Other Voices

The man whose birthday we celebrate today was, during his last 10 years, one of the most closely monitored and perhaps the most harassed citizen in American history.

Jerry McKnight

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Honoring Martin Luther King: The man and the myth

AS THE nation celebrates Martin Luther King's birthday, we must not get caught up in a let-us-now-praise-famous-men mood which obscures the full meaning and tragedy of his life. As with other national heroes, there is a tendency to romanticize those we honor until history slips unremarked into legend.

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It would be a grave disservice to King's memory and our national history if he is turned into a respectable national hero whose smoothed-over image bears little resemblance to the real man.

As in past years, today we extol the King of the "I Have A Dream" phase of the civil rights struggle, when black demands for social justice could no longer be deferred. We are transfixed all over again by the chilling images of King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) as they stood up to police dogs and fire hoses with nonviolence and redemptive soul-force. From these struggles were born the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

But the hard reality was that by the end of 1965 the civil rights movement was at an impasse, unable to progress in the face of institutional racism in the North and the government's preoccupation with Vietnam. King became painfully aware that legislative and judicial victories did little to improve the lot of millions of blacks living in Northern ghettos.

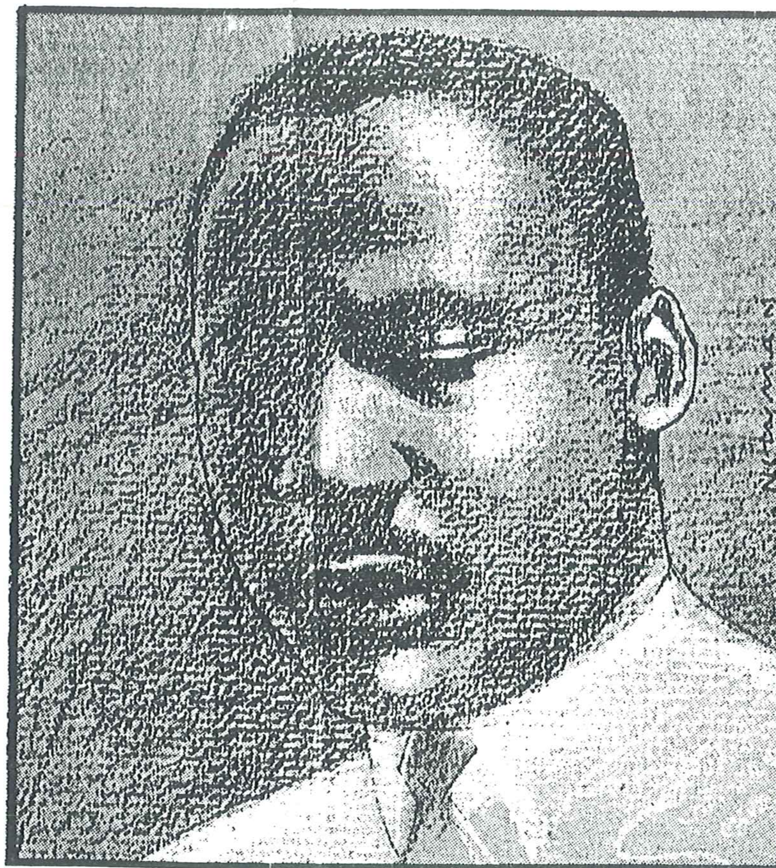
Hoping to extend its influence, the SCLC targeted Mayor Richard Daley's Chicago. But SCLC tactics of marching and praying did not overcome in Boss Daley's Chicago. After months of effort, King's "war on the slums" ended in bitter and bewildering defeat. His message of nonviolence to Northern black youth fell on deaf ears. Increasingly, he was either ignored or mocked by more militant blacks as an "Uncle Tom."

On April 4, 1967, in an address at Riverside Church in New York, King finally broke his silence on Vietnam. In harsh language he accused the government of diverting funds from the poverty program to fuel the Asian war and of cruelly manipulating black youth by "sending them 8,000 miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in Southwest Georgia or East Harlem." King called the Johnson administration "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today" and called on the president to unbind the nation from the war.

National reaction was swift and almost uniformly negative; even most of the black community's elite distanced themselves from King's denunciations. By the summer of 1967 King was no longer the confident hero we choose to remember, but a physically exhausted and isolated man, confused about the future and profoundly depressed.

King, however, found the inner strength to go on. During the last year of his life he went through a radical transformation. He suspended his earlier conviction that white racism could be overcome by appealing to the nation's moral conscience with the positive force of Christian love. By 1967, it was agonizingly clear to King that America had no moral conscience and was dominated by racism at home and abroad. He came to believe that the nation needed a revolution in values ignited by a radical redistribution of economic and political power.

To begin shaking the power structure, King and his SCLC staff threatened a new march on Washington for the spring of 1968. Phase one of their "Poor People's Campaign" began with recruitment of thousands of the nation's poor to encamp in a shantytown near the Capitol. In phase two, the poor people's army, its ranks swollen by hundreds of thousands of allies from the peace movement and the Washington ghettos, would engage in massive, nonviolent civil disobedience.



King felt these shock tactics were necessary to arouse a "moribund, insensitive Congress to life" and to grant the nation's poor an "Economic Bill of Rights" guaranteeing jobs, decent housing and a minimum income to those too young, too old or too disabled to work. The siege of Washington would not be lifted until these demands were met or all the protesters jailed.

The shift of the civil rights movement away from racial justice to economic and political matters — issues of class — only heightened the threat King posed to the reigning powers in government. No one in Washington had a more deep-seated fear of "subversive" influences undermining the status quo than FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. As early as the summer of 1963 Hoover viewed King as a threat to his way of life, his bureaucracy and his vision of a white, Christian, harmonious America.

It was, however, the political King of the Poor People's Campaign and the anti-war movement who galvanized Hoover's FBI to unleash a no-holds-barred campaign to destroy the man.

Although we may prefer sanitized history, we must face this sobering fact: The man whose birthday we celebrate today was, during his last 10 years, one of the most closely monitored and perhaps the most harassed citizen in American history. The FBI monitored King's movements through every intelligence-gathering technique imaginable. The agency even drafted scurrilous editorials against King and placed them in "cooperative" newspapers. The 402-page index to the bureau's King files indicates that they are over 250,000 pages long!

While tragically cut short, King's life was a fully committed one. He hoped to be known as a drum major for justice and peace during a turbulent time in our history. Caught up in the vortex of events, King looked for radical — but never violent — solutions to save the soul of the country. Yet his was more than the voice of a beautiful dream. Martin Luther King was a complex political man whose legacy deserves not whitewashing, but the honor of honest remembrance.

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