

The Left Forgets What Martin Luther King Stood For

This article is from the “Among Friends” section of the Church of God Big Sandy’s website, churchofgodbigandy.com. It was posted for the weekend of Jan. 23, 2021. Black civil-rights activist Robert Woodson (founder and president of the Woodson Center in Washington, D.C.) is the guest writer. (This article was posted at wsj.com on Jan. 17.)

By Robert L. Woodson

WASHINGTON, D.C.—As the nation celebrates the birth of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., the progressive left will again seize the moment to twist the story of black Americans’ struggle, to the detriment of those who suffered most in that struggle.

They’ll put all the attention on the oppressive conditions faced by black freedom fighters—what white racists did to them—rather than on their own spirit in fighting to gain equal rights under the law.

Ignoring achievement

Instead of celebrating blacks’ achievements and the progress made toward delivering on America’s promissory note, the left will transport yesterday’s real injustices into today’s false social-justice narrative, ignoring the principles that were so crucial to Dr. King.

History is full of inspiring examples of black people succeeding against the odds, including building their own schools, hotels, railroads and banking systems when doors were closed to them. According to the economist Thomas Sowell, “the poverty rate among blacks fell from 87 percent in 1940 to 47 percent by 1960.”

Cherished values

These accomplishments were made possible by a set of values cherished among the blacks of the time: self-determination, resiliency, personal virtue, honesty, honor and accountability. Dr. King understood that these values would be the bedrock for black success once true equality was won.

As early as 1953, he warned that “one of the most common tendencies of human nature is that of placing responsibility on some external agency for sins we have committed or mistakes we have made.”

Perpetual victims

Today the progressive left wants to ignore the achievements and pretend that blacks are perpetual victims of white racism. *The New York Times’s* “1619 Project” essay series is the latest salvo in this attack on America’s history and

founding—claiming “anti-black racism runs in the very DNA of this country.” This statement is an abomination of everything Dr. King stood for.

Further, the left’s disinterest in historical accuracy—as evinced in the *Time*’s dismissal of corrections sought by prominent historians—and its frequent perversion of blacks’ story will have grave consequences not only for blacks but the nation as a whole.

True to founders

In the sharp contrast to the claims of the “1619 Project”—which disparages the American Revolution and Declaration of Independence and insists America is hopelessly racist—Dr. King believed deeply in the need to remain true to the Founders’ vision—the “patriot dream that sees beyond the years.”

To him, that was the only avenue toward fulfilling America’s promise.

As he wrote in his 1963 “Letters From a Birmingham Jail”: “One day the South will know that when these disinherited children of God sat down at lunch counters, they were in reality standing up for what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judaeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom. Abused and scorned though we may be, our destiny is tied up with America’s destiny.”

Grievance-based identity

Dr. King, who sought full participation in America, would never have indulged today’s grievance-based identity politics—whose social-justice warriors use race as a battering ram against the country.

In fact, in “Letter From a Birmingham Jail” Dr. King explicitly warned against the type of groupthink that characterizes identity politics: “Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups tend to be more immoral than individuals.”

n Yesterday’s values prepared blacks to walk through the doors of opportunity opened to them through civil rights. Family, faith, character and moral behavior were all crucial to their victories.

n Today’s social-justice warriors trade on the currency of oppression, deriding the concept of personal responsibility and always blaming external forces. I can think of no better way to instill hopelessness and fear in a young person than to tell him he is a victim—powerless to change his circumstance.

Avoided excuses

During the civil-rights movement blacks never permitted oppression to define who we were. Instead we cultivated moral competence, enterprise and thrift, and viewed oppression as a stumbling block—not an excuse.

Dr. King would have refused to participate in today's identity-politics gamesmanship because it frames its grievances in opposition to the American principles of freedom and equality that he sought to redeem.

Created equal

He upheld the country's founding principles and sought to destroy only what got in the way of delivering the promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness—as well as the recognition that all men are created equal.

Last month the school board of Westfield, N.J., approved a history course on critical race theory, which is the embodiment of the oppressor narrative embraced by the left. At the board meeting a young woman spoke passionately in favor of the course—ending her comments by blaming slavery for the absence of black fathers in the home. This is how successful the left, with its lethal message of despair and distortion of history, has been at undermining agency within the black community.

Confronting evil

To honor the legacy of Dr. King, we must not only acknowledge the evil he confronted, but also focus on his example in overcoming it. He persevered and triumphed in the face of evil, because he was beholden to the truth, honor and love for all mankind—driven as he was to see blacks share fully in the American dream.

We must not let the purveyors of identity politics fudge the record: Martin Luther King Jr. believed in the promise of America. In fact, he helped to fulfill it.