

"Remembering the Dreamer"

This January 15 the nation will celebrate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s birthday. Before we get caught up in a Let-US-Now-Praise-Famous-Men mood, as celebrants let's be clear about the man we are honoring and the full meaning of his life and times. As in the case with other national heroes there is an irresistible tendency to romanticize and idolize those we honor until history slips unremarked into legend. Twenty-one years after his assassination there is reason for concern that people today are turning King into a respectable national hero whose comfortable, smoothed-over, present-day image bears little resemblance to the human King or to the political King of 1965-1968. We do a grave disservice to King's memory and to our own national history if we do not resist these tendencies to mythologize the man and his times.

If past years are any indicator, the man we memorialize this January 15 will be the Dr. King of the "We Shall Overcome" and the "I Have A Dream" phase of the civil rights struggle. This was the high-water mark of the "second American revolution;" that comparatively brief period in the history of the civil rights movement when the black demands for social justice seemed irresistible and could no longer be deferred. We will be transfixed all over again by the chilling images of that struggle in which Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference spearheaded assaults on Jim Crow in the Johannesburgs of the deep South. Against Birmingham's Bull Connor and his police dogs and fire hoses and Selma's Jim Clark and his Alabama State Troopers with their tear gas and rubber truncheons, King and the SCLC met the challenge head-on with nonviolence, redemptive love, and soul-force. In the aftermath of these inspiring moral victories came the fruits of

political and legislative breakthroughs in the form of the Civil Rights Act(1964) and the Voting Rights Act(1965). In these civil rights campaigns in the deep South the SCLC changed the face of black protest and Dr. King emerged as a national celebrity. Recognition came quickly in the form of honor^{or} degrees, foundation grants, Time's "Man of the Year" award, speaking engagements, a Papal audience, culminating in the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964.

While King and his allies anticipated continued advance all along the civil rights front, the hard reality was that by the end of 1965 the civil rights movement was at an impasse. The major obstacles to ending racism and poverty in America were institutional racism in the North and the government's escalating involvement in Vietnam. Despite the civil rights victories since 1954, King was painfully aware that black Americans had barely moved forward at all. Nor was the bitter irony lost on him that these legislative and judicial victories did precious little to improve the lot of the teeming millions of blacks living in the ghettos of the North. The SCLC targeted Mayor Richard J. Daley's Chicago hoping to influence America's most formidable machine-controlled ~~city~~ northern city government to modify its racist ground rules and provide its black citizens with equal opportunities to better education, jobs, and housing. SCLC's southern 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. Moreover, King's message and appeal of nonviolence to northern black youth in the ghettos fell on deaf ears. Increasingly, he was either ignored or mocked by the more militant blacks as an "Uncle Tom" or "D^re Lawd."

On April 4, 1967, in an address at the Riverside Church in New York City, King finally broke his silence on Vietnam. In

harsh and uncompromising language he accused the government of betraying the poor by diverting funds from the Poverty Program to fuel the Asian war and for 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 on the Johnson administration--a government he characterized as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today"--to unbind the nation from this Asian madness. National reaction to King's antiwar declaration was swift and almost uniformly negative. Most of the black community's elites quickly distanced themselves and their organizations from King's denunciation of President Johnson's war. A week after the Riverside Church address, for example, the NAACP Board of Directors adopted a resolution labelling any attempt to merge the civil rights movement with the peace movement "a serious tactical mistake." By the summer of 1967 King was physically exhausted, isolated, confused about the future and profoundly depressed. He worried that the emergent Black Power movement would be exploited by anti-civil rights elements of the American right to stigmatize the entire movement. Expected to have solutions to institutional racism in the North and to the problems of the poor, King felt he had nothing more to say; he was burned out.

Depressed though he was, King somehow found the inner strength to go on. During the last year of his life he went through a radical transformation. He suspended his earlier and sustaining convictions that white racism could be overcome by appealing to the nation's moral conscience with the positive and creative force of Christian love. By 1967 it was agonizingly clear to King that America had no moral conscience. America in the Vietnam era, especially the power structure, was dominated and ridden by racism at home and abroad, economic exploitation, and rampant militarism.

For King, America was a sick society that could not be turned around by piecemeal reform. What was needed was a revolution in values ignited by a profound reorganization of society that required a radical redistribution of economic and political power.

To shake the foundations of the power structure and make it responsive to the needs of the dispossessed, King and his SCLC staff threatened a new march on Washington for the spring of 1968. Phase one of the so-called Poor People's Campaign was set in motion in early 1968, when SCLC staffers began recruiting several thousands of the nation's poor--black, white, Chicano, and native Americans--to march on Washington and encamp in a plainly visible shantytown near the Capitol. In phase two, the poor-people's army, its ranks swollen by hundreds of thousands of antiwar allies from the peace movement and the Washington ghetto, would engage in non-violent tactics of massive civil disobedience. The Labor Department, Congress, and the war machine in the Pentagon would be inundated with protesters determined to peacefully dislocate the orderly functioning of government. These shock tactics were necessary, King was convinced, to arouse a "moribund, insensitive Congress to life," and coerce it to grant the nation's poor an "Economic Bill of Rights." The immediate expressed goals of the Poor People's Campaign were a guaranteed income to those too young, too old, or too disabled to work, jobs, and decent housing. The siege of Washington would not be lifted until these demands were met or all the protestors jailed.

The shift of the civil rights movement away from its concentration on racial justice to economic and political matters--issues of class--only heightened the political threat King posed to the reigning powers in government. This was especially true of those federal agencies which assigned to themselves the role of

guardians of American political norms and values. No one in Washington had a more deep-seated and rapid fear of "subversive" influences undermining the status quo than FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. As early as the summer of 1963 Hoover already viewed Dr. King of the "We Shall Overcome" phase of the civil rights movement 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 antiwar movement that galvanized Hoover and the top hierarchy of the FBI to unleash a no-holds-barred campaign to destroy the man the Bureau regarded as America's most dangerous militant. It is important to bear in mind that the man whose birthday we celebrate as a national holiday was during his last ten years the most surveilled and perhaps the most harassed citizen in American history. In its relentless campaign to neutralize King, the FBI used every intrusive intelligence-gathering technique to monitor his every movement. The sheer massiveness of the Bureau's files on King is obscenely registered in its own book-length inventory to these files--a total of 402 pages^{IN THE FILES OF FILES + 1/8 MC} and this inventory is incomplete because it fails to include a single record of the numerous tapes the FBI compiled by bugging and phone intercepts. Although incomplete, the inventory indicates that the King files contain well over 250,000 pages of investigative records!

When the FBI's campaign against King was not just plain ugly, it was criminally irresponsible. For example, in late March 1968, King and the SCLC were invited by local civil rights activists in Memphis to join in a demonstration in support of that city's striking sanitation workers. The march was barely underway when some teenage blacks began smashing store windows and looting. King and his entourage fled the scene of violence with the assistance of a Memphis police officer. The Memphis violence was tailor-made for the FBI's ongoing operation to discredit King. Two days after the abortive Memphis demonstration an editorial appeared in the St. Louis Globe-Democrat entitled "The Real Martin Luther King."

The thrust of the piece was to depict King as a sanctimonious hypocrite who preached nonviolence but, in fact, provoked violence, looting, and trouble. The editorial observed darkly that "Memphis could be only the prelude to massive bloodbath in the nation's capital . . . as Rev. King moves ahead with his plans" for the Poor People's Campaign. Some ten years after King's assassination the House Select Committee reinvestigating his murder, concluded in its final report that this editorial was drafted by the FBI and "handled," an FBI euphemism for placing the piece with "cooperative" newspapers, and that authorization for this initiative originated at the highest reaches of the FBI bureaucracy. Was the FBI unaware that cowardly, provocative, and illegal actions like this could only intensify the hostile atmosphere already surrounding King and increase the risks to his life?

While tragically cut short, King's life was a fully committed one. He hoped to be remembered as a drum major for justice, righteousness, and peace at an unsentimental time in our history when the nation was experiencing wrenching events that shattered the post-WW II political and social order. Caught up in the vortex of these turbulent times, King looked for radical solutions to save the soul of an America he feared was in the throes of moral bankruptcy. If America was to right herself and live out the true meaning of her creed there had to be a dramatic reordering of national priorities. For King, before any realignment could take place it was essential that the coalition of the civil rights and peace movements reclaim the nation from the war system by ending the Vietnam conflict. Like President John F. Kennedy before ~~him~~ and Senator Robert Kennedy after him, King saw Vietnam as a malignancy inside the body politic that had to be excised to restore the basic health of the republic. While all three of these national leaders sought different avenues to end the war they nonetheless shared

the common goal of its liquidation. Just as they shared the same fate to be struck down in their prime by assassins' bullets. The nation still ^{officially} mourns their deaths as an extension of the evils of the senseless violence that plagued the decade. Their violent deaths still haunt our era and some of us are not at ease with the conventional view that these tragedies were dealt us by a random, whimsical fate inconveniently interfering in the workings of democracy.

Jerry McKnight
Hood College
Frederick, Md.