

Dr. King's dream emphasized the universality of human rights

By WILL ROSS

I read with interest the Jan. 19 column by Greg Freeman on the racial divide in the city. He commented that the Martin Luther King Day parade was particularly divisive, with most whites staying home. On the contrary, at the Washington University School of Medicine, we held a King Day event that was as culturally diverse as one could imagine.

In the Eric P. Newman Education Center were equal numbers of blacks, whites, Asians, Hispanics and others. They came to hear Harry Wu speak on human rights abuses in China and how he fashioned his campaigns after the civil rights movement.

I would like to comment on why we chose Harry Wu for Martin Luther King Day. I think it would go far to reminding everyone in St. Louis what Dr. King really stood for.

COUNTERPOINT

I came of age in the middle '60s, growing up in the inner city of Memphis. Dr. King was one of my heroes. He died April 4, 1968, the victim of an assassin's bullet fired on to the balcony of the Lorraine Hotel, not far from my neighborhood. Anger engulfed my community, followed swiftly by flames created by fire bombs and Molotov cocktails tossed at white businesses. I asked myself: Is this what Dr. King wanted?

Why the tragedy? What went wrong in the civil rights movement? And what does any of this have to do with China and Harry Wu?

Dr. King had a dream, and in that dream he balked at the Aristotelian concept of centralized moral authority that could not be questioned. Instead he appealed to the moral conscience that resides in all men to be indignant at all abuses of individual rights. "Injustice anywhere . . . is injustice everywhere."

Dr. King built a coalition of disenfranchised blacks and disaffected whites, residents of Harlem and Appalachia, progressive minded members of the middle class and stodgy aristocrats, Jews, Muslims and Hindus. Using nonviolent protest, he asked the world to look on the plight of blacks in America, acknowledge the universality of human rights and to serve a response.

The world did respond, joining arms with King and all the heroes of the civil rights movements to sing, "We shall overcome." And for a brief time, justice reigned.

Dr. King's belief in multiculturalism was complete, effective — and dangerous. Within his own power base it led to the alienation of radical elements who felt that this should be only a black man's struggle. Fringe groups broke off, denouncing King's affiliation with white liberals. To placate these groups, he capitulated and relegated non-black leaders to back-room negotiations. His coalition was irrevocably fractured.

After his death, the balance of power was disrupted in this country for years. No one should have been remotely surprised by the ascendance of the radical right.

I asked myself one day how could we reweave the threads of King's shredded multicultural quilt. Then I heard music. They were singing the words: "We shall overcome." And it was coming from shanty towns in Lesotho, South Africa, from the idyllic green hills of Ireland, and out of the mouths of Nicaraguan freedom fighters. They sang that same song, that sacred black hymn as they tore down the Berlin Wall. And, yes, as student demonstrators stood in front of tanks during the pro-democracy marches in China's Tiananmen Square, they, too, sang, "We shall overcome." My soul was gladdened; the struggle was yet alive.

As Dr. King boldly spoke out against the Vietnam War, today he would similarly criticize the United States and its allies for their policies toward China in the face of its escalating human rights atrocities. That is why on Martin Luther King's birthday we wanted to hear of one man's struggle with injustice.

To Harry Wu, celebrated human rights campaigner, on behalf of all the supporters of civil rights, we say thank you for your courage and for reminding us of the dream. To those of us who yearn for racial diversity in our own city, let us not forget the racial inclusiveness of Dr. King's dream.

Will Ross, M.D., is associate dean and director of the Office of Diversity Programs at the Washington University School of Medicine.