

## THE APOLOGIST

A Column by David Thomas Scott

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### The New Ameritocracy

*DEAR APOLOGIST: As we reflect this week on the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr's "I have a Dream" speech, it's clear that America has a long way to go on civil rights. Think stop-and-frisk, voter suppression, racial profiling...*

—R.J., DENVER

You're right, but that's only half of the story. We should also mark the occasion by taking stock in just how far we've come. We can look at the civil rights movement over the last half-century as a struggle not just for minorities, but for *everyone*, to have a seat at the table—irrespective of race, gender, disability, age, or sexual orientation. This is not a liberal or a conservative value; it's the notion that when everyone has a chance to reach self-actualization, from wherever their starting point, our country is a more affluent, interesting place to spend our time. And by that measure, I would suggest, America has come a long way.

By some markers, in fact—social mobility, access to education, healthcare, affordable housing—there's more opportunity than ever. African Americans and Latinos hold seats in higher office from city council to Congress to the President of the United States. There are more women and minority CEOs of Fortune-500 companies (still a slim proportion, but they're gaining); minority representation is robust across entertainment, sport and many other industries.

Business and the economy, by the way, have benefitted greatly from that growing plurality: There's more money on the balance sheets of U.S. companies than at any time in our history. The Dow and S&P 500 have hit several high-water marks this year alone (all with corporate tax rates at their lowest levels

since the Truman administration), and there's a renewed emphasis on corporate social responsibility.

And for all the media attention on crime in big American cities, we're actually safer than we've ever been. A look at violent-crime statistics over the last half-century shows that murder rates spiked in the mean streets of New York City in the 1970s, and then again in the early 90s, reaching a high of 2,400 murders per year. How many murders were there in the five boroughs during the first half of this year? 156.

This is a major achievement, and one of the ways in which our quality of life has improved dramatically since Dr. King's speech and the March on Washington. Despite the protestations of talk-show hosts and Twitter cranks who would have us believe that the dream is dead, Americans now have an extraordinary opportunity to create and contribute and plug in—if they're good at what they do—with a minimum of interference from elites or The Man or anyone else. It's the very definition of meritocracy.

Do we have more work to do? Yes, and sometimes it helps to stop and take a deep breath, look around and marvel at how really good we have it.

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**Next week: a look at hackers and jackals and vandals—and how they're our secret allies.**