

Martin Luther King: The Starless Midnight of Racism

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Global Research, January 18, 2021

Region: [USA](#)

Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.” – Martin Luther King

There was a man speaking on the radio this morning and it was a speech not often heard on public radio stations. The voice was both noble and articulate. It was soon apparent it was none other than Martin Luther King Jr. speaking in his calm, distinctive style telling a story about how he was stabbed by a woman and narrowly escaped death; a foreshadowing of what was soon to come. This was his last speech; the next day he was assassinated on April 4, 1968.

Robert F. Kennedy, upon hearing of the assassination gave an impromptu speech later that day in Indianapolis before a predominately black crowd. His remarks are often considered one of the greatest speeches ever given by an American politician. Kennedy said,

“What we need in the United States is not division; what we need in the United States is not hatred; what we need in the United States is not violence or lawlessness, but is love and wisdom, and compassion toward one another, and a feeling of justice towards those who still suffer within our country, whether they be white or whether they be black.”

These comments seem timely today, not only due to the ongoing racial tension but also while we watch two political parties squaring off in an alarming confrontation, threatening to tear the country to shreds.

In 1999 the King family filed a wrongful death lawsuit against restaurant owner Loyd Jowers and other “unknown conspirators” for the murder of Martin Luther King. Loyd Jowers claimed in an interview in 1993 that he had conspired with the mafia and the federal government to kill King. The family lawyer William F. Pepper, who was also the last attorney of alleged shooter James Earl Ray argued that Ray was not the shooter but was framed by the FBI, the CIA, the military, the Memphis police, and organized crime figures. “There is abundant evidence of a major high level conspiracy in the assassination of my husband, Martin Luther King, Jr.,” Coretta King said at a press conference in that same year.

History has revealed that the FBI under the direction of J. Edgar Hoover launched a relentless propaganda campaign against MLK that contributed to the results of a Gallup poll conducted in 1966, that revealed only 33% of Americans had positive feelings toward Dr. King. Hoover despised Martin Luther King, that much seems obvious, but the “why” is harder to ascertain: on the surface Hoover claimed King was a “threat to national security” due to his relationship with known-Communist and one of his closest advisers, Stanley David Levison.

MLK's son Dexter King gave a more lucid and perhaps philosophical understanding of his father's death: "It is not about who killed Martin Luther King Jr., my father. It is not necessarily about all of those details. It is about: *Why* was he killed? Because if you answer the why, you will understand the same things are still happening. Until we address that, we're all in trouble. Because if it could happen to him...if it can happen to this family, it can happen to anybody."

It is apparent that the establishment was threatened by Martin Luther King—J. Edgar Hoover made him an object of the FBI's COINTELPRO program from 1963 until his death. FBI agents recorded his extramarital liaisons and reported on them to government officials, and on one occasion mailed King a threatening anonymous letter that urged him to commit suicide. These recordings were also sent to pastors and even to his wife Coretta but all recipients refused to make the recordings public.

The unpleasant truth is that there is a thick scar of racism running across the underbelly of America that rises to the surface on occasion like a great beast rolling over. The Black Lives Matter movement that gained strength over the summer months of the past year is ample proof that the beast is still breathing but maybe, just maybe it is a dying beast, cornered and trapped in its final death throes. More than one commentator has suggested we are currently witnessing the downfall of the Republican party and its dubious choice of a president has only accelerated the accompanying fall of white supremacy.

The ancient Israelites were infamous for stoning their prophets and America seems to have gone down a similar path with a growing list of extra-judicial assassinations and incarcerations of their most outspoken critics; it is fair to say that Martin Luther King was a modern prophet. Though he is known as the leader of a movement in the United States to free African-Americans from racial segregation and discrimination, his captivating rhetoric elevated all human beings to a higher level. He spoke from a universal platform about what it means to be a human being in the face of tyranny. Martin Luther King Jr., at the age of 35 became the youngest winner of the Nobel Peace Prize and on accepting this award on December 10th of 1964 he said, "I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word."

Someday, somebody will need to explain why so many human beings are threatened by those advocating freedom, equality, peace and brotherhood. The awful truth is that some human beings don't really want freedom and equality; some seem to relish tyranny and find solace in the worship of tyrants. For the rest of us, the goal is the same every day: Fight the good fight and speak the healing words that will bring brotherhood and lasting peace to our troubled world. Happy Martin Luther King Jr. Day.

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