



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on January 17, 2012

Interior Dept. Will Change Inscription on King Statue

On Friday, Interior Secretary Ken Salazar [said the inscription](#) will change.

[The inscription](#), in which King flatters himself, is something he never said, the record shows, but instead paraphrases a long line from one of his speeches. The words make King appear to have been a conceited man full of himself.

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Professional black activists and writers are [particularly upset](#) with the massive effigy of King on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., and not just because of the inscription. The choice of a Communist Chinese sculptor to fashion the 30-foot-tall statue also troubled them, as does [King's scowling visage](#).



The Inscription

Sitting on four acres on the Mall, the memorial features 10 words that upset black activists: "I was a drum major for justice, peace and righteousness."

[According to](#) the *Washington Post*, Salazar "ordered a correction to a badly mangled quotation from Martin Luther King, Jr. inscribed in granite on the Tidal Basin memorial to the slain civil rights leader.

Salazar said Friday that he has told the National Park Service to consult with the memorial foundation and the King family and to report back to him within 30 days with a plan to fix the carved excerpt that turned a modest and mellifluous phrase into a prideful boast.

[Salazar told](#) the *Post*: "This is important because Dr. King and his presence on the Mall is a forever presence for the United States of America, and we have to make sure that we get it right."

An opinion article in the *Post* "first drew attention to the inartful truncation," the [Post reported](#), "and sparked demands that it should be changed."

Indeed, the [Post noted](#), King's message was the opposite of that the monument imparts: "The paraphrase on the north face of the 30-foot-tall granite statue comes from a powerful and poignant 1968 sermon King delivered two months before his assassination," the *Post* observed.

King spoke of the "drum major instinct" as the epitome of egotism, a self-centered view of the world that he denounced. Imagining his eulogy, King used the conditional tense: "If you want to say that I was a drum major, say that I was a drum major for justice. Say that I was a drum major for peace. I was a drum major for righteousness. And all of the other shallow things will not matter."

"Arrogant Twit"

The "truncation" infuriated black activists, not least Maya Angelou, the leftist poetess.



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Angelou railed against the unwanted emendation of King's words, claiming it made him appear as if he were an "arrogant twit."

"He was anything but that," [she told](#) the *Post* in August. "He was far too profound a man for that four-letter word to apply.

"He had no arrogance at all," she said. "He had a humility that comes from deep inside.

"The 'if' clause that is left out is salient. Leaving it out changes the meaning completely."

The paraphrase "minimizes the man," she said. "It makes him seem less than the humanitarian he was.... It makes him seem an egotist."

Historians may disagree with Angelou's assessment of King's profundity, given that [he plagiarized](#) not only significant portions of his [Ph.D. thesis](#) for Boston University [but also words](#) in the speech for which he is most famous: "[I Have A Dream](#)."

The Other Big Problem

But the inscription may be the least of the statue's problems. The other [is its appearance](#), which many say is that of a cruel Chinese dictator. That problem arose because the artist who created the 30-foot-tall statue, [Lee Yixin](#), is a Chinese communist admirer of mass murderer [Mao Tse-tung](#).

Black activists are angry that a black sculptor was not picked to create the likeness and lost out on the job to a follower of Tse-tung.

Courtland Milloy, a leftist columnist at the *Washington Post*, [wrote that](#) "it stings when [the] ... creators of the King memorial say they couldn't find a qualified black sculptor."

Who gets the job? A Chinese national with an apparent preference for the heroic and authoritarian. The *Post* continued,

The sculpture is based on a 1966 photograph of King taken in his office in Atlanta, standing at his desk, with a picture of Indian leader Mohandas Gandhi on a wall in the background. In it, King has soft eyes and an open face that conveys the blessed assurance of a man who walks by faith.

Lei Yixin has turned those eyes into something of a steely squint.

The result is a stern colossus, dressed no less in a style of suit similar to ones found on many statues of Stalin. In America's militaristic culture, King's take-no-prisoners personae will surely resonate — especially among many in the black middle class, which places a premium on order and discipline. King's expression reminds me of a parent or teacher about to administer some tough love with a belt.

[Another critic cited](#) the conditions of the average Chinese worker who toiled to quarry the granite for the statue: "The granite to be used for King's sculpture will be harvested using slave labor — Chinese workers are not even provided masks to protect their lungs from the silica dust. They die in droves because the Chinese government considers them just as important as the students who protested in Tiananmen Square. The world watched the tanks roll over them. No human rights, No civil rights, and yet the honor of sculpting Dr. Martin Luther King? Not on our watch."

Ka-Ching!

Another issue with the King statue, [11 feet taller](#) than the neighboring likenesses of Jefferson and Lincoln, is that the King family pocketed a fortune on it.



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[According to](#) the *New York Times*, the King family charged some \$800,000 to the foundation that built the statue for the use of King's words. [King biographer David Garrow](#) told the *Times* that such payments are unusual to say the least. "One would think any family would be so thrilled to have their forefather celebrated and memorialized in D.C. that it would never dawn on them to ask for a penny," [Garrow told](#) the newspaper, adding that King would have been "absolutely scandalized by the profiteering behavior of his children."

As with declaring King "profundity," given his record of literary theft, the family's charging to use excerpts of his speeches is richly ironic; they might well be fencing stolen merchandise.

That, in turn, may well suggest that King would be anything but "absolutely scandalized by the profiteering behavior of his children."

Photo of MLK memorial: AP Images



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