

After Dr. King: Strong Currents

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When Martin Luther King Jr. was killed, his army of conscience disbanded. The banners fell, the movement unraveled, his apostles departed in different directions.

But King's death did not, as many assume, leave a void. He left strong currents of social change, an upward thrust by black people which is still working powerfully.

If anything, King seems larger today, a decade later. His legacy was more profound than either his critics or followers imagined, when he was assassinated in Memphis, 10 years ago Tuesday.

He was only 39. His almond eyes were benign, as pacific as his nonviolent philosophy, but his voice was heated with Christian outrage. His genius was in locating the moral ulcenum of white America's racial guilt and plying leverage.

"If Dr. King were around today," said John

Lewis, one of the disciples, "he would be pleased and gratified at some changes that have occurred. . . . On the other hand, he would be quite disappointed."

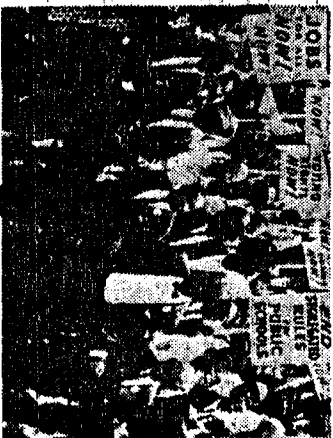
So much has changed. So much has not changed at all.

Today, nearly a third of the black population remains at the bottom. A fourth of black people are dependent on government welfare.

Yet, in the last decade, millions of blacks climbed to the middle and upper rungs of America's economic ladder. The number of black families earning more than \$15,000 a year has tripled, from 9 to 28 percent, moving upward faster than white families.

Black youths still confront staggering unemployment in the big-city slums, where drugs and street crime are the operative alternatives.

This familiar portrait of despair only tells half of the story. The other half is that young black people have achieved extraordinary



THE LEGACY OF THE DREAM

educational gains in the last 10 years—nearly closing the historic gap with whites.

A black youngster who reaches maturity in 1978 has nearly the same chance of going

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to college as a white child—a social change which could be as meaningful for the future as the GI Bill was after World War II.

These days, black political leaders feel a seasonal chill in racial politics—disappointment with the president they helped elect, a fear that white America is backing away from its commitments to the black minority.

Yet the last decade also produced the greatest political ascendancy for blacks since Reconstruction. From 100 or so black elected officials in 1964, the nation now has 4,300—most of them in the South, where black people were excluded from voting 15 years ago.

So those who marched with King, ordained ministers who shared his "prophetic vision" of peaceful change, are both pleased and despairing in 1978, as they believe Dr. King would be. Disappointed by the millions left behind in poverty, surprised by sudden progress on other fronts.

John Lewis, now associate director of Action, thought King "would be pleased, on the one hand, that there is less racial fear, less racial hostility, on the part of blacks toward whites and on the part of whites toward blacks. But he would be disappointed to see that, for the most part, we are still two societies, one white, one black."

The Rev. Andrew Young, who went from civil rights to Congress to his post as U.N. ambassador, feels King would be "thrilled" by the changes across the South and in his own hometown, Atlanta, where a black mayor governs, but terribly disappointed by the racial divisions which persist nationally.

"Things have probably come much further than he might have expected in the Deep South," Young said, interviewed last week in Nigeria. "The South has come to grips with its traditional racism very well.

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