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COMMENTARY

'The Human Factor'

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By Edward P. Morgan

The velocity of time leaves me in the dust. It's been 20 years since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy were assassinated but to me it seems like yesterday.

I have to keep reminding myself that time changes circumstances and tempers attitudes. Sometimes, people can learn a lot when positions are reversed.

In the spring of 1957, I was in Accra, the capital of Ghana, covering that country's first day of independence from British imperial rule.

In a spare moment, a couple of white journalists found themselves in the heart of the capital, caught in a sea of jubilation filling the streets from curb to curb.

"Well," spoke up one of our Black colleagues, Al Rivera, of Durham, North Carolina: "How does it feel to be a minority?"

I have never forgotten that experience. The majority of Americans don't "feel" themselves in the minority. But we should "feel" and think again.

(I remember another incident. After a lively ceremonial dance in a village outside the capital, President Eisenhower's vice president, a man named Nixon, presented the local paramount chief with a ballpoint pen.

"Thank you," the chief said, "I'll send it to my son at Columbia University.")

The so-called whites — Anglo-Saxon, Caucasians — are in the minority. The preponderance of people on this planet are clothed in darker skin. The whites would have a hard time summoning a caucus.

To that fleeting "white majority" of Americans, this should provide a sobering reflection.

White America has inflicted a deep — though not yet fatal — wound on itself. It has had the monstrously stupid short-sightedness to allow to continue, for 125

years after the Emancipation Proclamation, the treatment of Black Americans as unequal.

How much have these "superstitions" of racial prejudice robbed our country of the talents, the intelligence, the richness, the courage, and the humanity of Black Americans? Some cleared the obstacles but too many did not.

A *Christian Science Monitor* editorial recently noted "... how far America has

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come in a quarter of a century since the civil rights movement that helped launch (Jesse) Jackson's career!"

Jesse Jackson may not be the next president of the United States, but his campaign has cleared the way for another Black citizen who, tomorrow or the day after, will make it. Jackson has mobilized millions more citizens to come out and vote. For that alone, our open (or should I say opening?) society should be deeply grateful.

Columnist William Raspberry [*The Washington Post*] calculates that Jackson "by running strong and running smart has advanced the prospects of Black politicians by a good 25 years."

Jackson himself told *The Washington Post's* David Broder that the American people and the country have come so



far. "Racism is not unredeemable," Jackson said, "it's not genetic. It's the product of the environment, and the environment is changing."

I was struck by a remark Dr. Michael R. Winston [academic affairs vice president at Howard] made to me.

"The world has been shrunk by technology," he said. "But that hasn't necessarily made it any better."

There have been revolutionary advances in science, including computers and the exploration of outer space. But where do *people* come in? What benefits trickle down to you and me? Where is the magic mechanism to ease — if not solve — the strife in human relations, including war?

The fact is that in our fascination with the miracles of technology, something essential has been overlooked: The human factor.

How do all these marvelous advances affect poverty, unemployment, illiteracy, poor health and infant mortality in the richest nation on earth?

[Today's] generation faces perhaps the most exciting but demanding challenge in history.

One of the things I find cruelly, mad-deningly ironic is this:

The world now produces enough food to feed everybody in it. The super-powers, for the first time, are talking about lowering international tensions. Medical science has virtually eradicated smallpox, and is working hard on cancer, AIDS and the common cold.

But the carbolic acid of religious prejudice, tribal rivalries, ethnic clashes, the collision [between] Marxism, Socialism and Capitalism, and just plain ignorance are the obstacles that conspire to deny the "family of nations" the fruits of technology which are so tantalizingly within reach.

The blowtorch of hatred is an awful



thing. For generations, indeed for centuries, it has shriveled reason and justice to a cinder in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants; in the Middle East between Arabs and Jews; and now, ironically, in Iran and elsewhere, between Moslems and Moslems.

Here in America, the social superstitions of racial hatred rather than religious rivalries continue to divide us, though religious fundamentalism is now a factor too.

We will continue to have our differences, but we are all Americans, with the full rights of citizenship for all.

I don't believe that the United States has become what President Reagan visualizes and calls "A Shining City on a Hill." But its neglected and tarnished luster can be made to gleam if we are determined to do it.

In August, 1963, I, as a reporter, was standing about three feet from Martin Luther King when he confided to 250,000 people — and the world — his dream. His words still echo in my mind.

He dreamed of a country united in the creation of a "beloved community."

His assassination robbed not only Black Americans, but all Americans of a rare and priceless leadership. The civil rights movement faltered after his death and the present national administration has reinstalled roadblocks in its path — but they are not permanent.

Nightmares are conceived in fear and ignorance. Dreams are made of hope, which can produce a new reality.

"When I talk about power and the need for power," King said in another . . . inspiring speech, "I'm talking in terms of the need for power to bring about the political and economic changes necessary to make the good life a reality. I do not think of political power as an end. Neither do I think of economic power as an end. They are ingredients in the ob-

jective that we seek in life. And I think that end or that objective is a truly brotherly society . . ."

Recently, in *Omni* magazine, his widow, Coretta Scott King, wrote of her "Moral Wisdom for Utopia."

"As we move toward the new millennium," she said, "we must advocate a bold new vision of a world where starvation and hunger will not be tolerated on any continent, a world where no child

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lives in fear of a nuclear holocaust or suffers the ravages of war and militarism. We must create a world where valuable resources are no longer squandered on the instruments of death but are creatively harnessed for economic development and opportunity.

"I believe," she went on, "that if we are willing to work and pray and sacrifice enough, our moral development can catch up with our technological progress."

All of the ingredients are there, not for the perfection of utopia, perhaps, but to give civilization a fuller, richer meaning than it has now.

There is only one obstacle that stands in the way: People. People with all their suspicions and fears.

I once invented a formula which I pre-

sumptuously called "Morgan's Law." It reads that nothing ever happens until it happens to you.

What white Americans have got to realize is the fact that what happens to Black Americans happens to us too.

[Not long ago] Alan Paton, one of the great writers and anti-apartheid crusaders of this century, died, aged 85, at his farm near Durban, South Africa. His first novel, *Cry the Beloved Country*, published in 1948, has reached a circulation of 15 million copies and 100,000 copies continue to be sold every year. His subject, of course, was the cruelty of racial prejudice in his native South Africa, which has become a lesson to the world.

In *Towards the Mountain*, the first volume of his autobiography, Paton wrote of an experience he had had with a white woman named Edith Jones, an unabashed do-gooder, whose main concern in life was to help others. They had traveled to a remote little school in the hills north of Pietersburg, a strenuous effort for Mrs. Jones, who defied her doctor's orders that she must not overtax her frail health. The schoolmistress embraced her and told Paton, "when she comes, she makes things new."

Edith Jones died not long after that trip and her funeral, Paton said, drew Europeans, Africans, Asians, Jews, Christians, Moslems, rich and poor — all reconciled by her kinetic belief in serving others.

"I knew then," Paton wrote, "that I would never again be able to think primarily in terms of race and nationality. I was no longer a white person but a member of the human race."

Aren't we all? □

Edward P. Morgan, who for many years was a reporter for CBS and ABC News, currently is chief correspondent for "In the Public Interest" radio network. The above was excerpted from a speech at Howard's commencement exercises on May 14, 1988.