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Bush League, or Bus League?

We know on which side of the barricades MLK would have stood
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By [David J. Garrow](#)

Martin Luther King Jr. always appreciated the importance of city buses. Remember that it was segregated bus seating in Montgomery, Ala., that first catapulted King to national fame in 1955-56 as the primary spokesperson for that black community's courageously successful bus boycott.

So King would have appreciated the irony when Atlanta police and the U.S. Secret Service deployed five MARTA buses last week to keep a vocal crowd of perhaps 1,000 protesters from disrupting President George W. Bush's quick and hurried visit to King's tomb. Indeed the irony was exquisitely rich: using the buses to keep primarily African-American civil rights proponents *away* from King's human remains so that President Bush, in the lonely company of King's widow and sister, Coretta Scott King and Christine King Farris, could achieve his quickie photo-op wreath-laying on what would have been King's 75th birthday.

The King sisters-in-law may have had little choice once Bush, or White House political guru Karl Rove, decided that a little presidential party-crashing could profitably be piggy-backed on to a \$2,000-a-person Republican fundraising dinner that Bush already was scheduled to address that evening at the Georgia World Congress Center.

It's not that the White House has any dreams of winning significant black voter support for a president whose civil rights and economic policies are far from progressive, but the TV footage and newspaper photographs of Bush's wreath-laying are no doubt highly reassuring to thousands of white voters who prefer to see their president as a proponent, and not an opponent, of racial justice.

"It was a no-win situation for the King family," says Tom Houck, a longtime family defender who worked for the Kings when "Doc" himself was still alive. Neither of the sisters-in-law voiced any public criticism of the president's self-invited visit, but Houck makes exactly the point that any savvy student of King's life will immediately endorse: "If Martin could have jumped out of that crypt, he would have been on the other side of those buses," arm-in-arm with the protesters. Amen.

But this isn't the first time that King's legacy has been hijacked for petty partisan advantage, and it certainly will not be the last. Hijacking is an annual danger, thanks in part to the King federal holiday, which encourages celebrations of the least controversial aspects of King's message. Thus "I Have a Dream" is quoted hundreds and hundreds of times, while little emphasis is placed upon the most relevant parts of King's legacy, such as his toughly worded denunciations of American overseas militarism and his explicit championing of redistributive, democratic socialist economic policies.

Democratic presidential candidates Dennis Kucinich and Howard Dean may give voice to what would be King's present-day sentiments about the war in Iraq and Bush administration foreign policy, but none of this year's candidates offer even the palest imitation of the economic change agenda King preached during his last two years of life.

Yet George Bush's self-interested party-crashing distracted attention from a far more surprising scene that took place at that \$2,000-a-person evening fundraiser. Maybe it's not big news that Georgia's faux-Democrat U.S. Senator, Zell Miller, was there to heartily endorse the president's re-election, or that former U.S. Attorney General Griffin Bell, who served during the presidency of Jimmy Carter, also embraced Bush.

But almost a dozen ostensibly Democratic members of the state House of Representatives also appeared at the Republican fundraiser to endorse the president's re-election. Yet the only protests their appearance engendered came from Republican legislators unhappy that the disloyal Democrats got their pictures taken with George W. without having to pony up the bucks that were mandatory for all uncloseted Republicans. Mike Snow, a political chameleon from Chickamauga, has boasted that he intends to use his presidential grab-n-grin to deflect any Republican challenger -- that ought to encourage further Republican bickering.

The day's biggest surprise -- except it's not as big a surprise as you may think -- was the presence of former Atlanta mayor and former King aide Andrew Young at the Bush fundraising dinner. Asked about his attendance, Young boasted to a reporter: "I've had as much access to this president as I've had to any president." Really? If that's the truth, Young may be telling us more than he intended about just how little influence he had as President Jimmy Carter's first ambassador to the United Nations.

Young may well have overseas business deals for which he wants the president's acquiescence or assistance, and let's not forget that he's not the first former King assistant to get in bed with conservative Republicans: the late Ralph Abernathy, the late Hosea Williams, and James Bevel all did the same years ago.

But Young's behavior underscores the saddest aspect of the two King birthday scenes. Which should upset us the most: a Republican politician acting like a Republican politician, or a bevy of ostensible Democrats, plus one of King's closest intimates, eagerly embracing George W. Bush?

Indeed, if the White House had just planned ahead, those five MARTA buses could have been filled with Democrats for Bush. Then Martin Luther King Jr. would *really* have enjoyed jumping up and joining the protest!

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