Remarks, delivered at the Martin Luther King Celebration on January 15, 1982

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Remarks by President Lubbers at Martin Luther King Celebration - 1/15/82

In the 1960s I invited Dr. Martin Luther King to Central College where I served as President. When I sent the invitation I did not believe there was a good chance he would accept. At that time he was at the height of his activity for his cause. To my surprise, he accepted. Perhaps he had not been to the State of Iowa and wanted to carry his message there. For whatever reasons, he came and we filled the college's gymnasium.

After we announced that he had accepted our invitation, we received letters and telephone calls from all over the state asking for tickets. The demand exceeded our ability to accommodate all the people who wanted to attend. We had another kind of telephone call too - the threatening kind. The state police visited our campus. We made elaborate security provisions. Everyone thought he would fly into the major airport in the capitol city of Des Moines and drive 40 miles to Pella where Cantral was located. Instead he landed at a small airport near the college and entered town from the opposite direction. The hecklers with their burning crosses were visible only to the cold winter Iowa night.

When I walked to the platform with him, he received a standing ovation. He spoke with eloquence and some humor. He was a black preacher from the South, and he had perfected the art of communication that comes out of that tradition. He was a master. He had style. But people are not persuaded by style alone. He had a message. He was in the right. He was with the angels, and men and women of good intention and a sense of justice, both black and white, listened and supported what he said. He made articulate the feelings so many
Americans of all races felt. He organized people into action. He directed them and guided them in the tradition of peaceful revolution so effectively carried out and taught by Mahatma Ghandi in India.

He led us to a better America. He and we did not complete the job. He was struck down by the power of social hate, fear, and misunderstanding that held reign over our country throughout its history. It was not eradicated as his death attests, but it is lessened, and we as a country will not return to the old ways because of the peaceful revolution he led. He is the kind of hero whose memory all men and women of good faith can embrace.

After his speech at the College, he came to our house to visit and dine. I liked him. He was more intelligent than the average person, and he was more handsome than most men. Most of all, he had stronger commitments than most people, and he used his intelligence and presence to fasten that commitment on blacks and whites throughout the country. He was easy to talk to. He was pleasant to be around. He stayed for nearly three hours with us, and when he left I knew I had been with an unusual man. He is the greatest American hero I ever had a chance to be with for such a length of time. I cherish the memory. He was not a fake. He was for real. It is appropriate that his day be a national day of celebration.