Letters to My Children

Robert C. Maynard with Dori J. Maynard

Andrews and McMeel
A Universal Press Syndicate Company
KANSAS CITY
Is America a Racist Society?

January 24, 1988—If the definition of news is “when man bites dog,” try this sample of our topsy-turvy times: As the nation celebrated the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, something odd emerged on television.

On several different channels, the scene went this way:

A black civic or political leader is interviewed on the legacy of King. Inevitably, the question, most often from a white journalist: Is America still a racist society? If the answer was no, then the challenge: What about Howard Beach, New York; Forsyth County, Georgia; and Jimmy “the Greek” Snyder?

If the answer was yes, then this challenge: What about Jesse Jackson running for president, Gen. Colin Powell running the National Security Council, and Bill Cosby running first in the ratings as national dad?

In the 20 years since his death, King’s dream has become our national riddle: Is the bottle half empty or half full?

Walk down the mean streets of any inner city in America. See the drug dealers, the poverty and—always the hardest to take—children without hope. If the rich cadences of King’s dream were to ring in your ear, you would call it a nightmare. Empty bottles everywhere.

Now turn on the tube. The black general is a recruiting-poster artist’s dream. This is a general’s general, over six feet tall, broad shoulders, exuding confidence and generous doses of charm. He is as effective on television as he is in person.

The word that enters your mind when you meet General Powell is command. He is clearly in command of NSC and of his world in the corridors of military power.

The night King was killed, there was a riot in the nation’s capital. It came within 10 blocks of the White House. There was a scramble to defend the city. A high-level planning session was assembled by the federal government.

The black mayor of Washington showed up and was barred. He, by virtue of his color, might have given away the game plan to “the enemy” on the streets. A national security adviser made that decision.