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A DREAM DEFERRED?
25 YEARS AFTER HIS DEATH, MARTIN LUTHER KING'S VISION REMAINS
UNFULFILLED

By David J. Garrow

Twenty-five years after his assassination, the militant political legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. is often forgotten. Simultaneously, King's historical image is increasingly distorted by the popular misconception that he was primarily a philosophical "dreamer" rather than a realistic and often courageous dissident.

King's true legacy is not the 1963 March on Washington and his grandly optimistic "I Have a Dream" speech; it is instead his 1968 plan for a massively disruptive but resolutely nonviolent "Poor People's Campaign" aimed at the nation's capital, a protest campaign that came to pass only in a muted and disjointed form after his death.

Some of the distortion of King's popular image is a direct result of how disproportionately he is presented nowadays as a gifted and sanguine speechmaker whose life ought to be viewed through the prism of his "Dream." King had used the "I Have a Dream" phrase several times before his justly-famous oration, but on numerous occasions in later years, in speeches that are hardly ever featured in present-day video clips, King invoked the famous phrase only to emphasize how the "dream" he had had in Washington had "turned into a nightmare."

Both the dilution of King's legacy and the misrepresentation of his image are also in part due to the stature accorded his birthday, now a national holiday. Making King an object of official celebration inescapably leads to at least some smoothing of edges and tempering of substance that otherwise would irritate and challenge those Americans who are just as eager to endorse "I Have a Dream" as they are to reject any "Poor People's Campaign."

But another facet of King's erroneous present-day image as a milquetoast moderate, particularly among young people, is beyond doubt directly tied to the greatly increased prominence of Malcolm X. Even before the media boomlet that accompanied Spike Lee's movie last fall, popular appreciation of Malcolm had expanded well beyond anything that existed in the first two decades after his death in 1965. Even if young people's substantive understanding of Malcolm's message is oftentimes embarrassingly faulty or nonexistent, among youthful Americans of all races the rise of Malcolm has vastly magnified the mistaken stereotype that "Malcolm and Martin" were bipolar opposites.

Far too many people presume that if Malcolm personified unyielding tenacity and determination, King, as his supposed opposite, was no doubt some sort of vainglorious compromiser who spent more time socializing with the Kennedys than fighting for social change. Hardly anything could be further from the truth, for while Malcolm's courageous self-transformation is deserving of far more serious attention and study than it has yet received, King was as selflessly dedicated and utterly principled a public figure as the United States has seen in this century.

Perhaps King's most remarkable characteristic was how he became a nationally and then internationally famous figure without ever having any egotistical desire to promote himself onto the public stage, as is otherwise the case with virtually every luminary in contemporary America. Drafted by his colleagues in Montgomery, Ala., in 1955 to serve as the principal spokesperson for the black community's boycott of municipal buses, King was far from eager to be any sort of "leader," and only a deeply spiritual sense of obligation convinced him that he could not refuse this call.

King's resolutely selfless orientation gave his leadership both a public integrity and a private humility that are rare, if not wholly unique, in recent US history. Perhaps the greatest irony produced by the fact of there being hundreds upon hundreds of King's ostensibly private telephone conversations preserved for history thanks to the FBI's indecently intrusive electronic surveillance -- and released through the safeguards of the Freedom of Information Act -- is that one comes away from a review of King's most unguarded moments with a distinctly heightened rather than diminished regard for the man. Time and again, the transcripts show King as exceptionally demanding of himself and an overly harsh judge of his own actions. How many other public figures, lacking only a J. Edgar Hoover -- or Gennifer Flowers -- to preserve their off-the-cuff comments for posterity, could hope to pass such an ultimate test of civic character?

King's remarkable political courage and integrity were just as dramatically visible on the public stage, however, as in his self-critical private conversations. Unlike almost every other public figure in the country then or now, King had no interest in assessing which position on which issue would be the most popular or remunerative for organizational fund-raising before he decided how and when to speak his mind.

Nowhere was this more starkly apparent than in King's early decision to speak out against US involvement in Vietnam at a time when President Johnson's war still had the support of most progressive Democrats.

Many liberal newspapers -- and even several "mainstream" civil rights organizations -- vociferously attacked King for devoting his attention to an issue that did not fall within the "black" bailiwick; and while King in private was deeply hurt by such criticism, he had decided to confront the Vietnam issue knowing full well that just such a reaction would ensue.

"Leadership" to King did not mean tailoring one's comments to fit the most recent public opinion poll or shifting one's positions to win greater acclaim or support. King realized, too, that real leadership did not simply comprise issuing press releases and staging news conferences, and he was acutely aware that most real "leaders" of the Southern civil rights struggle -- unheralded people who performed the crucial task of encouraging others to stand up and take an active part in advancing their own lives and communities -- got none of the public attention and awards that flowed to King and a very few others.

King understood that in our culture of publicity, the recognition of an individual symbolic figure such as he was inevitable and essential to the movement's popular success, but he always sought to emphasize, as in his Nobel Peace Prize lecture, that he accepted such applause and honors

only as a "trustee" on behalf of the thousands of unsung people whose contributions and aspirations he sought to represent. King realized, better than many people at the time, and far better than some subsequent disciples, that the real essence of the movement was indeed the local activists in scores of generally unpublicized locales; and, in private, King was sometimes very self-conscious about the fact that he personally deserved only a very modest portion of all the praise and trophies that came his way.

King would welcome our new-found appreciation of Malcolm. Conversely, King would be intensely discomfited by a national holiday that sometimes seems to celebrate his persona more than the movement. He would rue how our culture of celebrity also has become more and more a culture of violence, and how economic inequality is even more pronounced 25 years after his death than in 1968.

King also would rue his legacy being too often shorn of his later nonviolent radicalism, and the celebration of his image by people who proffered him and the movement no support when he was alive. But King would not worry about any decline in his reputation or fame, for he would greatly welcome increased credit and appreciation for those whom the media and history habitually overlook. If in the next 25 years, Martin Luther King Jr.'s individual image gradually continues to recede, King himself would be happy rather than sad, for personal fame and credit were not something he sought or welcomed in 1955 -- or 1968.

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