

Colman McCarthy

## Sanitizing a Hero

*Who now has the courage to cite  
Martin Luther King's core convictions?*

This Monday is the first Martin Luther King Jr. holiday since Congress federalized it in 1983 when the consuming national issue is violence and how to treat it.

In recent weeks, President Clinton spoke in Memphis against violence. Larry King assembled Janet Reno, Bill Cosby and others—"We'll be taking your phone calls, don't go away"—for some prime-time hand-wringing in a Catholic church in Southeast Washington. A cover story in U.S. News & World Report was on youth violence: "When Killers Come to Class." The postal service held a symposium on workplace shootings, with wire services reporting that the annual national cost of workplace violence is \$4.2 billion.

Most of this talk has been descriptive: an adjectival flow of words to measure the height, weight and depth of our death-dealing.

The value of looking to King's thinking on violence is that both personally and intellectually, he cared more for solutions than descriptions. If he hadn't been solution-oriented we would have abandoned him by now, left him behind in the 1950s and '60s as an accomplished and admirable man but not memorably towering.

King's moral-based solution to our social decay centered on the one to which he committed himself: nonviolence, in thought and action. One without the other wasn't enough: "Nonviolence in the truest sense," he wrote in 1957 in "Stride for Freedom," the first of his four books, "is not a strategy that one uses simply because it is expedient at the moment. Nonviolence is, ultimately a way of life that men live by because of the sheer morality of its claim."

Nothing came closer to the core of King's philosophy than that. Yet it routinely goes uncited when current leaders find the martyred King useful for applause lines. When Clinton addressed a congregation of black clergy and lay people in Memphis on Nov. 13 in the same Masonic Temple where King preached the

ton's speech about Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis was like a lecture on Einstein and that omitted physics. No allusion was made to what consumed King in his religious and social ministry: his absolutist belief that "the only way to have a world at peace is through nonviolence."

Clinton toasted the ceremonial and sanitized King—as is customary around this time of year—not the militant King. For traders in the lukewarm, King is too hot to handle. King's moral alliance with nonviolence lurks only a risky half step from his political view that "we live in a sick, neurotic nation."

What president would dare use those words of King? Jimmy Carter once referred to America's "malaise," and found himself ridiculed as a moralizer.

The sickness and neurosis that King defined in the 1960s remain. If a difference exists between then and now, it's that King saw institutional violence at society's upper reaches as the greater curse, not street violence at the bottom. Those at the top, he argued, were responsible for the hemorrhage of money that went into America's military adventurism and bankrupted the economy.

That hasn't changed. While Clinton was in Memphis aligning himself with King, production plans for the radar-evading F-22 fighter plane kept to schedule. Another \$700 million, on top of an earlier overrun of \$1.2 billion, has been added to the original estimate of \$9 billion—for a plane designed for combat against the vanished Soviet Union and criticized by the General Accounting Office as militarily marginal.

With mayors and governors weary of telling dispirited citizens that money isn't available for many routine social services—skip the emergencies—what would King be saying today? Nothing, for sure, that a president would want to quote, and nothing close to this from April 1967: "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military programs than on programs for social uplift is approaching spiritual death."

Confront the real enemy, King said and did, which is the ethic of violence, and then turn to the real solution: nonviolence. That, too, he did. Will more of us care to remember and figure out how to do it today?

night before his murder, the president praised the fallen hero. He referred to King's "Promised Land" speeches and then rhetorically asked, "What would he say" if "he were here today?"

In Clinton's suggested answers, nothing about nonviolence was mentioned, not even the word itself. Clin-