



Stuart Vyse: On selling 'Letter from Birmingham Jail'

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ECONOMISTS use the concept of a public good. Air is a public good. No one can be excluded from using it, and if I breathe a little air, the amount left over for you is not detectably diminished. We all rely on public goods: the roads, the police force, and drinking water. Our lives are immeasurably improved by the availability of these goods and services.

In our modern world, a world increasingly described as an "ownership society," there are frequent disputes about public goods. Can a person own a beach? Shouldn't beaches be available for public use? Can a private company profit from oil or timber in a national forest? These are questions that help define the kind of nation we share, and they are worthy of debate.

On June 30, Sotheby's will auction off a number of Martin Luther King Jr.'s handwritten texts. The highest bidder will walk away with a draft of the "I Have a Dream" speech and an early version of King's "Letter From Birmingham Jail," with annotations and corrections in his own hand. According to Sotheby's, this may be the only remaining version of the letter that shows King's own handwriting.

In April 1963, King was jailed for participating in a peaceful protest in Birmingham, Ala., and his famous letter was written in response to a group of white clergy who were sympathetic to the cause but believed that the end of segregation should be pursued only in the courts. In his respectful yet deeply felt reply, King argued that civil disobedience was justified and necessary to end discrimination.

He ended the letter with this sentence: "Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from

our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty. "

These words are a public good. They are part of the history of our country, and even if the surviving documents become the private property of some wealthy person, we can all revel in their beauty. King's words and ideas transcend ink and paper, and even the man who wrote them.

Yet the letter was written by a man. It was written on foolscap while sitting in a jail in Birmingham in 1963. It is important that we remember this. It is important that we remember that change is not created by mythical figures but by real men and women.

Furthermore, it would benefit us all if schoolchildren could hear this story and see this version of the letter spattered with Martin Luther King Jr.'s own handwriting. History comes alive when we can see the artifacts that remain.

I am not a wealthy man. There is nothing I can do to save these bits of our past. I can only hope that someone who does have the means to buy them will see this auction as the remarkable opportunity that it is. In an act of great generosity and patriotism, a single person could preserve a piece of history -- a valuable public good -- for us all.

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