

Beyond Politics

By DAVID S. BRODER

Memphis commercial appeal 8/18/83
WASHINGTON — Twenty years ago this month, as a young reporter on The Washington Star, I was one of many from its staff assigned to cover the civil rights march on Washington. I took the assignment with no more sense of history-in-the-making than if I were going to cover a Senate committee hearing.

But as the huge crowd gathered, and moved in solemn procession down the Mall, filling the space before the memorial to Abraham Lincoln, the impact of the event began to dawn on every witness. And when the afternoon of oratory climaxed with the impassioned address of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., my heart, I expect, was beating as fast as any in the multitude.

BUT THE STORY I wrote that night for the Star was less adulatory than analytical, trying to assess from the reac-

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tions of many on the scene and in the nearby Capitol what the impact of this extraordinary event would be in achieving its immediate goal: breaking the deadlock on civil rights and social welfare legislation in Congress.

The clouds of retrospective sentiment surrounding that summer afternoon should not obscure what anyone who was there knew: It was a political demonstration. It was a political rally which King, with his spirit and words, translated into something of enduring moral and historical significance.

That is worth remembering in the current debate on legislation creating an official holiday commemorating the birthday of the slain civil rights leader. Such a bill passed the House early this month and awaits action in the Senate.

There is a good deal of cynicism about the political considerations that persuaded 406 of the 435 representatives

to support the measure and which now are reportedly causing President Reagan's aides to think it may be prudent for him to abandon his previously expressed opposition to such a holiday.

Blacks are a growing force in politics, an increasingly mobilized and motivated voting bloc. Their distaste for Reagan and the Republican Party is documented in every poll. So the cynics see the King birthday bill as a reward the Democrats are offering an important constituency and a measure the Republicans are afraid to oppose.

But that observation — even if accurate — does not begin to exhaust the argument. Almost everything King did in his life, from the Montgomery bus boy-

cott to the final, fatal march in Memphis, was political. It was designed to challenge and change existing laws, customs and power.

But the significance of his life was that the means he chose — passive resistance and passionate oratory — transformed and elevated the political struggle. It became a process of personal reconciliation, permanently changing the lives and attitudes of both blacks and whites in this country.

As much as any man since Lincoln, he helped end the tragic heritage of slavery which had flawed this experiment in democracy from its start.

I was struck, in the House debate, not so much by the words of the black members who spoke on behalf of the bill, but by the words of some young conservative whites who endorsed it.

Rep. Dan Lungren (R-Calif.), who was only 22 when King was killed, said that in his distant community, the civil rights leader "stirred inside me a feeling that we had to walk together if we were going to work out the problems of this country." In 1981, conservative Lungren played a key role in extending the Voting Rights Act.

Rep. Mickey Edwards (R-Okla.), the head of the American Conservative Union, recalled that, "Before Martin Luther King, before the marches, before the sit-ins, blacks in my district rode in separate seats in the back of the bus. They could not use the restaurants or the restrooms that the rest of us used. They could not go to the same schools."

"While Dr. King was black and the fight to end segregation directly affected the black community," said Rep. Newt

Gingrich (R-Ga.), "his birthday should be celebrated by all Americans as a demonstration of the virtues of freedom and a free society."

Particularly striking were the words of Rep. Ed Bethune (R-Ark.). "As a Republican and as a former FBI agent," he said, "I rise in strong support of the Martin Luther King holiday bill."

Recalling the civil rights struggles of the 1960s in his state, Bethune asked, "Do you know what we learned out of all that? The great changes are not made here in the legislative chambers or in the judicial halls. The great changes in this world are made in the hearts and minds of men and women."



"I think," he said, "that this holiday for Martin Luther King will give us an annual opportunity to recommit ourselves to the proposition that all men are created equal. It will nourish the spirit of reconciliation we need so desperately in this country right now."

Some may read those words as cynical political opportunism. I do not. Just as King himself surpassed politics, so may the act of honoring him.

Locked Files Of FBI Shield War On King

By JACK ANDERSON

WASHINGTON — Civil rights leaders are planning to commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s epochal 1963 march on Washington with another march on the nation's capital Aug. 27.

Undeserving of emulation — but not easy to forget — was the FBI's march on the march on Washington. The late J. Edgar Hoover's agents dogged the footsteps of King and his associates, bugged them and tapped their telephones, squandering millions of taxpayer dollars on this disgraceful surveillance operation.

Now, 20 years later, tens of thousands of documents — perhaps hundreds of thousands — relating to the King family and other civil rights leaders, as well as to the historic march itself, are still locked tight in the FBI's files, unavailable to researchers and the public.

The existence of the FBI's voluminous files on King was discovered by Harold Weisburg of Frederick, Md., an indefatigable researcher on U.S. political assassinations. He obtained a 404-page partial inventory of documents stored in 59 FBI field offices across the country. A single entry in the inventory could refer to one page or a thousand pages of hidden material.

The inventory for the New York City field office is instructive. It has a

15-page index, and mentions "100 volumes" of unreleased documents. The general estimate of a "volume" is 200 pages, though it could run anywhere from six to several hundred pages.

The New York listing has 2,610 entries on a single King aide. The material includes formal and informal FBI memos, reports of physical surveillance, teletypes, informants' reports, newspaper clippings and copies of documents in files of other field offices.

Much of the FBI material is classified and is still withheld because of "national security." This was a favorite Nixon-era device used to hide information that might embarrass the federal government, often when there wasn't the faintest connection to the nation's security.

Other data are being withheld by the FBI, even in the face of litigation, on grounds that it was supplied by confidential informants whose identities must still be protected. But after 20 years, the informants who are still alive could be protected easily by simply deleting their names or other identifying hints.

Oddly enough, there's a whole raft of King material that would be freely available at FBI field offices — but only if someone knew specifically what to ask for.

In fairness to the FBI, employees spent hours trying to sort out the facts on the unreleased material for my associate Les Whitten. But they admitted they have no idea — even to the nearest hundred thousand — how many documents remain hidden on the most influential black leader of our time.