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Redefining MLK's legacy diminishes him

Steve Bakke  January 26, 2022



1968 was an eventful year in my life, loaded with important events, dramatic life changes, and terrible national tragedies. I graduated from college that year, was married, bought a convertible, reported to my first professional job, and was drafted into the Army.

There was violence at the 1968 Democrat National Convention in Chicago, the bloody Tet Offensive was launched by the North Vietnam army and the Viet Cong, and almost 17,000 U.S. lives were lost in Viet Nam. And in the springtime of 1968, both Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. were murdered. I'm sure young people today think of 2020-2021 as defining national chaos for the United States – but it certainly did not.

Something was different this year as complex “2022-type” emotions mixed with growing commentary surrounding King's recent birthday commemoration. He would have been 93 on January 15th.

One thing that's different is the mention of King's name in the current discussion assigning Jim Crow status to the political election reform debate. It was King who made us see how Jim Crow voting restrictions, the KKK, segregated lunch counters and other racist practices were wrong. To equate those issues to voter ID requirements, reasonable limits on early voting, and safeguards on mail-in balloting is foolish.

It's absurd to claim that the horrors King faced and fought against in 1963 are anything like the present situation. His dream was about people like me getting out of the way of personal achievement for all races. His dream was about minimizing differences, the opposite of today's identity politics.

King's successful leadership came from an ability to communicate his social justice goals with all races. He had enemies, and couldn't convince all white citizens to support him, but most respected his methods and there was a measure of popular sympathy for his message.

I lived through the “years of King.” Yet, leftists have frequently, directly, and personally, scolded me for daring to claim appreciation for King. Contrary to what some radicals think,

conservatives don't support him simply because his message was modest or limited. It was profound and transformational.

King was frustrated by things he hadn't accomplished, and he expressed those feelings repeatedly. But he understood his foe was rabid segregationists that wouldn't soon be vanquished. Anyone who read his last book "Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?" knows social justice was clearly his goal and vision for the future. He clearly expressed his dissatisfaction as well as his vision.

In his letter from the Birmingham jail, he told us of the necessary tension for resolving these issues. He scolded us "lukewarm white supporters" and told us of his disappointment in us. And his later writings and comments expressed an impatience and frustration with people like me, but he also bemoaned the more radical of his time that were likewise impatient and distancing themselves from him.

Before his death he spoke sadly of his disappointments, and people like me must take some blame for that. But the day before his death he reassured us by saying that "only when it is dark enough can you see the stars," and he proclaimed that he had "seen the promised land."

I remember King speaking eloquently in a way that could motivate his minority constituency, as well as help white America understand his methods and goals. He had the same messages for black and white, but had the unique ability to send his message, in the right way, to whatever audience he was facing in that moment.

King didn't make modest requests. He pushed for big changes, but he never supported warfare between whites and blacks. He proclaimed we should be dissatisfied until no one would shout white power or black power and people would shout out God's power and human power. He wouldn't support the lawlessness of 2020-2021.

To associate King's name with identity politics of today is an affront to all he stood for. And to weaponize his legacy in support of irresponsibly rolling back election integrity is to denigrate that legacy. Identity politics wouldn't be his choice because it foments division. He chose deemphasizing race which defuses those same emotions.

Redefining King's legacy will only diminish him.