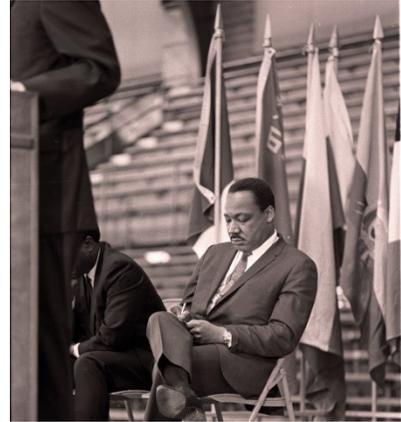


## **Martin Luther King, Jr. Visits K-State**

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On January 19, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke to a crowd of over 7,000 in Ahearn Field House on the campus of Kansas State University; the title of his speech was "The Future of Integration." He was invited to present an "all University Convocation," although today it is often assumed that he was a speaker in the Alfred M. Landon Lecture Series on Public Issues. It is worth noting that the Landon Lecture Series was in its infancy at that time with Alf Landon giving the inaugural presentation on December 13, 1966, followed by three speakers in 1967. As early as July 1967, King was invited to be a Convocations speaker in January of 1968. The Convocations Series had been established in 1963 with Harry Golden, an American Jewish author and publisher, delivering the first talk on April 3. The subject of his remarks was racial equality!



**Dr. King at Ahearn, 1968**

During its existence (1963-1997) over 200 distinguished speakers participated in the Convocations Series including representatives of various ethnic and religious groups. In the 1960s and 1970s alone speakers included Braj Kumar Nehru (Indian diplomat and Ambassador to the U.S., 1961-1969), Pierre Mendes (French socialist and statesman), Charles Malik (Lebanese human rights advocate), Carl Rowan (Black journalist), Charles Evers (civil rights advocate and older brother of Medgar Evers), Dick Gregory (political and civil rights activist who spoke twice), Gordon Parks (Black photographer and writer), and Ralph Abernathy (civil rights leader and close associate of King).

In retrospect, King's visit and speech was an important event in K-State's history and King's legacy. On April 4, 1968, less than three months after his trip to K-State, he would be assassinated in Memphis. How King's visit was accepted by K-Staters and the people of Manhattan is a matter of opinion. Certainly James McCain, president of Kansas State University (1950-1975), held a strong belief in freedom of speech and that a university should offer its students and faculty the opportunity to hear people from different walks of life and other countries to express their diverse viewpoints, as indicated above. McCain later admitted that he received criticism for allowing King to speak on campus, just how much is not known. One negative letter was uncovered in his presidential papers that denounced him for inviting "the Communist stooge" to K-State, one that the "negro [sic] community now recognizes as a phony." However, in 1986, several former faculty members who were present at King's lecture reflected in a K-State news release how well King was received on campus and the favorable reactions to his message.

The year 1968 was especially noteworthy in K-State history. Not only was Dr. King assassinated a few weeks after he spoke on campus, so was Senator Robert F. Kennedy. On March 18, Kennedy

made his first public speech at K-State after announcing that he was a candidate for the presidency (the University of Kansas also claims that distinction but Kennedy spoke here in the morning and at KU later in the day!). Kennedy died from an assassin's bullet on June 6 after winning the presidential primary in California. Ironically, while serving as Attorney General of the United States in 1963, Kennedy gave J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI permission to tap King's telephone to determine if he was involved in Communist activities. Apparently Kennedy's approval was for a limited basis and a brief period of time but Hoover took it upon himself to monitor King's activities more extensively and for an extended period. Both King and Kennedy addressed the Vietnam War in their remarks at K-State. The conflict drew the attention of President McCain and his administration for several years; the most visible example was the burning of Nichols Gym, also in 1968 (on Friday the 13th of December!), apparently at the hands of arsonists opposed to the war (the responsible parties were never arrested).



**Nichols Gym Fire, 1968**



King arrived on campus in 1968 as the leader of the Civil Rights movement. As director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference he helped found in 1957, he led and participated in numerous major events throughout the U.S. until the time of his death. For example, he was one of the organizers of the march on Washington, D.C. in 1963 where he delivered his "I Have a Dream" speech. He was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 becoming only the second African American to receive the prestigious award (Barack Obama was the third). At age 39, King was the youngest to win the prize since it was initiated in 1901.

King's address concerned the issue of whether any real progress had been made in the area of race relations. He summarized the history of slavery and segregation in the U.S. pointing out how far integration had come; however, in truth, he told the audience that there was still so much that needed to be done in terms of racial equality. He said to ignore this truth would leave those in attendance "...the victims of an illusion wrapped in superficiality, and we would all go away the victims of a dangerous optimism." He went on to summarize the discriminatory conditions the "Negro" faced around the country in a multitude of



areas: violence (shootings, lynchings, and arson), housing, employment, education, and "psychological murder," to name a few.

He reinforced his stance on confronting the plight of the Negro by non-violent means because it "...is the most potent weapon available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom and human dignity." At the same time, he stated he would be "...as vigorous in condemning the continued existence of intolerable conditions in our society..." He offered his views on how inequality should be addressed including the passage of legislation to address illegal behavior because the country had a debt to pay the American Negro whose ancestors were brought here in slavery and had not been allowed to obtain all the qualities of freedom through a myriad of discriminatory practices.

King felt the situation was enhanced by the Vietnam conflict taking place at the time. He explained how the administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson was using the war to divert attention from



civil rights and poverty. He answered those who criticized his opposition to the administration's war policy by stating he could not support the war even if that meant jeopardizing his integration efforts. Instead, it was a matter of right and wrong and it was wrong to be involved in a war that could not be won. According to King it was a war where the U.S. government spent \$500,000 for every Viet Cong killed versus spending \$53 for an American living in poverty.

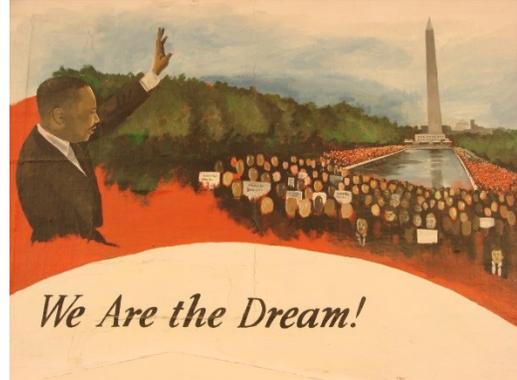
King admitted to the K-State students that he often got discouraged because of the conditions of racial inequality, as well as the war in Vietnam, and questioned if these problems could be solved. However, he continued by saying that when he visited college campuses and talked with students his hope was always renewed. "I think that you who sit here today under the sound of my voice may well have the answer, for it is the student generation that is saying to America that there must be a radical reordering of priorities. It is the student generation that is saying to America there must be a revolution of values, and is forcing America to review its values."



Dr. King did not live to see how his "Dream" for equality played out and if the students of America had a positive impact. To honor King, a Martin Luther King, Jr. Observance Week is sponsored by K-State every January. In 2007 a bust of King was dedicated on the lawn near the southeast corner of Ahearn Field House to recognize his achievements and visit to K-State 39 years before. At that time 17th Street was given the honorary name of Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Drive.

A "We Are the Dream" mural was painted and dedicated in 1980 on the fourth floor of Hale Library. It was sponsored by the Black Student Union, MEChA (a Chicano student group), and the Native American Indian Student Body.

While King's death prohibited him from fulfilling his "Dream," the words and legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., live at Kansas State University.



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