

Martin Luther King, Jr. In His Own Words

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January 17, 2005 marks the nation's annual reminder that Martin Luther King, Jr. must be simultaneously recognized and completely ignored. That is, many gather to commemorate a man whose legacy is all but buried beneath a mountain of empty rhetoric where a mythical history is created to support conventional, albeit equally contrived, myths of "progress." King has to be among the most known and least understood figures in world history considering the enormity of his legend and the emptiness with which that legend is met. In one small attempt to address this reality here are some excerpts from King himself. It is believed that once made clear King's thought will direct us toward more substantive discussion and action. Considering the 2004 State of the Dream Report¹ which details the economic, social and political backwards slide African America has taken since his assassination² King's words continue to strike at the core issues confronting this nation and the world.

The primary sources for the following are:

1. King, Jr. Martin Luther (1966). King's Speech to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Speech delivered to the leadership of the SCLC on November 14, 1966.
2. King, Jr., Martin Luther (1967). Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos Or Community? New York: Bantam Books.

There are still three basic evils in America: the evil of racism, the evil of excessive materialism, the evil of militarism. And we must come to see, and we must not be intimidated at this point, that these are inseparable triplets (1966).

... even though we gained legislative and judicial victories during{the pre- 1965 Voting Rights Act} period, that rectified long-standing evils, caste structures, and long-standing experiences that Negroes confronted in the South, these legislative and judicial victories did very little to improve the lot of the millions of Negroes in the teeming ghettos of the North... These victories did very little to penetrate the lower depths of Negro deprivation, particularly in the North... while this period {the pre-1965 Voting Rights Act period} represented a frontal attack on the doctrine of white supremacy it did not defeat the monster of racism (1966).

¹ Muhammad, D. et al. (2004). State of the Dream 2004: Enduring Disparities in Black and White. Boston: United For A Fair Economy.

² An assassination which is equally misunderstood considering few are clear on the positions taken by King or what those positions represented to those in power. This leads to a confusion as to why he would be a target of and threat to the most powerful segments of "our" society.

For the vast majority of white Americans, the past decade – the first phase – had been a struggle to treat the Negro with a degree of decency, not of equality. White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation or all form of discrimination. The outraged white citizen had been sincere when he snatched the whips from the Southern sheriffs and forbade them more cruelties. But when this was to a degree accomplished, the emotions that had momentarily inflamed him melted away. White Americans left the Negro on the ground and in devastating numbers walked off with the aggressor. It appeared that the white segregationist and the ordinary white citizen had more in common with one another than either had with the Negro (1967, p. 4).

Negroes have proceeded from a premise that equality means what is says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America in 1967, including many persons of goodwill, proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression for improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap – essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it. Most of the abrasions between Negroes and white liberals arose from this fact (1967, p.9).

Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to re-educate themselves out of their racial ignorance (1967, p.11).

... the so-called white backlash is white reaction to questions being raised about the Civil Rights Movement which demand a restructuring of the architecture of American society... When you look at it, {integrating public places} did not cost the nation one penny. It didn't cost business men one penny. In fact, it helped business men out. Even the right to vote didn't cost the nation anything to guarantee, or at least seek to guarantee, the right to vote... Now what I want you to see is that we are now making demands that will cost the nation something. You can't talk about solving the economic problem of the Negro without talking about billions of dollars. You can't talk about ending slums without first saying profit must be taken out of slums. You {are} really tampering and getting on dangerous ground because you are messing with folk then. You are messing with Wall Street. You are messing with captains of industry... in other words, we are dealing with class issues, that is the problem (1966).

I am always amazed when I go {to Scandinavia and Sweden}, they don't have any poverty. No unemployment, nobody needing health services can't get them. They don't have slums. The question comes to us, why? It is because Scandinavia has grappled with the problem for more equitable distribution of wealth. Now this means that we are treading again in very difficult waters, because it really means that we are saying that something is wrong with the economic system of our nation. That is what it means, really. It means that something is wrong with capitalism... We must develop programs that will drive the nation to the realization of the need for a guaranteed annual income (1966).

Since racism is based on the dogma “that the hope of civilization depends upon eliminating some races and keeping others pure,” its ultimate logic is genocide. Hitler, in his mad and ruthless attempt to exterminate the Jews, carries the logic of racism to its ultimate tragic conclusions. While America has not literally sought to eliminate the Negro in his final sense, it has, through the system of segregation, substituted a subtle reduction of life by means of deprivation... If a man asserts that another man, because of his race, is not good enough to have a job equal to his, or to eat at a lunch counter next to him, or to have access to certain hotels, or to attend school with him, or to live next door to him, he is by implication affirming that that man does not deserve to exist. He does not deserve to exist because his existence is corrupt and defective (1967, p.82). (Consider this previous statement with one made more recently by legal scholar Derrick Bell: “If the nation’s policies towards blacks were revised to require weekly, random round-ups of several hundred blacks who were then taken to a secluded place and shot, that policy would be more dramatic, but hardly different in result, than the policies now in effect, which most of us feel powerless to change.” Quoted from: Strangers and Neighbors: Relations between Blacks and Jews in the United States. Ed. Maurine Adams, et al. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, p. 806).

The virtue of patience will become a vice if it accepts so leisurely an approach to social change (1967, p. 103).

The white liberal must rid himself of the notion that there can be a tensionless transition from the old order of injustice to the new order to justice... It is important for the liberal to see that the oppressed person who agitates for his rights is not the creator of tension... We did not cause the cancer; we merely exposed it (1967, pp.106-107).

The limited degree of Negro anti-Semitism is substantially a Northern ghetto phenomenon; it virtually does not exist in the South. The urban Negro has a special and unique relationship to Jews... (1967, p.108).

In this way the system conspires to perpetuate inferior status and to prepare the Negro for those tasks that no one else wants, hence creating a mass of unskilled, cheap labor for the society at large... then society develops the myth of inferiority to give credence to its lifelong patterns of exploitation, which can only be defined as our system of slavery in the twentieth century ... No Negro escapes this cycle of modern slavery (1967, pp.136, 141).

...the Negro must take {sic} to work passionately for group identity. This does not mean group isolation or group exclusivity. It means the kind of group consciousness that Negroes need in order to participate more meaningfully at all levels of the life of our nation... There are already structured forces in the Negro community that can serve as the basis for building a powerful united front – the Negro church, the Negro press, the Negro fraternities and sororities, and Negro professional associations. We must admit that these forces have never given their full resources to the cause of Negro liberation (1967, p. 147).

If I can close by using a little analogy here. We brought the football of Civil Rights through gains in public accommodations, and the right to vote to about the 50 yard line. And now we are moving into the opposition's territory... we started out on this freedom flight, pilots, honestly saying that we were going to get there in just a few months and years – that things were changing, that progress was being made. And along the way as we started we had marvelous tail winds. After all, we had the Supreme Court's decision behind us. We had the magnificent unity of the Negro in Montgomery, Alabama to let us know that we could do it ourselves. We had the glorious days of the sit-in movement, all of this behind us, and we had a great tail wind. But we got up along the way and discovered that all of a sudden a storm developed. We ran into unexpected turbulence, and unexpected tail winds. And if I can use this analogy on end; I would say that it means that we must readjust our schedule and recognize that we have a long, hard struggle. And we must honestly let the people know how difficult it is. We must honestly let ourselves know that we do not have days {ahead} that can be interpreted as flowery beds of ease.

Lastly, it is important to note –at these times of commemoration – that King concluded his 1967 book with an Appendix dedicated to “Programs and Prospects.” In this section he outlines ideas for action for change in the areas of education, employment, housing and more. Our commemorative services need to include these ideas, preferably in the form of workshops, in order to properly honor the man, and more importantly, the ideals for which he gave his life.