

A Letter to President Clinton in the Spirit and Memory of Dr. King

Mr. President, I note with interest your speech of November 13, 1993 at the Church of God in Christ in Memphis, the church where Martin Luther King made his last speech before he was assassinated. Mr. President, I must say to you in all sincerity that I deeply resent your selective use of the life and legacy of Dr. King to mask the flawed policies of the U.S. Government and the gross inadequacies and failures of your administration on the issues of racism and poverty in this nation. It is politically self-serving, even insulting for you to patronize black America by preaching to us about the mission and meaning of the life of Dr. King on these vital issues.

Those of us who have devoted our lives to the cause of civil rights and human rights remember all too well what Dr. King was saying and doing about violence in American society. It is white America which has largely come to suffer from amnesia on the substantive issues for which Dr. King gave his life. Perhaps you were away at Oxford University when Dr. King made his fateful journey to Memphis and are therefore unaware of what he was concerned about at the end of his life. It might be useful to remind you that Dr. King was deploring government inaction on the issues of economic injustice as he journeyed to Memphis, and he was in the midst of planning a Poor People's Campaign to fight for a fundamental change in the wretched condition of the black masses.

Perhaps some of Dr. King's own words might serve to jog your memory and help you be more relevant as you most assuredly now prepare to mount some podium on Martin Luther King Day to utter some more self-righteous platitudes: "The fact is, there is a major depression in the Negro community. The unemployment rate is extremely high, and among Negro youth it goes as high as 40 percent in some cities. We need an Economic Bill of Rights. This would guarantee a job to all people who want to work and who are able to work. It would also guarantee income to those not able to work ... Our whole campaign, therefore, would center on the jobs question, with other demands, like housing, that are closely tied to it. We feel that much more building of housing for low-income people should be done."

Mr. President, things have not changed very much since Dr. King spoke these words in 1968. Indeed, conditions for the masses of black people have severely worsened. Time and time again African-American leaders have, in the tradition of Dr. King, pointed to unemployment, poor housing and inferior education as root causes of the crisis of crime and violence in urban America. The equation is very simple. Mr. President, economic injustice contributes to crime and violence.

And yet, Mr. President, there is very little in your rhetoric on this issue that addresses this vital question, and there is virtually nothing within your economic agenda that resembles anything like an Economic Bill of Rights. The principal cause of the crisis of violence in your analysis is declining family values and the deteriorating family. Hence you have done nothing on the jobs issue. You even abandoned the paltry "stimulus package," which you promised during the campaign. In Dr. King's day it was the Vietnam War that was draining off the resources that were needed to cope with social problems here at home. Now the U.S. is shackled by a massive debt and deficit created by the greed and misdeeds of the rich and the privileged — the most "responsible" and "respected" citizens in the land. So America cries broke while the masses of black people suffer. And you, Mr. President, despite the fact that the Cold War is over, continue to budget some 270 billion for war/defense.

The Congressional Black Caucus and the Progressive Caucus have pleaded with you to adopt a strategy of economic conversion which would drastically reduce military spending so that programs like the National Urban League's Domestic Marshall Plan could be funded. Their please have fallen on deaf ears. Dr. King had something

to say about that too, Mr. President, if you care to listen. "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." Mr. President, you would prefer to spend \$22 billion to put more police on the streets and to build more prisons to warehouse the oppressed than to cut the war budget in the interest of creating peace and security based on justice.

Mr. President, being a Bible-quoting, God-fearing man, I thought you might appreciate my closing this letter with some final words from Dr. King that you just might want to remember. "There is an Old Testament prophecy about the 'signs of the Father being visited on the third and fourth generations.' ... America is reaping the harvest of the hate and shame planted through the generations of educational denial, political disenfranchisement and economic exploitation of its black population. Now almost a century removed from slavery, we find the heritage of oppression and racism erupting in our cities with volcanic lava of bitterness and frustration. ..." Good day, Mr. President.

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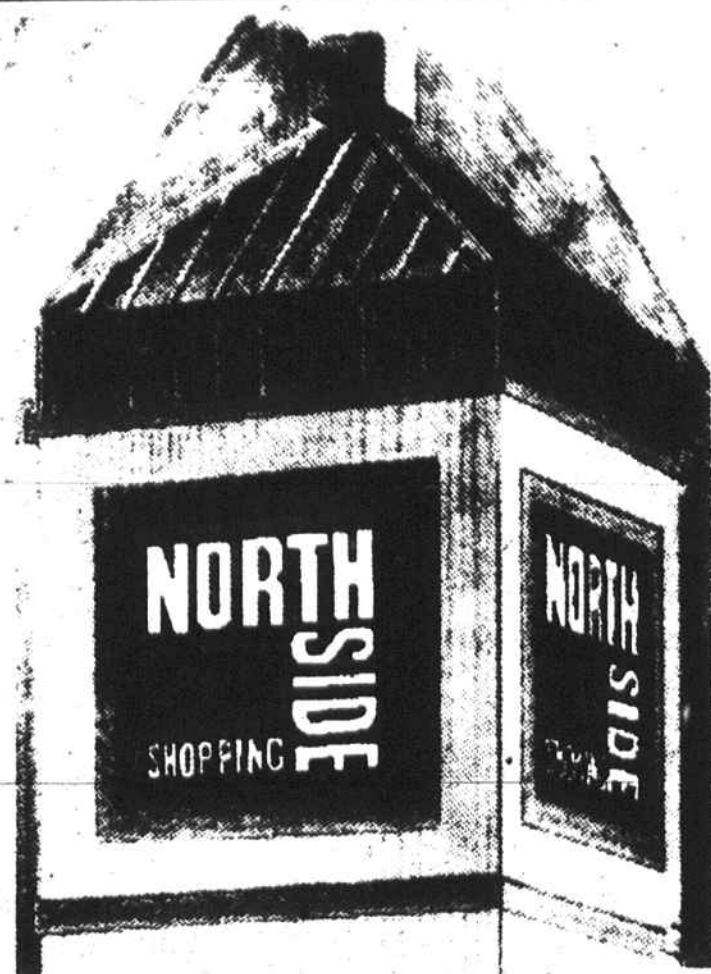
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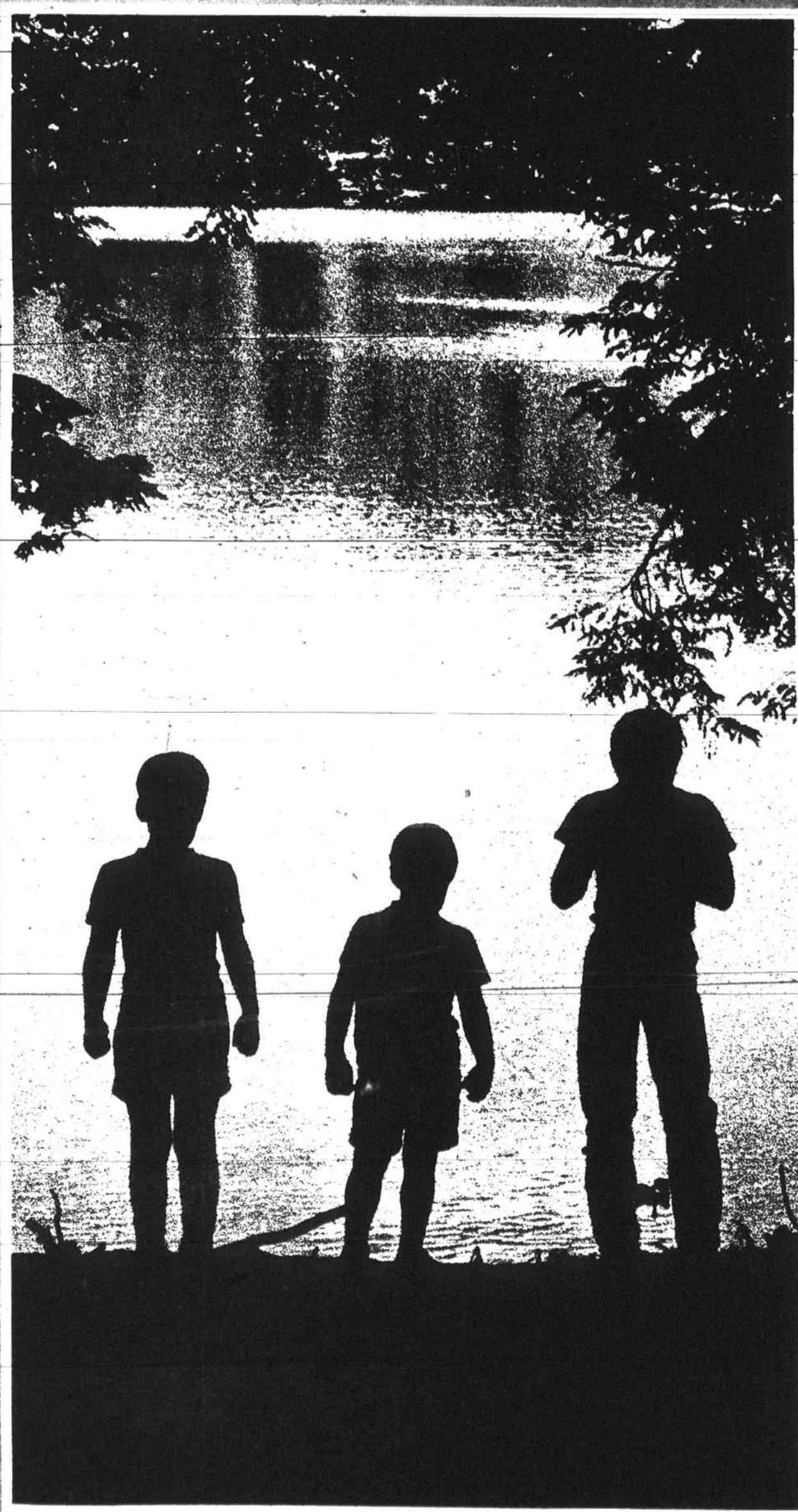
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"Say that I was a drum major for justice. say that I was a drum major for peace."

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The merchants of Northside Shopping Center proudly honor the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., humanitarian and Nobel Peace Prize recipient.



SOONER OR LATER, ALL THE PEOPLE OF THE WORLD WILL HAVE TO DISCOVER A WAY TO LIVE TOGETHER IN PEACE.

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

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