

Protecting the Legacy of Dr. Martin L. King

As the birthday of Martin Luther King approaches and the nation prepares to celebrate the national holiday in his honor, once again the debate about how to appropriately remember Dr. King is heating up.

From my vantage point the celebration has become enveloped in so much ritual and pomp and circumstance that there is almost the illusion that the need for civil rights agitation and human right struggles impasse. The rhetorical ring of "I Have a Dream" reverberates monotonously throughout the nation as if to consciously mask the nightmare that exists for millions of Afro-Americans and poor people in this country.

It is as if the King Holiday has become an annual occasion to coopt

the real meaning of the life and legacy of Martin Luther King. It has almost become a harmless

affirmation of the virtues of the American dream and the American system.

The American system may indeed have its virtues, but Martin Luther King used the freedom of speech, the right to peaceful assembly, the right to vote and the right to petition the government to confront unjust laws and hypocritical system which provided sanction for racism, segregation, discrimination, racial oppression and violence.

In the spirit of natural rights and the Declaration of Independence, Martin Luther King used non-violent direct action to revolt against and call into question an unjust government. Civil disobedience was used as a weapon to transform a fatally flawed system, so that the idea of an American dream might have some prospect of being realized.

As he neared the end of his life, Dr. King still had his dream, our dream, but he was well aware that the dream was far from being fulfilled. When Dr. King journeyed to Memphis, he and his aides in the Southern Christian Leadership

Conference were planning the most massive direct action mobilization ever, the Poor People's Campaign. In 1963, Dr. King delivered his renowned "I Have a Dream" speech. By 1968 the "promissory capitalist political economy into question. His was an urgent appeal to cherish people over profit and human and spiritual values over property rights and materialism.

Since Martin Luther King was assassinated, it seems that everything has changed, yet in reality nothing has changed. As we are half way through the decade of the 90s, the rich in America are getting richer while the poor are getting poorer.

In America the capital of capitalism, the homeless and hungry roam the streets, our inner cities are in decay and drugs are overwhelming

entire neighborhoods. And despite the apparent progress of a few Afro-Americans, misery still abounds among the masses. Afro-Americans and people of good will still

need to use what Martin called moral force to challenge this nation to change.

Beyond the King Holiday and beyond the dream, we need a living, acting Martin Luther King maintain a renewed assault on racism, racial violence, militarism and poverty. The King Holiday must inspire us to act, to finish the unfinished business. It must not lull us to sleep or have us celebrate into complacency.

There is always the danger that the real legacy of Dr. King's life will be lost and that his image and symbol will be manipulated and used as an instrument of cooperation and pacification. It is our sacred duty to protect and live our the real legacy of Martin Luther King.

(Ron Daniels served as the director of the National Rainbow Coalition and as the deputy campaign manager for the Rev. Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign in 1988. He is now president of the Institute for Community Organization and Development in Youngstown, Ohio.)

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Martin Luther King Jr. Day January 15, 1996

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