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After the Assenter

By Roger Wilkins

Last Thursday, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. would have celebrated his 47th birthday. Next April he will have been dead eight years. As the sixties recede, the significance of his life becomes much clearer and the impact of his absence becomes almost tangible. Before he was murdered, he embodied the hope of the vast majority of blacks and of many whites as well. In contrast, his death and the circumstances surrounding it not only symbolize a dramatic decline of faith once firmly held in the black community; they actually fuel and accelerate that decline.

In 1955—except in those communities where the schools were under court order to desegregate—Jim Crow's iron grip on Southern society, along with virulent discrimination in the North, seemed permanent aspects of the American landscape. The white view of race and society was reflected off so many facets of American life and was imposed with such uniformity and rigidity that it was impossible even for blacks to resist believing at least some of it.

The Montgomery bus boycott began to change all of that and more. Ordinary black people—domestics, janitors and garbagemen—faced down the segregated system and left it reeling. It was a thunderclap that signaled a new era in the psyches of black Americans, and Martin Luther King Jr. was the human symbol of that thunderclap.

As the movement ripened, Dr. King's symbolism spread beyond the growing black sense of potency to embrace American idealism in its entirety. Dr. King's famous dream—spelled out at the Lincoln Memorial in August 1963—was an expression of profound belief in and love for America. He was not simply a dreamer, he was a believer of such depth and intensity that, in retrospect, the allegations of alien influences in his movement are rendered grotesque and ludicrous.

But even then, in the summer of '63, the belief and fervor generated by Dr. King's work and the audacity of his challenge had unleashed a different set of forces entirely. Because the hypocrisy, greed and sloth which undergirded so much of American racism collided so sharply with Dr. King's clear and honest fervor, J. Edgar Hoover had legions of supporters in his fierce angry obsession with him. When Dr. King held America's most idealistic fantasies up to the light and demanded that the country put up or shut up, disorientation and rage were very often the automatic responses. Even in the black community during

the halcyon days, there were those who did not share his charitable sense of the American character or his optimistic vision of the future; but their numbers were relatively small. Thus, they were easily put down as paranoiacs when they suggested that the intelligence agencies of the United States were actively countering the black movement or when they raised the possibility of official complicity in the assassination of black leaders.

Now, almost eight years after the murder, there is a virtual moratorium on Dr. King's kind of dreaming. Many of the Federal programs designed to give the poor a better break have been discarded, others have been severely crippled and still others such as food stamps are under heavy sustained attack.

Even as catastrophic unemployment levels in minority communities are tolerated, some conservatives are actively plumping for changes in the Government's definitions of unemployment in order to make vast numbers of the minority unemployed even less than they currently are. Intellectuals once considered liberal are hard at work explaining why programs designed to give minorities better job possibilities are destructive and why, since busing is unpopular, the whole notion of school integration might better be rethought.

On the heels of those developments has come documentation of F.B.I. programs to foment intergroup violence between black radical organizations and to fit foul and unremitting efforts to nullify Dr. King as a force in American life. As a result, the question, Who killed Martin Luther King? has become a code to suggest a skepticism so broad and so deep as to make the faith of the sixties seem naive and quaint.

From the perspective of 1976, it seems clear that America was not up to the challenge hurled at her people and her institutions by such a thoroughgoing assenter. Dr. King's belief was too much—at least for its time—for America to live up to. So the country turned away from his vision with a number of rationalizations—too busy, too costly or we're there already.

For many blacks, that pretty much disposed of those good fantasies about America that Dr. King pursued so avidly. Thus, the country is in little danger of again facing his brand of rich deep assent from blacks in the near future. At least as long as people continue to wonder, Who killed Martin Luther King . . . and why?

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