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COMMENTARY

18 **The Legacy of King:
America Honors a Hero**

By J. Clay Smith, Jr.

America is a land that honors its heroes. The designation of the birthday of the late civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., as a national holiday is both a great honor and a testament to the fact that in the end truth does prevail.

The King holiday bill passed the House of Representatives last August 2—by an overwhelming vote of 338-90. It was approved in the Senate by a vote of 78-22 on October 19—despite a tough challenge by ultra conservative senators—and signed into law by President Ronald Reagan on November 2, 1983, at a White House ceremony that was attended by members of the King family, among other guests.

Black institutions, such as Howard University, have been celebrating King's birthday on January 15 for quite some time now. The official national holiday will be on the third Monday in January, beginning in 1986.

The designation of one Monday in January as a day of remembrance to the man, and to his contributions to our society and country, is a moment that Black America had waited for, marched for, prayed for, and lobbied for for more than a decade.

In his time, King resurrected the Constitution of the United States by his direct but non-violent action—an action that pierced the veil of compassion of hardened segregationists and rekindled worn-out dreams of the oppressed.

For Black America, King left challenges for our future survival. For America as a whole, he left his dream.

Each year, since King's assassination in 1968, Michigan Congressman John Conyers, joined by bipartisan members of Congress and a broad coalition of Americans, has sought to have King's birthday designated as a national holiday.

It is essential, for us, to revisit the basic ideas that King bequeathed to the American Dream—for many of us have forgotten and others have never been exposed to them. A new generation has emerged and more than 15 years have passed since King died.

Although King is remembered primarily as an American civil rights advocate, in fact, he was a universal leader in the crusade for the human rights of all oppressed people—regardless of race, color, creed, sex, religion or national origin. The circumstance that catapulted King into local, national and international leadership was his recognition that the shadows of slavery restricted the ability and the capacity of Black people to drink from the stream of liberty or to eat from the tree of life. This he believed to be immoral. And his non-violent movement forced America to focus on the root problem—racism and all its ugly accoutrements.

King knew that the direct non-violent movement had to begin step by step to ultimately achieve equality. To him, equality and existence were synonymous. The first phase was the "struggle" of Black Americans to be treated with a "degree of decency not of equality." According to King, the civil rights movement was able to enlist white Americans in the first phase because they were "ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lust of brutality and coarse degradation..."

However, "when Negroes looked for the second phase, the realization of equality, they found that many of their white allies had quietly disappeared." King asked: "Why is equality so assiduously avoided?" One of his goals was to protect the concept of freedom by making the idea of freedom adaptable to all persons who live and work in America.

While King believed that the "majority of white Americans considered themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro," he questioned the depth of their recognition of the evils of racism. During his life, King never condemned all of white America. In fact, he invited whites and Blacks to join together in the quest for equality; he believed that the ability of the two races to work together and to understand each other would not be found ready-made—it had to be created through contact.

King and all those committed to the direct non-violent movement set out to expose American society to the evils of racism and "economic discrimination." King asked: "Why should the robbers get richer and the robbed get poorer under a system of laws which manifests equality for all?"



20 King was committed to make phase two work, but he recognized that Black and white Americans had a "fundamentally different definition" of the term equality. He was blunt about it: "Negroes," he wrote, "have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talk of it as an objective." King dedicated his life to broaden the definition of equality and to harmonize the term in the minds of the general public.

The direct non-violent movement was a restless movement. The attainment of equality is a restless goal. King recognized that the poor and the forgotten, the handicapped, the feeble, and those whose manhood had been robbed, whose womanhood had been stained, whose souls had been wounded, had to be uplifted to make injustice uneasy conduct in a constitutional democracy. The confidence of large masses of Black Americans had to be restored in order to move them from a state of cynicism that the constitution is a document of white people, by white people and for white people, to a state of hope for "liberty and justice for all."

Martin Luther King, Jr., sought to liberate America—white Americans from their fixed segregated values, and Black and brown Americans from the abyss of despair and potential violence. King knew that recognition and validation of self-worth could evoke an eruption of violence in America. But he never retreated from the philosophy of non-violence, which was shaped both by the ideas of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and his own moral principles. King wrote: "Humanity is waiting for something other than blind imitation of the past. If we want truly to advance a step further, if we want to turn over a new leaf and really set a new man afoot, we must begin to turn mankind away from the long and desolate night of violence."

An assassin's bullet robbed America of a

dreamer. However, it did not rob America of the ideas of the dreamer or the challenges which he left for America to meet. King made it quite clear that racial and economic discrimination "is the most despicable expression of man's inhumanity to man." He warned America not to look at the few Blacks who break through the system as evidence that the millennium has arrived because "most people are totally unaware of the darkness of the cave in which the Negro is forced to live. A few individuals can break out, but the vast majority remain its prisoners."

Today, as in King's time, minorities in America need more keys to free the prisoners of which King spoke.

As white Americans are called upon to review the life and ideas of Martin Luther King, Jr., Black Americans who advocated that his birthday be proclaimed a public holiday, are compelled to engage in the same review.

In his book, *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community*, King identified six challenges facing Black America. The challenges he expressed in 1968 still face Black people today.

The first challenge "is for blacks to develop a rugged sense of somebodyness." He or she must "assert for all to hear and see a majestic sense of worth."

Unfortunately, unemployment and the lack of equal employment opportunities in many sectors of the nation make it difficult, if not impossible, for minorities to chant King's concept, a concept expressed more recently in the words of Jesse Jackson . . . "I am somebody!" However, King's challenge requires that Black America not yield to a state of despair but fight on "until victory is won."

The second challenge is "to work passionately for group identity." King knew that the survival of Black people in America would always be perilous if they had no "group identity, group unity, group trust and reconciliation." He sensed that

"Negro liberation" would be achieved only if the "structured forces in the Negro community" served as a "basis for building a powerful united front"; namely, the Black church, the Black press, fraternities and sororities, and professional associations.

Today Black institutions such as the press (long protector of Black rights), colleges and universities that produce most of the Black college graduates, and groups such as the NAACP (which presently has an intense national appeal for funds), face serious obstacles. Some segments of the society know that to weaken Black institutions is to weaken Black America. But the strength of Black America is lodged in its ability to overcome adversity, to rally in support of Black institutions. For Black America views any threat against those institutions as a threat to the Black community as a whole.

The third challenge is "not to wait until the day of full emancipation before we set out to make our individual and collective contributions to the life of our nation." King believed that Black Americans were morally required to become inventors, artists, politicians, and educators. When Black people look at their weary years, no door is too hard to open, no river too wide to swim and no mountain too tough to climb. Blacks in America are committed to seek excellence and to abhor mediocrity.

King implored Black people not to forsake the young, but to take them under their wings and guide them into manhood and womanhood, and encourage them to seek and find "the doors of opportunity which are gradually opening . . ."

Black Americans are heeding King's challenge to the extent that equal opportunities in America allow them to do so. Today there are several Black mayors serving in major cities, and 21 Black members in the House of Repre-

sentatives. These Black men and women are making significant contributions to the nation and to the world. In addition, Black colleges and universities continue to infuse the society with the culture and ideas of Black Americans.

The fourth challenge is "to unite around powerful action programs to eradicate the last vestiges of racial injustice." King believed that it is fallacious to conclude that ethical appeals and persuasion alone will bring about justice. To him, physical presence was power. He warned Blacks to never underestimate the structures of evil and to get involved in every segment of America to protect themselves against evil—for after all, "the American racial revolution has been a revolution to 'get in' rather than overthrow."

King's challenge to Black America is as sound today as it was when issued. He knew that no social action programs which benefit Black Americans would survive unless Blacks united to assure the continuity of these programs.

Today Black Americans must pay closer attention to the challenge to get involved in issues touching the whole society. This is the only way that minorities can protect their flanks and simultaneously make a contribution to American democracy.

The issues affecting Blacks and other minorities in America are becoming more complicated and there is evidence that the post-King generation takes for granted the hard-won gains of the past decades. For years to come, every new minority generation must "stride toward freedom" with more vigor than the past generation. If King were alive, he would observe that some quarters of the Black community have become too comfortable to care about the less fortunate and too busy to get involved.

The fifth challenge calls upon the Black middle class to assume the role of leadership and to abhor isolation from the underprivileged. King directed the mid-

dle class not to forget from whence it came and not to forget the masses of poor people in the society, for "to forget the masses is an act not only of neglect but of shameful ingratitude."

The sixth and final challenge is "to be ever mindful of enlarging the whole society, and giving it a new sense of values as we seek to solve our problem." Here King teaches us that in order to liberate ourselves, we "must not overlook the fact that millions of Puerto Ricans, Mexican Americans, Indians and Appalachian whites are also poverty stricken." He believed that the civil rights movement was one to fully absorb exiled minorities into the republic. He was vitally concerned about Native Americans and their protection from continued "physical extermination."

King's concept to enlarge the whole society by redefining its sense of values was indeed a noble dream because it pitted the objective of the civil rights movement against every established institution in America, including the national government. This movement was profoundly successful because it opened the eyes of all Americans to the plight of the poor and the disenfranchised.

King's challenge not to overlook the plight of Hispanics and poverty-stricken whites is gradually being comprehended by Black America. He believed that cooperation with the causes of poverty-stricken whites and the plight of Hispanics and Native Americans, and vice versa, was necessary if equality for any of those groups were ever to be achieved in America. King knew quite well that equality would never be achieved in America for disadvantaged whites, Blacks, Native Americans and Hispanics if each group squared off to fight for one bone.

Martin Luther King's quest for equality for minorities in America remains unfinished. And, the people for whom he gave his life

—the American people—are urged, if not compelled, to review the writings and teachings of this gentle giant. □

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