

ERASING DR. KING'S REAL LEGACY

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The recent death of Coretta Scott King, and the massive public memorial held in her honor, which President George W. Bush attended, marked an end in a phase of Civil Rights History. Coretta Scott King had been the principal force behind the establishment of the federal holiday honoring the life and legacy of her husband, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in 1986. Yet Coretta King's death forces today's proponents of racial justice to ponder serious questions about how Dr. King's holiday has been subverted from its real political meaning.

Only days before Coretta King's death, newspapers and the electronic media had widely documented the deep disarray within both the King family and Atlanta's King Center. In December, 2005, the King Center board, controlled by younger son Dexter King, announced it was considering selling the center for \$11 million to the National Park Service. Dexter's decision immediately provoked public protests from the elder son, Martin Luther King, III, and Bernice King.

Critics noted that Martin Luther King III collected nearly \$180,000 annually from the King Center, with millions of dollars more funding a for-profit company owned by Dexter. The Interior Department was already allocating \$1 million annually to the center, yet its public educational activities were at best modest. The Education Department even began investigating the center's use of federal grant funds in its development of a civil rights curriculum.

The controversies and lack of effective leadership from the King Center in representing the actual political content of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s ideas – such as his opposition to the Vietnam War and U.S. militarism – contributed to a subversion of King's legacy. One noteworthy instance of this occurred in January, 2006, in San Antonio, Texas, when T-1 training jets from Randolph Airport Base flew over that city's twentieth annual King march. March coordinators insisted that this vulgar display of military muscle did nothing to diss Martin, a noted pacifist and Vietnam War critic. Yet hundreds of San Antonio protestors devoted to Martin's ideals released white doves and chanted "Shame!" at the march, and raised posters reading, "Peace Not Planes" when the jet squadron flew overhead.

At the 2006 King ceremony at Washington, D.C.'s Kennedy Center, Bush did his best to bury King's activist legacy, once and for all. "The reason to honor Martin Luther King is to remember his strength of character and his leadership, but also to remember the remaining work," Bush declared. King and civil rights activist Rosa Parks had both "roused the dozing conscience of a complacent nation."

Nowhere in Bush's babblings was there any recognition of what Martin actually stood for, or that the historic struggle for black freedom and equality had long predated both King and Parks. Nowhere in Bush's mumbling platitudes was there any acknowledgement that his reactionary administration is aggressively dismantling civil rights enforcement and the last vestiges of affirmative action that Martin had died to help make possible.

Others sought to neutralize the activist legacy of King by merging the late civil rights leader with the ghost of conservative black educator Booker T. Washington. The Reverend Floyd Flake, former New York Congressman and president of Wilberforce University, presented this neo-conservative spin of Martin as the keynote speaker for Atlanta's 2006 King observance. Instead of deploring Bush's callous abandonment of civil rights and the poor, Flake emphasized a bootstrap approach of self-reliance, emphasizing the need for blacks to educate their children and to disengage from protests. "The next step is not about liberal or conservative," Flake informed his audience. "You cannot afford to talk about [political] parties when you've got a party that takes you for granted and a party that ignores you." Flake's admonition wrongly implies that the Republicans, who are aggressively dismantling affirmative action and civil rights enforcement, are literally no different from liberal Democrats who defend such programs. Flake primarily used the event to push his own centrist agenda, not to revive King's militant activism or dedication to public protest against racism.

Over the past two decades, the emphasis of the King holiday has focused on the importance of public service, and especially on behalf of nonprofit organizations and groups involved in social welfare, education, and children's services. While these activities are commendable, they do not adequately engage us with the legacy and content of Martin's values and ideals.

In a January 16, 2006 New York Times editorial, historian Taylor Branch explained that in many respects we are removing Dr. King from his own holiday, by ignoring the actual content of his ideals. Branch observed, "Despite our high-stakes national commitment to advance free government around the world, we consistently marginalize or ignore Dr. King's commitment to the core values of democracy. . . . Dr. King's ideas are not so much rebutted as cordoned off or begrudged, and for two generations his voice of anguished hope has given way to a dominant slogan that government itself is bad."

Branch reminds us that a central feature of King's politics was the essential connection between "nonviolence" and "democracy." Branch observed, "Every ballot – the most basic element of free government – is by definition a piece of nonviolence, symbolizing hard-won or hopeful consent to raise politics above anarchy and war."

To actualize Martin's idea of nonviolence and democracy today means that we must ensure that all U.S. citizens and permanent residents have the democratic right to vote. Because of repressive voter laws in many states, millions of Americans who are

former prisoners – women and men who have fully paid their debt to society – continue to be permanently penalized by stripping them of their democratic right to vote. In states like Florida, over 800,000 people with felony convictions have lost the right to vote for life. Restoring full voting rights to the millions of Americans who cannot vote preserves a nonviolence way for civic expression and public engagement.

To truly honor Martin's legacy and ideals means that we must rededicate ourselves as a nation to the eradication of poverty, hunger, and the lack of medical care for all Americans. America is the wealthiest nation on earth, yet 46 million of our citizens lack basic medical coverage for themselves and their families. We have the greatest material affluence the world has ever witnessed, yet several million children will go to bed hungry tonight, while millions more remain trapped beneath the double burden of personal debt and poverty. This is the living legacy of Dr. King.

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