

## **Is it Mourning or Morning in America?**

Alexander Walton '23

My brothers, it was only a few days ago that we celebrated the life and work of our greatest alumnus, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Like many of you, I scrolled Instagram and Twitter, and was happy to see that many seemed to be observing the holiday, at least perfunctorily, in a way I had not observed in years prior. However, I noticed that most of the quotes of those I follow, from former Presidents to my past AAU teammates were taken from King's "I Have A Dream" speech, and his "Letter from Birmingham Jail."

It is to the credit of our excellent philosophy department that my first thoughts went instead to a sermon delivered by King at Ebenezer Baptist Church titled, "The American Dream." I feel that this sermon is especially relevant to today's topic. In this piece, King reflects on what he calls the "schizophrenic" strain in American society, and what is the needed response from contemporary Americans. It was King's observation, one with which I strongly agree, that America was founded upon the theological belief in the Imago Dei, that all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, that all human beings are of intrinsic and equivalent moral worth, and that all laws should be passed to complement the flourishing and personality of all human beings. In addition, any law which degrades the personality of a human being is an unjust law.

The American regime has both affirmed the dignity of human beings through constitutional amendments and Civil Rights Acts, and denied it, through Slavery, Jim Crow, and all other forms of unjust discrimination. This schizophrenic strain is highly distressing to those who share King's concern for the disinherited and downtrodden, and those within America who wish for it to fulfill its creed and become the great country it is meant to be. It is my belief that this schizophrenic nature leads to two discrete emotions when people view the American regime; expressions of optimism analogous to a sun rising, representing 'morning' in America, or a feeling of overwhelming despair and frustration, a dark emotion of grief that gives one a feeling of 'mourning' in America.

When the question is put to me, what is the best summation of our American story, I

would turn to those great words found in the Negro spiritual of our ancestors:

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around  
Turn me around, turn me around  
Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around

I'm gonna keep on a-walkin',  
keep on a-talkin'  
Marchin' down to freedom land

The progress of all classes of people who have been denied the full personality of humanity in the American regime has been secured through their belief in the American dream, made possible by the emphasis on human equality in the Declaration of Independence. The American regime created a context in which even those who were the most reviled could assert their rights since our rights do not come from the government, do not come from our fellow citizens, and do not come from the constitution. Our rights come from God, and because of that no human power can take them away.

My brothers, the progress of our ancestors is the result of endless toil and constant vigilance, of an indefatigable disposition that has made our modern celebration of equality possible. In short, it is morning in America because of our continued belief in the American project, which is itself a product of providence.

*(This speech won first place in the 2021 Otis Moss Jr. '56 and Otis Moss III '92 Oratorical Contest)*