recovery program targeted toward just one sector of the population.

What might Dr. King say when confronted with these circumstances? While it is impossible to predict, I think that 47 years after "I have a dream", he would still demand that our nation "cash the check."