

4-9-68

N Y Post



Partly in Anger

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Dr. Martin Luther King would probably have deemed me an unworthy listener hopelessly guilty of uncharitable thoughts and sorrowful anger about some who hounded and demeaned him in life and now enshrine him in death.

One desperately hopes that the tragedy will touch off a lasting upheaval of the American spirit. There have been lovely sights and sounds in many places during the awful aftermath.

But these emotions will soon be drained, as all grief must diminish, before too long. The baseball season, momentarily delayed, will begin tomorrow. In the many mornings after the day of mourning, life in too many places will revert too easily to conventional patterns.

Certainly some things will be altered, for better or for worse. Yet there are too many signs that the profound sickness of our society defies any miracle treatment, including the shock of Dr. King's slaying.

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I have been moved as much as anyone by the voices of black and white joined together singing "We Shall Overcome." In a time of deepening separatism this had become an old-fashioned song. Suddenly it has been reinstated out of reverence for Dr. King's vision. To suggest that his death will bring no abrupt transformation of America is not to deny or denigrate the meaning of his life, or his place in history.

If there is a sad skepticism in these words, it reflects only a refusal to embrace premature hope and an awareness of the incongruities that have marked this time of memorial.

The search for Dr. King's slayer is being guided by the same director of the FBI who, less than four years ago, called Martin Luther King "the most notorious liar in the country."

I have no doubt Mr. Hoover's agents are diligently engaged in hot pursuit of the assassin, and will accept all manner of testimony if and when the fugitive is found. Dr. King, whose gift of laughter survived many ordeals, would have found cosmic jest in the spectacle of this FBI manhunt. In the past the same agency squandered many hours of its manpower subjecting him to public and private investigation (not protection) in an effort to compile a damning dossier against him. His largest crime was his charge that the FBI had shown inadequate concern for the defense of civil rights workers in the South.

This is only one of many paradoxes. On Saturday King was being eulogized by Theodore Gleason of the International Longshoremen's Assn., and a reverential stoppage was conducted under his command. The same Mr. Gleason was boasting in a recent time that his members had violently assaulted peace marchers in this city, and were prepared for further combat duty on a larger scale. One can only pray that Gleason has seen the light of revelation in the darkness of Memphis, but a doubt persists.

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There were those who told Dr. King that his involvement in the anti-war movement was undermining his status as a civil rights leader. There were politicians imploring him until the day of his death to call off his projected "poor people's" march on Washington, lest it be construed as an affront and an intrusion by members of Congress. There were the nationalist militants who mockingly called him "de Lawd" because he would not assign whites to the back of the bus.

His course became steadily lonelier; in retrospect, it seems that only multitudes of people remained with him.

But death did not bring quick victory or vindication beyond the realm of rhetoric. It did not even persuade the civic rulers of Memphis to yield at once to the garbage-workers' simple quest

for union recognition—the issue that brought Dr. King on his fateful final journey, as it once brought him to New York in behalf of exploited hospital workers here.

In the coming days and weeks we will discover how many citizens are so authentically moved by Dr. King's death that they are prepared to proclaim their readiness to pay higher taxes to carry out the programs he preached. We will find out how many real estate boards in the suburbs of the nation are prepared to remove the "for whites only" signs. We will learn how many institutions in which racism is subtly practiced have undergone a genuine reawakening.

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Dr. King was not the first martyr of the movement he led; he was only the most renowned. We have had earlier spasms of guilt, followed by quick sedation. And fright alone will not produce a new day; it may invite only rival frenzies.

In these hours too many Americans have talked only about Dr. King's commitment to non-violence, as if lamenting the unfortunate passing of the nice boy on the block. What they ignore is that he was advocating non-violence as both the moral and strategic basis of a sweeping, revolutionary social change. He was more than an apostle of brotherly love; he was a passionate crusader for economic justice and dignity for the have-nots, an implacable foe of the inequitable status quo. It is too easy for men of property to embrace his teachings of non-violence, and to forget the rest of his message. A comparable message has been distorted in much of the world for nearly 1,968 years.