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VIEWPOINTS

NEW YORK FORUM ABOUT RACE

King Wouldn't Have Approved

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THE 59th ANNIVERSARY of Martin Luther King Jr.'s birth offers an opportunity to reflect upon not only the valuable legacy King's life has left us, but also upon New York's own most recent - indeed, only recent - experience with significant civil disobedience, the mid-December interruption of Brooklyn Bridge and subway traffic organized by an ad hoc group of black activists unhappy with the current state of New York race relations.

Martin Luther King Jr., of course, is rightly thought of as the foremost proponent of civil disobedience in recent American history. Would King have readily supported or endorsed the Brooklyn traffic disruptions as commendable political actions, as some if not all of the Dec. 21 demonstrators believe and suggest? (See "'No Justice, No Peace,'" by Benjamin Chavis, New York Forum, Jan. 8).

Before anyone assumes an affirmative answer, it would be wise for us to look back carefully at King's strategic maxims, and in particular to consider his reaction to a proposed April, 1964, New York civil rights protest - a "stall-in" intended to halt traffic on the opening day of the World's Fair in Queens - whose planned tactics mirrored those used in Brooklyn this past December.

In King's mind in 1964, two strategic considerations were uppermost in evaluating the wisdom of organizing the stall-in. First, demonstrators who are going to employ disruptive and obstructive civil disobedience need to articulate their goals clearly and specifically. If protesters fail to explain their goals with sufficient clarity - as King realized he himself had failed to do in the important 1961-62 civil rights demonstrations in Albany, Ga. - then it is more difficult for onlookers to appreciate the justice of the protesters' cause. Similarly, when such clarity is lacking, those at whom the protests are aimed can more easily evade making specific policy concessions - concessions that could help protesters to rally greater forces for further initiatives.

In 1964, the stall-in proponents provided relatively little detail concerning the particular policies or tangible concessions they hoped their demonstration might attain. In 1987, the Brooklyn demonstrators listed a substantial number of extremely laudable but extremely broad aspirations, but addressed no specific demands to responsible targets - government officeholders or other political and economic decision-makers. Hence, King's criticism of the stall-in might be just as appropriately voiced about the Brooklyn disruptions: "The proponents of the 'stall in' failed to

establish in the public mind the reason why this course of action was necessary. So it appeared to be a meaningless protest in general with no specific demands or goals in mind."

Second, King felt strongly in 1964 that disruptive civil disobedience ought to be employed only if the protest's specific targets had refused to discuss or negotiate the detailed demands of the demonstrators. "I would only advocate such a drastic program of civil disobedience," he wrote with regard to the stall-in, "when persistent attempts at goodfaith negotiations have completely failed." If protesters have not identified their concrete goals or presented specific wants to answerable policy-makers, then disruptive civil disobedience is tactically inappropriate. "It is absolutely essential," King wrote in the Amsterdam News, "to establish a documented moral record that relief was sought via negotiations. Then and only then does it seem that such a drastic program of civil disobedience should be launched."

It is crucial to emphasize that while King criticized the tactical error represented by the stall-in, he firmly refused to condemn the stall-in proponents for their assertive activism, as did numerous other civil rights organizational leaders. Disruptive and obstructive civil disobedience is an appropriate political tactic, King argued - particularly in his nascent 1968 Poor People's Campaign - if it is employed in a strategically fitting and tactically intelligent way.

What if, for example, advocates for the homeless, frustrated after renewed and unsuccessful appeals, pursued disruptive civil disobedience to force the provision of safe housing? Dr. King would enthusiastically applaud. Obstructive protests can often be both appropriate and necessary, but - witness Brooklyn - not all uses of valid tactics have clear goals and valid strategies underlying them.

1) Photo-David J. Garrow. 2) Newsday photo by Jim Cummins-Civil rights protesters at a Brooklyn subway station (P. 50 NS)