

"There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution."

MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

Sleeping through the revolution

One of Martin Luther King's most thoughtful, articulate and reasoned speeches was made almost two years after his more famous "I Have A Dream" oration at the Lincoln Memorial in 1963.

Titled "Remaining Awake Through a Great Revolution," King's speech at Oberlin College in June 1965 is one of my favorites, having come to my attention only in recent years.

Dr. King recalled Washington Irving's story about Rip Van Winkle, who fell asleep for 20 years. When he began his extended nap, a sign at a nearby inn had a picture of King George III of England emblazoned on it. When Rip awoke two decades later, the sign had a picture of George Washington on it.

The most striking fact about the story, Dr. King reminded his Oberlin College audience, was not the fact that Rip had slept for 20 years, but that he had slept through a revolution.

"There is nothing more tragic than to sleep through a revolution," Dr. King said. He then went on to make a remarkable speech challenging all Americans not to sleep through the revolution that was sweeping the nation, the struggle for human dignity.

When Dr. King said that there are all too many people in our midst who, in periods of social change, fail "to achieve the new mental outlooks that the very situation demands," he was speaking to me and other white Southerners who had many opportunities to understand, embrace and work for social change in those early years of confrontation over the social and legal order in the Old South but did nothing.

Many, older than me, had an opportunity at the time of the Montgomery bus boycott in 1955 and when sit-ins and demonstrations pressed the case for equal access for all Americans to hotels, restaurants and movie theaters. I and others had chances at the March on Washington in 1963 and at Selma's Edmund Pettus Bridge in 1965.

In South Carolina in 1968, we could have helped to heal the deep divide that followed the Orangeburg Massacre. In 1970, we could have taken a stand for peaceful integration of our public schools following the turning-over of a school bus full of children in Lamar.

But while many South Carolinians of good will stepped forward in those days, many of us also did nothing, metaphorically sleeping (in many cases, a troubled sleep) through a revolution. Fortunately, time has been forgiving to us who needed another opportunity to do the right thing, while it has been cruel in allowing injustice, inequity and inequality to remain embedded in our society, forcing the revolution to continue.

That opportunity presented itself in more recent times as the effort to remove the Confederate flag from atop the State House and the legislative chambers was championed successfully by many of those

same white Southerners, including me, who earlier simply had slept.

Many of us now have learned, some gradually, that honest dialogue, frank communications, mutual respect and solid effort can open the door to collaboration for genuine social progress. The newest example of the embodiment of these ideas has come in the special leadership of South Carolina's own U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, first acknowledging the genius of Dr. King's vision and leadership, then poignantly pointing to the basic unfairness in the growing disparity of funding of public education in South Carolina's imperiled rural communities.



John Rainey

Guest Columnist

Before a packed audience at the Columbia Urban League's breakfast on MLK Day last month, Sen. Graham articulately and eloquently said what so many of us had thought, consciously or unconsciously,

during the past 40 years or so when he asked: "How many of us wished we had met Dr. King at the other side of the bridge, shook his hand and said 'You are right, Dr. King'?"

He then sided with the eight rural school districts that have brought a lawsuit over their inability to fund an adequate education for children in their public schools. "The merits of the claim are real," Graham said, citing "years and years of neglect."

The successor to former Sen. Strom Thurmond gave a moving testimony of his own humble beginnings in Seneca and the challenges he faced in becoming successful and making a difference with his life that would make his deceased parents proud (his parents died within a few months of each other when he was 20).

He then concluded by pledging to continue "to knock down walls... built out of neglect. If you take the hatred out and replace it with caring and attention, anything is possible."

South Carolina's goal, Sen. Graham stated powerfully and clearly, should be "to fill the void in funding these districts" where learning conditions are so desperate and "come up with an equity funding system for the neglected parts of our state by putting more resources on the table."

As we look to genuine solutions to South Carolina's unfinished business of racial reconciliation, economic development and educational improvements, I believe we have a basis of renewed optimism from the bold leadership of our state's new senior senator, and I, for one, am grateful that I woke up to take part, before the revolution is over.

Mr. Rainey is a Columbia attorney and chairman of the State Board of Economic Advisors.