

Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial

By ELIZABETH KELLEHER



White House photo by ERIC DRAPER

Opera and gospel music stars sang, President George W. Bush and former President Bill Clinton and four children gave speeches, poets read their lines and 75 people put shovels into the ground to inaugurate a memorial to civil rights hero Martin Luther King, Jr. in Washington's front yard—the National Mall—on November 13, 2006.

President Bush said he was proud to dedicate the memorial in its “rightful place”—between monuments to Thomas Jefferson, who “declared the promise of America,” and Abraham Lincoln, “who defended the promise of America.” King, Bush said, “redeemed the promise of America.”

The new memorial, the first on the National Mall to honor an African American, is scheduled to be completed in 2008.

In the summer of 1963, King delivered his famous “I Have a Dream” speech from the nearby steps of the Lincoln Memorial to more than 200,000 civil rights marchers gathered on the mall. That speech is considered by many to be one of the greatest speeches in American history. It called on America to make good its promises of freedom and justice for all citizens.

The memorial will feature King's words, inscribed behind

falling water and near a “stone of hope” reminiscent of a phrase in his speech in which King said he had faith that the marchers would be able to go back to the segregationist southern states and “hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

At the time of that and other civil rights marches, African Americans were segregated from whites in schools, shopping places, restaurants and on buses. Their attempts to register to vote in the South often were met with violence. King began a long campaign of nonviolent resistance to rectify these wrongs. In his “dream” speech, he said his people would not be satisfied “until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” Less than one year from that date, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act, making segregation a federal crime.

After a cold and rainy November morning, the downpour stopped and 5,000 people—many women in high heels and fancy hats and men in their best suits and ties—walked determinedly through mud puddles to witness the groundbreaking. Those civil rights activists who had been close to King and are still able to travel were on hand: Andrew Young, America's first African American ambassador to the United Nations;

Congressman John Lewis, founder of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee during the civil rights era; Dorothy Height, president emeritus of the National Council of Negro Women; and Jesse Jackson, a prominent political leader.

Television celebrity Oprah Winfrey said, “I am who I am because of the struggles of Dr. King. My life is what it is because of his work.” She said she remembers King's courage “with every breath” and plans to come back to visit the memorial when it is completed. A museum of African American history is also planned.

According to Young, Americans celebrate the words of King “not because he spoke them, but because he lived them.” Young reminded the crowd that while King was engaging in a nonviolent struggle to secure rights for African Americans, his home was bombed, he was indicted for tax evasion, stabbed and jailed.

President Bush praised King because he “held the nation to its own standards.” He said King's dream—in which the nation rises up and lives out the true meaning of its creed, that all men are created equal—was not shattered by an assassin's bullet, but “continues to inspire millions across the world.”

Nelson Mandela, South Africa's

President Bush greets former U.N. Ambassador Andrew Young on November 13, 2006, after the groundbreaking ceremony for the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Memorial in Washington, D.C. Young is flanked by (from left) King's daughters Yolanda Denise King and Bernice Albertine King, and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice.

anti-apartheid hero, sent a letter saying that King's movement “transcends a single nation” and praising King's legacy of standing up to tyranny “without looking for selfish gain.”

The memorial has been on the drawing board since President Clinton signed legislation approving it in 1996.

In the days leading up to the groundbreaking, \$6 million was raised from corporations and individuals, bringing the total to more than two-thirds of the \$100 million needed to complete the memorial.

The largest donors have been automaker General Motors Corporation, Tommy Hilfiger Corporate Foundation, the National Basketball Association and the Walt Disney Company Foundation. 

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