

Letters to the Editor of The Times

Idea of Collective Responsibility

To the Editor:

Prof. Richard Pipes, in his letter of April 11, shows with painful clarity that he totally missed Ashley Montagu's point.

Mr. Montagu had written of the responsibility shared by all Americans who through our history have complacently permitted the Negro to suffer slavery, poverty, physical and psychological persecution and death. We whites do, in fact, continue to enjoy the benefits of the very system which victimizes the blacks, and are all too eager to adopt a position absolving us of responsibility. This subtly leads up directly into the charge of white racism so accurately assessed by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders.

Mr. Pipes correctly challenges the idea of collective guilt in the act of the assassination of Dr. King: certainly we were not collectively fingering the trigger in that Memphis tragedy. But collective responsibility is quite another idea, for it applies not to that specific act but to the human condition.

Each man is morally responsible for his brother, his neighbor, his fellow man; he can ignore that responsibility or he can assume it, with its myriad concerns. He can never escape it. The white who benefits from an unjust system (while extolling the virtues of "peace" and "law and order"), without crying out in anguish over its injustices to his fellow man, has not avoided responsibility, as many would wish. He has merely proved himself irresponsible.

The solution is hardly simple, but a beginning would be to see through the facile arguments of the defenders of white irresponsibility, to accept the painful charges of collective responsibility. To accept one's responsibility is not to be saddled with impossible guilt problems; it is to acknowledge the wonder and worth of every human being, and to suffer with them each injustice perpetrated on one's brother man. How, then, can we remain silent?

JOHN H. ALSDORF
New York, April 11, 1968

Collective Guilt

To the Editor:

I was much impressed with the well-reasoned statement of Prof. Richard Pipes in a recent letter regarding the absurdity of the concept of collective guilt. It was good to read his statement at a time when so many people seem to have lost their sense of proportion and balance.

ARTHUR E. ALBRECHT
Bronxville, N. Y., April 13, 1968

Coalition of Conscience

To the Editor:

The horrifying slaying of Dr. Martin Luther King, crusader and prophet of nonviolence, racial and social justice, has challenged the conscience of the nation. Out of it has emerged a moral and spiritual coalition of conscience, embracing a wide spectrum of American citizens, including black and white, Catholic and Protestant, Jew and Gentile, moderates and black militants, marching together in honor of Dr. King, a symbol of the struggle for racial and social change for progress without violence, hatred or bloodshed.

The observance of the last rites for Dr. King, attended by the Vice President of the United States, Governors, Mayors, Congressmen, and numerous leaders of the church, education, industry and labor, attest to the fact that America need not founder upon the rock of racial conflict; that there need not be a divided America, one black, one white, separate and un-

equal; but only one America committed to the principles of universal human rights, racial and social justice, freedom, democracy and world peace.

America is to be congratulated upon the splendid manner in which it responded in honoring Dr. King, with high moral purpose and commitment, as one people in this hour of trial and test. It served notice upon the world that America will not bow to violence, hatred and racism, white or black, but that it will ever strive for the realization of the fact that there is only one common human family in which all men, regardless of race or color, religion or national origin, are members and therefore brothers whose personality is of equal dignity and worth.

Verily, there must be no racial polarization in America. Rather should all America, black and white, mobilize to achieve the equalization of job, housing and educational opportunity for the black and white poor.

A. PHILIP RANDOLPH
President
Brotherhood of Sleeping
Car Porters
New York, April 11, 1968