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COMMENTARY

Palaima and Schenk: Hold onto hope for justice

Thomas G. Palaima, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

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If the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. came back to witness Barack Obama's inauguration, would he think that the people he led in peaceful pursuit of social justice had reached the promised land of racial equality? What could be more barrier-shattering in his eyes than our electing an African American president?

King's answer is found in his essay "A Testament of Hope," which appeared posthumously 40 years ago this month in *Playboy* magazine. Like putting a man in orbit on the way to putting men on the moon, shattering a barrier is just a first step. The rest is the hardest part.

The promised land will be reached, as King saw it, when economic, social and educational barriers no longer make the darkest color of the American rainbow an unexpected sight in the United States Senate, the White House, executive boardrooms and head coaches' offices.

Barack Obama's big step in becoming only the third African American U.S. senator in 125 years has been overshadowed by his giant leap to become the first black president. But the co-founder of the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther Party, Bobby Rush, was the main voice speaking out for Roland Burris to be confirmed in the seat Obama vacated. And it took a governor under federal indictment and facing an impeachment trial to ensure we still have an African American in the U.S. Senate.

If King were alive, he would call on us to celebrate Obama's inauguration. Obama's calls for hope and unity across political and racial divisions echo King's. Obama, too, urges us to see how we all will benefit by achieving racial equality. But to lead us there, he must make us heed the message of "A Testament of Hope."

King knew the challenges we face. He lived and died trying to overcome them: "White America must recognize that justice for black people cannot be achieved without radical changes in the structure of our society. Inferior education, poor housing, unemployment, inadequate health care - each is a bitter component of the oppression that has been our (i.e., the African-American) heritage. Each will require billions of dollars to correct. This fact has not been grasped, because most of the gains of the past decade (the 1960s) were obtained at bargain prices. The desegregation of public facilities cost nothing; neither did the election and appointment of a few black public officials."

King spoke about justice. The politicized appointments within the Civil Rights Division of the Department of Justice during the Bush presidency are no small matter. They corrupt the nation's ultimate instrument for racial justice. State Sen. Royce West explained how this played out in the

discriminatory redistricting under Tom DeLay in 2003: "Political appointees at the Department of Justice conspired to commit a political crime that denied voting rights to African Americans and Hispanics in Texas."

Worse still, many young African Americans do not have any political voice.

When King was alive, there were 100 prisoners for every 100,000 Americans. Now there are 472. Most prisoners and ex-offenders lose their right to vote and to live with their families in public housing.

Poverty is a key factor. The average offender has yearly earnings between \$1,000 and \$2,000. Those are not typos. Many black youths view going to prison as a natural step in their lives. Twenty-two percent of black men in recent generations have prison records. Only 12 percent have college degrees. Recidivism rates are high because of repeat-offender, mandatory-sentencing and drug laws. Budgets to help ex-prisoners re-enter society are low.

The words of singer Michael Franti capture the understandable anger and frustration about these conditions: "For just about anything they can bust us / false advertising sayin' "Halls of Justice."

King showed us a peaceful path to the promised land. But we cannot walk it together if young African Americans continue to experience the truth of Franti's prayer: "Oh my, oh my God / in my mind they got us livin' suicide / singin' oh my, oh my God / in my mind they got us livin' genocide."

Palaima is a classics professor at the University of Texas. Emily Schenk, a senior in Plan II Honors and the School of Social Work, contributed to this column.