

My Day with Dr. King at Kansas State University:

by

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I am very pleased to participate in this annual event in remembrance of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Kansas State University is to be commended for devoting an entire week to honor his memory.

As we all know, Dr. King was a Convocation speaker here January 19, 1968, his last visit to a university—four days after his 39<sup>th</sup> birthday. That was 43 years ago. I am now 87 years old, but I will try to share my waning memory of that day.

I was then professor and first head of KSU's new political science department, founder and first chairman of KSU's Landon Lectures, and chairman of KSU's ongoing Convocation Lectures series. The early success of the Landon Lectures made it easier to attract equally outstanding speakers for the Convocation Lectures, such as Norman Cousins, Senator J. William Fulbright, Muhammad Ali, and Edgar Snow. It was in this capacity—as a Convocation speaker—that Dr. King came here.

After it became publicly known that Dr. King was to speak at KSU, I received an unsigned hate letter about our invitation. It disturbed me so much that I notified the FBI. An FBI agent came to my office. I gave him the letter. But I heard nothing more about it. President McCain also had received hate mail, but I was not aware of that at the time.

I met Dr. King at the Kansas City airport. The two of us were the only passengers to fly to Manhattan, on a small chartered plane. During our flight, we discussed our respective experiences in India. Dr. King reminisced about his 1959 visit to India to deepen his understanding of Mahatma Gandhi's unique "satyagraha" philosophy and practice of nonviolent resistance to unjust laws. He visited Gandhi's birth place, and met many of those who had participated with Gandhi in the campaign for India's independence from Britain. I related that I was a Fulbright professor in southern India the previous summer. In August 1967, I was a speaker at the state capitol in Hyderabad, India to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of India's independence. My address was about Mahatma Gandhi's influence on Dr. King's civil rights movement

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in the United States. We had a lively discussion about Gandhi's successful leadership in deploying nonviolent resistance in India.

KSU's President McCain met us at the Manhattan airport. We proceeded to the field house of the campus where Dr. King was to deliver his address. Thousands of students, staff, and others were present. President McCain introduced Dr. King. I sat behind on the platform as Dr. King spoke. Up to this point, Dr. King impressed me as unpretentious and somewhat reserved. But as he spoke, I became mesmerized by the power and eloquence of his riveting message, the lifting and cadence of his voice, and the passion and meaning of his words. It was as if I was being swept up by the sheer greatness of his presence. In retrospect, it was one of the most transforming experiences of my life. And there he spoke, effortlessly before an enthralled audience without any notes or text. President McCain said to me that Dr. King was one of the greatest speakers he ever witnessed, "equal even to Winston Churchill."

Afterwards, I walked with an associate of Dr. King. I believe it was Reverend Joseph Lowery who had arranged separately to be there. I asked him: "How was it possible for Dr. King to deliver that wonderful address without the help of any notes?" He answered: "That is the art of *homilectics* that is taught in divinity school." I had never encountered that word, "homilectics," before. Later I found it means "the art of preaching a sermon."

Dr. King left behind no written or printed version of his address. Fortunately, I had arranged for it to be taped. It was then transcribed by our political science department secretary and edited by me. I mailed this typed edited version to Dr. King at the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta. I requested he review it for accuracy. I added that no response from him would be considered by me as his acceptance for publication. Having received no response, it became part of the public domain, with other selected Convocation and Landon lectures, when they were published in 1968 as a book by the University Press of Kansas. The title was "Issues 1968," with myself as Editor.

I drove Dr. King in my car to the Manhattan Airport. On our way, I asked him where his work would next take him. He answered: "Gary, Indiana." There was no mention of Memphis.

On April 4<sup>th</sup>, I was with Governor Landon in his book-lined study of his Topeka home where we had met many times before. He received a phone message. He turned to me and said: "Martin Luther King has just been shot!" Only in late 2008<sup>9</sup> did I learn that when he was assassinated that fateful day, he had a piece of paper in his pocket on which was written four names, including KSU President McCain, my name, George Haley, and Homer Floyd. I surmise that Dr. King happened to be wearing the same clothes he wore at his Kansas State address a few weeks before.

Within two months after Dr. King's presence at KSU, Senator Robert Kennedy was our next major speaker here. It appears especially timely to recall what Senator Kennedy said, during his Presidential campaign, upon learning of Dr. King's death. After descending from his plane in Indiana, he spoke briefly from his heart before a crowd gathered there to greet him. Among his comments, he said:

"Martin Luther King dedicated his life to love and justice between fellow human beings. He died in the cause of that effort. In this difficult day . . . it's perhaps well to ask what kind of a nation we are and what direction we want to move in. . . . We can move in . . . greater polarization . . . filled with hatred toward one another. Or we can make an effort, as Martin Luther King did . . . to comprehend, and replace that violence, that stain of bloodshed that has spread across our land, with an effort to understand compassion, and love. . . . What we need in the United States is not division; what we need . . . is not hatred; what we need . . . is not violence and lawlessness, but . . . love, and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice toward those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black."

Two months later, Robert Kennedy, too, was dead from an assassin's bullet.

Many in our country still mourn Dr. King, assassinated on April 4<sup>th</sup>, and Robert Kennedy, assassinated on June 5<sup>th</sup>, of that fateful year. Dr. King's Convocation address here, entitled "The Future of Integration," was his last at a university. Senator Kennedy's Landon lecture here, entitled "Conflict in Vietnam and at Home," was the first public speech he gave to launch his presidential campaign. They were my heroes.