

Martin Luther King: “Now That He is Safely Dead”, What Should be Done?

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*Now that he is safely dead let us praise him,
build monuments to his glory,
sing hosannas to his name.*

*Dead men make such convenient heroes.
They cannot rise to challenge the images
we would fashion from their lives.*

*And besides,
it is easier to build monuments
than to make a better world.,” — Carl Wendell Hines*

“Now That He Is Safely Dead” is the poignant poem that was written by black poet/musician Carl Wendell Hines soon after Malcolm X’s assassination in 1965. The poem has been appropriately – and perhaps more meaningfully – associated with the murder of Martin Luther King and King’s legacy of nonviolent struggle for black liberation, freedom, equality, voting rights, job opportunities, economic justice and the pursuit of happiness.

Ignoring Dr. King’s governing principle of unrelenting struggle against injustice with gospel-inspired, non-homicidal, resistance to evil, America has – since his murder – posthumously awarded him a national holiday, a statue in DC and frequent references to the moving “I Have A Dream” speech from 1963. And in the process, a major point of his mission has been lost.

The establishment, with the help of the deeply ingrained, “institutional” white racism, has managed to keep in check the demands for real reforms for blacks and other minorities by repeatedly focusing on the very worthy Dream speech rather than on King’s more radical messages. One can sense the wink-wink, nod-nod and the tip of the politician’s hat towards lady justice while continuing to delay and deny justice for yet another legislative and Supreme Court session. The congenial Martin Luther King of 1963 is easier to deal with than the fire-breathing, more militant, antiwar King of 1968 who knew he didn’t have all that much time left to teach and preach and inspire.

Hosannas have been dutifully sung and another MLK Day has safely passed – and we are facing a hard right-wing, militarist Congress that is beholden to Wall Street war profiteers and the racist South that are working hard to reverse the gains that King fought and died for.

Peace and justice-seekers who have read Hines’ poem, automatically apply the sentiment to many of the other assassinated liberal and progressive whistle-blowers through history who

have been champions of the down-trodden, including this short list: Jesus of Nazareth, Abraham Lincoln, Mohandas Gandhi, John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Robert Kennedy and Paul Wellstone. If one was to include the names of the multitude of other courageous antifascists who have been “suicided”, imprisoned, marginalized, made mentally ill, drugged up or otherwise silenced, the list would be thousands of names longer.

Jesus of Nazareth was King’s main mentor and one of the early whistle-blowing tellers of unwelcome truths that threatened the status quo (and the comfort level of the powerful ruling elites of his time) by advocating nonviolent revolution in the universal struggle to relieve human suffering.

King’s ministry as a pastor and his tactics as a civil rights leader were both based on the radical gospel teachings of the Golden Rule and the unconditional love of friend and enemy – although King himself realized that the essence of Jesus’ teachings (in the Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5, 6 and 7]) were soon abandoned when Christianity was co-opted by the Roman Empire and made the state religion. The original form of the Christianity of the first century barely survives today in a few small, often discredited, remnants.

King was an easily recognizable echo of the original voice of Jesus, and he had the courage to preach those dangerous truths that threatened the military power of his nation. Dr. King knew all about the power and practicality of the power of love, but he also knew what usually happened to the prophets who preached it, especially in violent, racist, militarized societies like the United States

Purging the Prophets

Both ancient and modern powers-that-be recognize dangerous whistle-blowers when they see them, and they usually don’t waste much time making contingency plans for the “silencing”. That is the function of the national security apparatus of all states and, in King’s era, it was a major function of J. Edgar Hoover, the racist FBI head who was a sworn enemy of King and all that he stood for.

Usually whistle-blowing prophets are ignored early on, but then, if the rabble-rouser doesn’t go away, he is more actively opposed and eventually brought down, by hook or by crook.

German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer proclaimed that all great truths are dealt with in three ways: firstly they are ignored, secondly, they are violently opposed and thirdly they are accepted as self-evident.

In our more complicated era where bullies, paid informers, spies, lobbyists, the mass media, megacorporations and politicians use hidden persuasion (propaganda), fear and gun violence to silence the truth-tellers, the first two parts of Schopenhauer’s dictum still hold. But these days there are more sophisticated ways to discredit or silence the prophets and whistle-blowers seem to be delaying the third part. The enemies of truth seem to have perfected the use of dirty tricks, smear campaigns, rumor-mongering, “honey traps”, psy-ops, intimidation, infiltration of the prophet’s movement by agents provocateur, death (or job loss) threats to the whistle-blower (or his family)] the use of right-wing think tanks to spread disinformation and even the arranging of murders that look like accidents or suicides.

A Vocation of Agony

And so it goes. Being a prophet is hazardous duty. King called it “a vocation of agony”.

Whistle-blowers such as King know very well that they are going to pay a heavy price for their refusal to bow down to authority. They know that they will have to endure character assassination and eventually physical assassination if they don’t shut up.

“I Have a Dream” vs “Beyond Vietnam”: A World of Difference

Over the decades we Americans have been indoctrinated in the belief that the essence of King was his “I Have A Dream” speech. The ruling elites allow the repeated airing of that worthy speech but have successfully kept hidden his more powerful anti-war “Beyond Vietnam” speech. They have managed to virtually erase from the history of the civil rights movement the antiwar activism of King’s maturing years and the unshakable commitment to gospel nonviolence that he had had from the beginning.

King’s commitment that “black lives matter” came out of his understanding of the life, mission and gospel ethics of what most Americans were briefly exposed to in Sunday School. King’s commitment to nonviolent societal transformation mirrored the politics, theology and the ethics of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount.

A testament to the deep truth of King’s message and the likelihood of the success of King’s nonviolent tactics is the fact that his institutional enemies had to conspire to assassinate him in order to stop the movement.

And it was King’s willingness to come out against the dirty war in Vietnam in his “Beyond Vietnam” speech that unleashed the final assassination plot (by hired assassins other than the patsy James Earl Ray) in order to permanently silence him (or so they thought) with a single bullet to the head exactly one year to the day after that speech.. (For the documentation proving the innocence of Ray,listen to Dr William Pepper’s speech at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=24-ALnvr4kM> or read Pepper’s book – “An Act of State” – that tells about the Memphis jury trial that exonerated Ray in 1999.)

“The Greatest Purveyor of Violence in the World Today is my Own Government”

William Pepper, in 1967 a free-lance journalist just back from Vietnam, met with King that year and told him the stories and showed him the photos he had taken that proved the truth about the alleged American war crimes, atrocities, torturing and murdering of innocent Vietnamese civilians in that war. King had wept with Pepper over the information; and thus began the new reality for King. He had struggled for months with what he knew was his calling to speak out against the atrocities that deceived American soldiers were perpetrating in Vietnam. Ultimately he realized that he had no choice but to exercise his duty to warn others about what his government had been up to in the fog of war.

He said:

“As I have walked among the desperate, rejected and angry young men, I have told them that Molotov cocktails and rifles would not solve their problems. I have tried to offer them my deepest compassion while maintaining my conviction that social change comes most meaningfully through nonviolent action. But, they asked, what about Vietnam? They asked if our own nation wasn’t using massive doses of violence to solve its problems, to bring about the changes it wanted. Their questions hit home, and I knew that I could never

again raise my voice against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today – my own government.”

King saw the connections between the financial, spiritual and psychological costs of participation in the human slaughter in Vietnam and the racial and economic violence that was preventing poor blacks from attaining justice in America. King knew a nation couldn't adequately fund both “guns and butter” (the notion that a nation can pay for war and simultaneously provide for its people's basic human needs simultaneously). They have to make a choice between the two, and America's politicians, as usual, easily made the choice, and they voted massive funds for the guns and a pittance for the butter.

“Justice Delayed is Justice Denied”

The funding was predictably going to go to the war and not the poverty and injustice. Pouring scarce resources into war-making automatically sabotages programs that provide impoverished, suffering people with the basic necessities of life.

President Johnson's “war on poverty” was lost because American war profiteers and warmongers chose to fight Johnson's war in Vietnam instead. King understood the incongruities and spoke out about them. He knew that the war in Vietnam trumped freedom for the oppressed back home especially if the uber-patriotic white racists and militarists who controlled Congress had anything to say about it.

Many historians believe that King's “Beyond Vietnam” speech was equivalent to the signing of his own death warrant. The war profiteers, the pro-war pseudo-patriots, the national security state apparatus, the weapons-industry-funded politicians and most of the others in positions of power at the time absolutely could not tolerate and antiwar activism that might interfere with the “golden goose” and “cash cow” that was the Vietnam War.

King was working for justice for all of humankind and definitely not for the ruling elites. King was not only concerned with the oppressed blacks here in America but, being an advocate of gospel nonviolence he felt obligated to speak out in defense of the defenseless Vietnamese women and children who were being indiscriminately driven from their homes and livelihood and starved, maimed, tortured, bombed and napalmed into homelessness and desperation.

King was likely unaware of the criminality of the massive USAF spraying of Monsanto's Agent Orange that poisoned forever the soil, water and unborn children of Vietnamese women but, given the fact that King still had an intact conscience, he had no choice but to speak up in opposition to all the varieties of death-dealing weapons that America was wielding all around the world, not just against the varieties of “lynchings” of his fellow blacks back home.

Approaching Spiritual Death

Racist oppressors and racist bullies (including both under-privileged, oppressed poor whites and over-privileged whites who rely on fear and intimidation to maintain their positions of power over poor blacks) naturally fear reprisals from their victims if and when they gain their freedom. But do the oppressors fear for their souls or the souls of their nation? Do they heed King's warning for America?

In his Beyond Vietnam speech, King proclaimed: “A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death.”

King pointed out the absurdity of the “guns and butter” myth (that a nation can invest time, mind and money on both simultaneously), and he accused those who quietly went along with the military’s legendary wasting of precious resources on state-sponsored terrorism as being guilty of committing crimes against humanity.

Harry Truman understood that reality when he said, “All through history it has been the nations that have given the most to the generals and the least to the people that have been the first to fall.

The elephant in the room

The elephant in the room that the power elite tries to hide (the naked emperor’s “new” clothes) is the state-sponsored violence that King spoke out against. It is the military spending that keeps justice from being delivered. Reversing poverty and racism will be impossible as long as the Pentagon continues to spend an unaffordable and bankrupting \$2,000,000,000 (\$2 billion) every day on war, weapons systems and militarism. Every program of social uplift – education, healthcare, good nutrition, safe drinking water, safe air to breathe, living wages, etc, etc) is made unaffordable when military spending is the nation’s top priority.

The spirit of Martin Luther King is not dead, if only we will listen to what he tried to tell us. We need to take his message seriously. The pacifist King accurately echoed what the pacifist Jesus commanded (not requested) his followers to do: “Put away the sword, for those who live by the sword will surely perish by the sword.”

America is doomed to continuing its spiritual starvation (despite America’s legendary obesity epidemic) if it doesn’t stop wasting so much money on inedible weapons and the training of those who are willing to kill those that are fingered as enemies by our political and military leaders. Without serious resistance to America’s unthinking willingness and eagerness to kill imagined enemies there will be no hope of achieving equality, economic sustainability, living wages and an end to racism.

We can’t afford to keep putting King’s message on hold.

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