

Dan Rather speech at the Dedication Ceremony for the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. National Memorial in Washington D.C.
Sunday October 16, 2011

Thank you very much. I am humbled to be here.

Heroes are honored in their time; legends live through the ages.

While considering Dr. King's legacy...an obscure poem called "Lifters and Leaners" comes to mind. Dr. King was a world-class, heavyweight lifter. While thousands leaned on him, I never saw his shoulders give way or his back bend. He was as brave a man as I've ever seen.

The historical weight of this long overdue monument reminds us, WE must be lifters now.

In the 1960s, as today, divisiveness was based on fear and prejudice and misinformation. Now, with the constant 24-hour news cycle, the power of misinformation has increased. We must remind ourselves that intelligence trumps ignorance every time. And when given a choice and all the facts, people make good decisions. But that leads us to a problem Dr. King faced 50 years ago...one that is worse today. That is the corporatization, the politicalization and the trivialization of the news.

Dr. King once spoke candidly with me about news coverage of the civil rights movement -- nationwide, but especially in cities such as Atlanta and Jackson. The first problem was that there was so little news coverage at all, anywhere. And he was also concerned that Southern affiliate stations would persuade the networks to tone down if not eliminate coverage that went out to the rest of the country.

At the time, frankly I didn't feel his concerns were warranted. The then owners of my network and my bosses in New York were rock-ribbed when it came to reporting the news without fear or favor to anyone, including their own affiliates. And yet, in retrospect, I can't ignore that the CBS affiliate at that time in Atlanta -- Dr. King's hometown -- refused to carry some CBS News reports about the movement in 1962. They censored them.

Today, different owners and many big money special interests are more closely intertwined with, more colluding with, big political special interests than ever...for their own -- not the people's -- purposes.

In Dr. King's time, his main battle was against racial injustice, a battle far from over. But now, added to that, is the fight against greed and for economic justice. This time, we judge people not on the content of their character, but on the color of their money.

Once again, we have Americans outside looking in. This time many people of ALL races and creeds feel stuck in a rickety, rudderless boat of economic injustice, and are struggling to make their voices heard.

Many in white America supported desegregation but didn't support the demonstrations and passive resistance that Dr. King had learned from Thoreau and Gandhi. This created a kind of ambivalence on the part of many white Americans, and it gave some unscrupulous figures in local, state and federal government the opportunity to skew the news -- and press coverage -- their way. Does this not sound familiar?

The lifters, such as Dr. King, must have felt the weight of a million injustices. But hewn like this stone likeness, Dr. King was strong and able to carry the weight.

For every Lifter there are a hundred Leanners. But on this day, standing in front of the statue of an American hero, icon and legend, we are reminded: we must all be Lifters now. We cannot wait for others to carry our messages and lift our share of the load.

Although Dr. King's lasting legacy can never be summed up in a few minutes, let me leave you with this: There is heavy lifting to be done again...and in the spirit of Dr. King's lasting legacy, we need to start now.

Thank you very much.