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IRREVOCABLE? YES. POINTLESS? NO.

In the land of the free, brave men are assassinated. In the richest country in the world, a spokesman for the poorest of its citizens was murdered. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., preacher, peace Nobelist, non-violent protester against oppression of blacks in the United States, and dreamer, was slain by a single perfectly aimed rifle shot in daylight in Memphis, Tennessee. As police rushed to the victim from the direction of the shot, the killer or killers escaped. On executive order, Federal police joined the man-hunt. Ballistic, fingerprint, and other physical evidence was collected and turned over to the FBI for laboratory test and analysis. "Leads derived from the evidence are being followed up in several parts of the United States," said U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark who flew to Memphis by order of President Johnson, with what instructions and for what explicit purpose neither official stated publicly. Yet before the leads yielded evidence, before the FBI laboratory tests were made, and in advance of arrest of the hunted quarry, the Attorney General was quoted as saying, "All [!] of the evidence indicates that this was the act of a single individual" (N.Y. Times, April 6, 1968). Clark, it seems, had learned from the Warren Commission. But life soon bettered the instruction. As the "leads" lengthened, the quarry proved more elusive than hapless Oswald, and it became apparent the evidence was a carefully-laid blind trail, the Attorney General was less sanguine but still hopeful the assassin would be caught. In any case it was crystally clear, to paraphrase the Attorney General, available evidence indicates the Federal

government, on Johnson's order, in 1968 as in 1963, illegally pre-empted investigation of a murder from duly constituted state authority.

Other similarities between the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King leap to mind. "Everywhere in Europe people linked Dr. King's death with the assassination of President Kennedy in 1963," cabled Anthony Lewis to the New York Times from London on April 5th. The link Lewis reported is born of "All the concern about the United States and its leadership that have grown here in recent years-- concern especially about the war in Vietnam and the violence in America. . ." There is "fear for the stability of American society" in Europe wrote Lewis. That view might have informed the comment of the Parisian newspaper Le Monde "a common tragic link indeed unites men devoted to a common struggle." But not the attitude of "members of all parties in the House of Commons [who] introduced a motion expressing 'horror at the brutal and senseless murder' and pledging to eliminate racial discrimination."

"The Evening Standard," cabled Lewis, "said in an editorial that 'America is indeed a violent land.' Comparing Dr. King's death with President Kennedy's assassination, the editorial said, 'Once again one of its greatest citizens has been cut down by an act of pointless and irrevocable violence.'"

Heart transplants may become universally standard medical practice. Resurrection, however, lies beyond the farthest reach of science. Death is irrevocable. But neither the assassination of President Kennedy nor the murder of Martin Luther King was pointless. In each instance there was motive. And the motives were not the same.

President Kennedy was killed as a means of changing the orientation of American foreign policy from accommodation with the Soviet world and the revolutionary forces in the "third world" to militant anticommunism. It was President Johnson's bad luck to be compelled by iron political necessity to allay unrest to promise continuation of his predecessor's policies, and to be impelled by the powerful forces which are or were the source of his economic and political life and strength and which set the stage for his elevation to power, to revert to cold-war postures and undeclared war in Vietnam while simultaneously restraining the dogs of war from completely devouring their victim.

The murder of King served other immediate interests. Until he became involved in Memphis, King, as an eloquent and dedicated religious pacifist, appealed principally to older and less militant black Americans; and to a relatively small part of the white middle class. He gave new meaning and currency briefly to the discredited shibboleths of American democracy and infused his followers with courage and hope. But to the suffering masses of poor blacks he offered little besides dreams. Significantly, the sermon of his brother, Rev. A. D. Williams King, in Atlanta three days after the assassination "was based on the parable of the rich man Diades and the beggar Lazarus. Mr. King said that Lazarus had asked for crumbs from Diades's table. . . ." (N.Y. Times, April 8, 1968).

By projecting the illusory ideal of egalitarianism in contemporary American capitalist society to be achieved by purely moral force, King gave impetus to the development of "race" consciousness among a minority of blacks but not on the part of the

great masses of the black poor; he could not stimulate the growth of class consciousness among them. His militant civil disobedience tactics attracted a small number of blacks and enlisted the support of a small number of the white middle class, but could not rouse, as King hoped, the nonexistent conscience of the ruling class; his movement was foredoomed to failure. His injunction to love the venomously sadistic brutes who beat and killed defenseless protesters against oppression and injustice did not meet the need of the black poor for organized defense, made sacrificial victims of his followers, and alienated the most militant black elements. His opposition to the war in Vietnam, courageous though belated, antagonized those black young men for whom service in the armed forces, even at the risk of wounds and death, seemed an improvement over their empty, dreary, hopeless ghetto life.

King's religious pacifism could have no appeal for white workers who have instincts and traditions of great militancy but whose relatively superior economic and social position is made to rest in good part on perpetuation of black poverty, misery, and oppression and who, in consequence, feel threatened by black rebellion and are infected with antiblack prejudice. In effect, King's appeal for black pacifist militancy served to widen the cleavage between black poor and white worker.

Because he failed to stir and rouse the masses of the black poor and to win significant support in the white working class, King achieved little. He could not overcome. Despite his best efforts the situation of black people in American society deteriorated markedly during the twelve years of his apostleship.

No, Martin Luther King was not, on the whole, a threat to the capitalist social order; he was an anticommunist; not even a Christian socialist. In fact, by muting violent rebellion he served the oppressive capitalist system well. Hence his prestige which even J. Edgar Hoover could not tarnish with epithet and slander. In fine, King was an expensive and admirably decorative luxury which the established order found it necessary and advantageous to afford. The honor and respect heaped on his memory by the establishment attest his value to it.

King moved on foot through dangerously violent situations in Birmingham, Selma, Chicago, and other cities; his courage was unimpeachable. His life was threatened many times. He was attacked on a number of occasions. He lived always in recent years with the expectation of sudden violent death at the hands of paranoid racist assassins. Death came to him in Memphis as it came to John F. Kennedy in Dallas more than four years before.

Why in Memphis? Because there King went to the aid of striking black and white sanitationmen demanding recognition of their existence as organized workers. In Memphis, "poor garbage workers, men who picked up slop and waste," in the words of King's colleague, Rev. Ralph D. Abernathy, black and white wage slaves, struck in the world-wide and time-honored way of labor for union recognition and made other economic demands on their employer, the city government. Thereby they set a modest precedent for bridging the chasm between the movement of black rebellion and the labor movement-- in struggle against government. King to his honor and credit adopted their struggle, dramatized it while the organized labor movement sat

on its hands, and placed it forcibly in national consciousness.

Dangerous possibilities loomed. Unorganized arsonists-- unorthodox practitioners of free enterprise and individual initiative-- and looters, the latter even though integrated as in Detroit in the summer of 1967, can be contained and suppressed. And if need be, exterminated. But the integration of organized black and white workers, constituting a fusion of the movement of black rebellion and militant white labor, in struggle against government at any level, even though for elementary economic demands, has, in present circumstances, distinctly revolutionary possibilities. In spite of himself King might have become a serious threat to the existing social order. No other road than challenge to the system of wage slavery itself was open to him. He was killed because he stood before the door of redemption, at the threshold of class struggle. Murder locked the door.

Nothing could have cast as lurid light on King's role in the events and time through which he moved and in which he lived-- before Memphis-- as the flames of burning ghetto buildings in more than 100 cities in the United States following his death. While tens of thousands of poor blacks for whom King professed to speak protested his assassination and their condition in American society by the only means available to them in their leaderlessness and oppression-- spontaneous violent non-political attacks on "small" property-- and thousands more, joined by whites, made peaceful manifestation of their grief in silent marches in many cities, and department, chain, and other stores and business enterprises took expensive black-bordered newspaper ads featuring pictures of King

and his birth and death dates, hundreds of government officials, including the Vice President and leading candidates for Presidential nomination, distinguished clergymen, socialites, entertainers, and other luminaries of American capitalism, mostly white, joined 50 to 100 thousand blacks in impressive funeral services in Atlanta, Georgia, presided over by King's colleagues.

With King in his coffin before them his eulogists and fellow clergymen addressed themselves to the task at hand. They extolled the martyr and the causes he served. They praised the personal and religious significance of all he said and did. They vowed to persevere in his footsteps.

For the embattled blacks in slum and ghetto, ringed by hundreds of thousands of municipal and state police, National Guardsmen, and U.S. Army detachments, armed to the teeth, restrained from taking life for the most part, yet waiting for the command to massacre if rebellion turned from destruction of lower middle-class property to large capitalist enterprises and to assaults on seats of power, King's spiritual heirs had no word except "non-violence." No summons to American blacks to struggle or to African blacks to aid them, no appeal for defense against impending slaughter to the white poor and the workers of this and other countries, no pleas to the communist world for help issued from their lips. Of the tremendous struggle wracking the United States in the aftermath of King's assassination, his official eulogist said only, "If we love Martin Luther King and respect him. . . let us see to it that he did not die in vain. Let us see to it that we do not dishonor his name by trying to solve our problems through rioting in the streets"

(N.Y. Times, April 10, 1968). "Each one has to decide which side he is on," declared Regis Debray at his court martial in Camiri, Bolivia, November, 1967, ". . . on the side of violence that represses or violence that liberates." To the dignitaries in the funeral audience whose basic social interests, regardless of their public postures on issues and events, are threatened by black rebellion and labor upheaval and depend ultimately on "violence that represses," King's heirs gave reassurance; in King's name they rejected violence that liberates. In death as in life King was made to serve the system which oppresses and dehumanizes the people whose aspirations for freedom, dignity, and bread he espoused.

With fear in their hearts that the black poor would graduate from arson and looting to organized political assault on capitalism as a system, King's heirs could not say of their dead leader, as Debray spoke of martyred Che Guevara, "There are some men who are even more dangerous when they are dead than when they were alive. . . For us Che now begins to live, and the revolution continues." A few months later, 20,000 protesting students in Rio de Janeiro marched in step to the chanting of Che's name. One is reminded of another and earlier martyr in the long struggle against slavery. John Brown, a religious fanatic but no pacifist, took up arms against the government of the United States in the hope of freeing large numbers of slaves, and was hanged as a traitor by a military detachment commanded by Robert E. Lee. Two years later tens of thousands of young Americans went to war against the Confederate government served by Lee, singing "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, his soul goes marching on."

King is certain of a place in history. It is unlikely, however, that rebellious blacks and whites in days to come will do battle in the name of Martin Luther King, who styled himself a "drum major for justice." Protesting black students at Columbia University posted pictures of Che Guevara, not King. It was exquisitely and bitterly ironic that King, spokesman for the poor, was shot while talking on the balcony of the "new and hopeful Lorraine Motel" by a gunman serving the interests of America's masters from a "leprous little hovel" (The Apotheosis of Martin Luther King, by Elizabeth Hardwick, New York Review of Books, May 9, 1968). It was fitting and proper and at the same time characteristic of this effort to live in and reconcile two irreconcilably antagonistic worlds that King was borne to rest in a "gleaming African mahogany coffin that rested on the rough plans" of a faded green "crude farm wagon pulled by two Georgia mules" (N.Y. Times, April 10, 1968).

The "point" of King's assassination is clear. What remains to be established are the locus in the spectrum of reactionary capitalist interests of the decision to remove him, the specific force assigned the task, and the identities of his executioners.

Thomas Paine
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