

Guest Editorial

King and the Oil Habit of the 'City on the Hill'

by Gregory Stephens

"The world now demands a maturity of America that we may not be able to achieve." Martin Luther King, Jr., "A Time to Break Silence," April 4, 1967.

The right time has come to take a hard look in the mirror and consider Martin Luther King's fierce criticism of American arrogance. Somehow, we must "overcome oppression and violence without resorting to violence and oppression," as King said in his Nobel Prize speech.

Michael Eric Dyson calls King the "greatest American" because he spoke unpopular truths to power. But why should we struggle with King's assessment of the U.S. government as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," when we can just play that old loop of "Free at Last" over and over, once a year?

Ever since President Reagan gritted his teeth and signed the King Holiday bill in 1983, King's legacy "has been pillaged by ideological grave robbers," notes Samuel Freedman, author of *Upon This Rock*. King is quoted in attempts to legitimate attacks on affirmative action, or violence against abortion providers. But how many American patriots are willing to quote King's "A Time to Break Silence," delivered on April 4, 1967 (a year before his assassination)? How many of us are willing to take to heart the tough love in "A Drum Major Instinct," delivered on Feb. 4, 1968, two months before King was slain?

Little has changed since King declared that North America was "the supreme culprit" of belligerent nationalism--that urge to say "I must be first. I must be supreme. Our nation must rule the world." Last fall, the Bush Administration released a "National Security Strategy" report. This "Pre-Eminence Doctrine" envisions American domination over the world into an indefinite future. American military supremacy must be maintained "beyond challenge," it asserts.

Did we learn nothing from Vietnam? We had but a brief moment of self-doubt in the late 1970s, as Loren Baritz noted in *Backfire*. We turned on President Carter for trying to articulate a more modest self-concept. Then President Reagan swept into office by re-stating that old dream, "We shall



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become that shining city on a hill." And Americans have been chanting the slogan "we are the greatest nation on earth" ever since.

Just three days after the 9/11 attacks, President Bush vowed to "rid the world of evil." In our fear, we do not seem to have glimpsed the remarkable hubris of such an ambition. Who, after all, but an almighty God would be capable of "ridding the world of evil"?

The belief that America is a chosen people, a Redeemer Nation, a "city on a hill," has very deep roots. It is a unifying myth, a largely unconscious national script. "At last the world knows America as the saviour of the world," President Wilson declared after World War I. It is but a short leap from this to President Bush's campaign to "rid the world of evil."

Nowadays, we may express this in secular terms: our destiny is to free the world of false ideologies so that all humans can find happiness as consumers. But the missionary zeal, and the quasi-religious language, remain. And so does the shadow side of this messianic self-concept. Saving the world (or converting it to the market system) explicitly requires "destroying evil."

We have long exhibited a tendency to demonize those who disagree with our definition of freedom. We describe them as an "axis of evil," or as part of "a malignant, devastating evil," as Attorney General John Ashcroft said. Those who dissent from U.S. policy domestically are marginalized as unpatriotic, or even persecuted as traitors, as King was.

The National Security Strategy report reveals a great deal when it states that "rogue states and terrorists... hate the United States and everything for which it stands." In fact, most people who are angry at America, and who oppose our rush to war in Iraq, do not hate everything we stand for. They hate that we are monopolizing the world's resources. Millions suffer because we support repressive regimes that assure our continued oil fix.

Our obsession with "ridding the world of evil" and cornering the world's oil market has aroused intense anti-Americanism among traditional allies. Former admirers see how American crusades threaten their own freedom and security. Many have grown tired of Americans crowing "we're number one." Perhaps they have observed that the nation telling the rest of the world how to live is number one in military spending, per capita energy use and waste production, recorded rapes, homicides, and executions. Daily world traffic fatalities and the monthly human road kill in the U.S. equal the death toll of 9/11, but we don't blink at the human carnage of the regime of oil. We are closing schools and laying off teachers, yet we have no problem funding war.

"A nation that continues to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death," King said. He argued that we needed a "true revolution of values" in order to practice "co-existence," rather than "co-annihilation."

A revolution of values would require us to recognize that the American way of life can only be sustained by a minority. The freedoms of what the Bush team likes to call the "civilized world" can only be maintained at the cost of shortchanging freedom for the many. Our oil habit in particular has led us to apply "two sets of ethical standards" to aggression, as John Chancellor observed before the 1991 Gulf War.

One essential part of King's revolution was to expand our definition of patriotism, and national interest. In 2003, true patriotism requires us to come to terms with our oil addiction. "The Bush Administration's energy policy—a military garrison in the Middle East and drilling for more oil in the Arctic," wrote Robert Redford, "is costly, dangerous and self-defeating." It takes an entertainer to tell us the truth on a national stage: "Weaning our nation from fossil fuels should be understood as the most patriotic policy to which we can commit ourselves."

North Americans, with four percent of the planet's population, consume 25% of the world's energy. Our 200+ million cars spew out half of the carbon dioxide produced by all the world's cars. Our political policy is premised upon robbing the future in order to feed our present habits. And pity the politician who countenances Americans paying the true cost of their oil habit.

In truth, opposition to war is meaningless without a commitment to reducing oil consumption. In the Bush Administration's "Strategic Energy Policy Challenges for the 21st Century," the "central dilemma" for United States leaders is laid out in stark detail: "The American people continue to demand plentiful and cheap energy without sacrifice or inconvenience." Our elected leaders go on telling us that "the American way of life is not up for negotiation," as President Bush Sr. said. But our neighbors on this planet are realizing that it is America's oil habit that poses the greatest threat to world security. We should not dream of being a "shining example" to the world, until we face up to our destructive addiction.

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