

Coretta Was More Than Just Dr. King's Wife



By: Earl Ofari
Hutchinson
—Guest Columnist—

"I certainly appreciate your concern, and I would appreciate anything that you can do to help." That was the dignified, but worried, request for help in 1959 that Coretta Scott King made in a phone conversation with then Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy. Her husband, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been sentenced to four months of hard labor at Georgia's notorious Reidsville State Prison after being arrested on a trumped-up traffic warrant and for violating probation. The second charge stemmed from

Dr. King's earlier arrest at a sit-in demonstration.

Coretta was deeply pained that Dr. King might not make it out of Reidsville alive. There had been rumors of foul play planned against him. During the tense days of his imprisonment, Coretta frantically worked the phones trying to get any help she could for his release. At the time, Pres. Kennedy was locked in a tight White House race with Republican Vice President Richard Nixon. Pres. Kennedy made the call partly out of sincere concern for Dr. King and partly with an eye on the Black vote.

Coretta's efforts paid off for Dr. King, and Pres. Kennedy, and sunk Mr. Nixon. The Democrats turned the call into a public relations coup. Pres. Kennedy's action was credited with tipping large numbers of Blacks toward the Democrats, and Mr. Nixon, the early odds-on favorite to win the presidency, lost by a narrow margin. Dr. King was soon released unharmed and the Civil Rights Movement gained greater steam and vigor in the next couple of years. Coretta's dogged determination to save her husband energized the civil rights fight and changed the course of a presidential election and race relations in America.

It was fitting that Pres. Kennedy's life-affirming and politically profound phone call was made to Coretta. In December 1955, she and Dr. King anxiously kept watch at the front window of their home in Montgomery, AL., to make sure that there were no Black riders on the buses. She stood, walked and cheered arm in arm with him at

countless civil rights marches, demonstrations and rallies. She endured his long absences and the gossip rumors of his infidelities, and kept the family and the marriage together.

That meant great personal sacrifice. For years, the King family lived in what charitably could be described as a ramshackle house. As his family grew in size, friends and family members begged him to move to a larger house. Dr. King resisted.

An exasperated Coretta fired back at the King critics that he "felt that it was inconsistent with his philosophy" to own property. Eventually, Dr. King gave in and paid the grand sum of \$10,000 for a bigger home. But he continued to complain that the house was "too big" and "elegant." King critics delighted in taking pot shots at him for his shun of personal wealth, but Coretta's greatest concern remained in fulfilling Dr. King's dream, and that did not include fattening their bank account.

In the decade after his murder, Coretta did not fade from the scene. She continued to storm the barricades against racial injustice, economic inequality, military adventurism and against hate crimes and violence. She wrote countless letters, gave speeches and participated in direct action campaigns. She continued to fiercely protect Dr. King's legacy from the opportunists that twisted and sullied his words and name.

Coretta never bought the official line that Dr. King was gunned down by lone assassin James Earl Ray. When Ray demanded a new trial, Coretta went to bat for him and testified in court that Mr. Ray should get another trial. Her concern was not with him but, as she put it, "to determine the truth" about Dr. King's assassination. Though there is no evidence of a government plot to kill him, Coretta still wanted to put the FBI and the government on trial for its decades-long illegal stealth-war of harassment, surveillance, intimidation and poison pen letters against Dr. King and other civil rights leaders.

The friction over the affairs of the King Center that cropped up in recent days will not alter the judgment of history about Coretta. She and Dr. King shared the same relentless passion and vision that helped permanently transform American society and enrich the lives of millions of Americans of all races. She was more than just Dr. King's wife.

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