

A Shrinking Legacy

The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. deserves better from popular culture and his own family

By David J. Garrow

Twenty-nine years after the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, his authentic **legacy** stands in danger of receding further and further from public view. Popular acclaim for Malcolm X, whose views are often wrongly thought of as antithetical to King's, has generated an alternative symbol of aggressive black protest. In addition, scholarly studies of the black freedom struggle increasingly focus on the previously unheralded sacrifices of little-known local activists all across the South, rather than on the leadership contributions made by famous individuals such as King. Lastly, the ongoing behavior of the King family, and especially the recent championing of King's assassin, James Earl Ray, by King's son Dexter threatens to bring greater and greater embarrassment to King's name.

The re-emergence of Malcolm X as an important historical figure should not threaten King's **legacy**. Malcolm and King were allies in the same struggle, and any attentive student of King's life ought to know that King's aggressive commitment to the cause of black freedom was no less intense than Malcolm's.

Younger people in particular may presume that Malcolm X, who was killed by a Nation of Islam murder squad in February 1965, was a "tougher" freedom fighter than King. Wrong. King's courage in the face of physical assaults, nonstop death threats and horrible harassment by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI was resolute and unceasing. Time and again, from Montgomery in 1956 to Memphis in 1968, King selflessly risked his life in service to others.

Especially in the final years of his life, King preached a message of economic justice and international nonviolence that many Americans found threatening, if not subversive. Those facets of King's **legacy** remain just as politically relevant as they were in 1968. Paradoxically, the national celebration of King's birthday as a federal holiday imperils the most challenging parts of King's **legacy**. With even the most conservative politicians seeking to embrace some portion of King's teachings ("I have a dream"), celebrations revolve around the most innocuous and unobjectionable of King's principles rather than those that made him an outspoken critic of American foreign policy and a self-professed democratic socialist.

Within the scholarly world, most historians believe that more than enough has been published about King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Instead, scholarly energies are increasingly being channeled toward recognizing the accomplishments of grass-roots activists. The contributions of young people and especially women are drawing fresh attention, and without fail the most important

"movement" books of the past few years focus on previously unrenowned regional stories ---volumes such as Charles Payne's "I've Got the Light of Freedom" (1995), on movement organizing in the Mississippi Delta, and David Cecelski's "Along Freedom Road" (1994), on eastern North Carolina.

Lastly, anyone who follows news reports knows how much damaging attention has been drawn to King's **legacy** by his surviving relatives. First there was the King estate's multimillion-dollar publishing "deal" with Time Warner Inc. to exploit the commercial value of King's writings.

The King estate already had sued USA Today and CBS News for using the "I Have a Dream" speech without paying a fee, but the Time Warner announcement seemed especially incongruous in light of how the estate fails to sustain the family-operated King Center. For more than two years the center's priceless collections of movement documents have been closed to researchers and students. The family's interest in maximizing the availability of King's works thus seems limited to those opportunities that offer a profit.

Avarice is the exact opposite of King's own utter selflessness, but family spokesman Dexter King stressed to The Wall Street Journal several weeks ago that "We're not in the civil rights, protection-of-rights business." If that's not an abandonment of King's **legacy**, what is?

The answer, unfortunately, is Dexter King's even more recent championing of the innocence of convicted King assassin James Earl Ray. Eighteen years ago the House Select Committee on Assassinations documented Ray's guilt beyond any shadow of doubt while also demonstrating the great likelihood that Ray shot King on behalf of a white racist conspiracy. The committee asserted that Ray may have had assistance from one or more of his relatives and detailed how Ray and two of his brothers at different times after King's killing had as their lawyer one of the South's most notorious white racists, convicted Birmingham church bomber J.B. Stoner.

Thursday on NBC's "Today" show, Dexter King went himself one better by declaring not only that Ray is innocent, but also that he's not a racist. His proof? Ray's not a Southerner, since he was born in Illinois. Maybe Dexter King doesn't know who J.B. Stoner is, but the idea that there is an absence of racism in Illinois is ludicrous.

In 1966, the SCLC made a valiant effort to tackle racial discrimination in the urban North. The leader of that effort said he'd "never seen anything so hostile and so hateful" as the racism of Chicago. Maybe Dexter King doesn't know who that really was, either. It was his father.

Martin Luther King's real **legacy** is in danger, indeed.

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