

Our Country, Right or Wrong

*Speech given by Mayor Dan Pike
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Growing up in the 1960s, I heard—too often—this and similar rhetoric meant to suppress dissent against the war, dissent against bigotry, dissent against those using power in favor of the few and against the many.

Echoes of that sentiment echo too strongly today. When leaders use an ideology of ‘You’re either with us or you’re against us,’ and when patriotism is defined as blind support of blind policies, we all need to pay attention.

In the 1950 and 60s, in the face of intolerance, a constellation of leaders arose to fight for the true American values. Surely the brightest star in that firmament was Martin Luther King, Jr.

Dr. King was gifted with writing and speaking abilities second to none. His ‘Letter from Birmingham Jail’ is both a social testament and a literary masterpiece. Listen to the power of his ideas:

“I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.”

His speeches continue to resonate to this day in our vernacular. I hear Dr. King’s voice clearly in my mind whenever I happen upon the words, “I have a dream...”

Recalling that voice, I rejoice that hope for the Dream lives on, even while mourning to this day the premature passing of its author.

The Dream may be alive, but much work remains. We are too quick to pat ourselves on the back for the small efforts we have made, both personally and as a society, while being equally quick to ignore our failure to fully protect those in need.

In seeing the growth of a population of color in our region, we assume it means we are colorblind. In seeing some overcome challenges of prejudice, we assume that equality is fully realized.

Yet it took us one hundred years to apologize for our complicity in the forcible and violent eviction of the East Indian community from our midst in the early 1900s. Our relations with local tribal nations have much work undone.

We turn too easily from the uncomfortable view of the conditions in which those harvesting our food, weaving our clothing, supporting our comfortable way of life, are living.

Clearly there is much work yet to be done, and to be done here in our community. Fortunately, there are many engaged in the effort. Dr. King's voice still rings in our consciousness, and his friends and successors carry on the work.

Voices such as Dr. Harding remind us of the importance of the legacy, and drive us towards fulfilling the Dream. In our own community, groups such as Womencare, the Opportunity Council, the Whatcom Human Rights Task Force, the Whatcom Peace and Justice Center and many, many others fight for those without a voice, for justice, for peace, for a meaningful future.

The work of the Dream needs our help. The words, 'Our country, right or wrong' were wrongly used a generation ago to divide us, but we should restore their full context:

'Our country, right or wrong. When right, to be kept right, when wrong to be put right.' Carl Schurz defined true patriotism with these words 150 years ago. They still ring true today.

Let us keep what is right, right. Let us put what is wrong, right. Let us honor the Dream and the life of Dr. King. We must Hope for the Dream—not only hope for it, but work for it and deliver it.