What Would King Tell Obama?

By Michael Honey, January 19, 2009

What would Martin Luther King, Jr., whose birthday we celebrate on January nineteenth, say to Barack Obama, inaugurated as President of the United States on January twentieth? A friend of mine is judging student essays on that question for the King Holiday. It is a good question, with answers that might surprise some people.

King thought in terms of progressive phases of history. He saw phase one of the American freedom movement as the struggle for legal integration, equal opportunity, and full voting rights. That struggle was most intense between 1955 and 1965, crowned by the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and teh Voting Rights Act of 1965. This is what most people think of when they think of King.

After that, King demanded a phase two, which he defined as a struggle for economic equality. He didn't mean we would all make the same income, but that the playing field should be levelled up somewhat for poor and working people. "Something is wrong with capitalism as it now stands in the United States," he said. "It takes necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes."

In phase two, King sought remedies for capitalism's defects. He launched his Poor Peoples Campaign demanding that government divert funds being spent for war to education, housing, and jobs. King also went to Memphis to support a strike of sanitation workers for the right to have a union. King, saying, "all labor has dignity," supported unionization as a portal to a decent life.

In phase two, King also vigorously challenged America's militarist foreign policy. He saw the slaughter of millions in Indochina and regretfully condemned his country as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today." Guns and bombs would never create security for anyone; violent means would only produce violent ends. The massacre in Gaza and the rockets hitting Israel today will undoubtedly demonstrate the truth of that insight once again.

Today, King would urge Obama to continue building a broad consensus for change, to pass new labor laws to help workers organize unions, to gain health care for all, and to put America back to work. He would support Obama's pledge to restore civil liberties and the rule of law, after the travesty of the Bush years, and to use diplomacy to bring peace. Like Obama, King sought tangible gains for people, not pie in the sky.

But King would go further. He wanted a new kind of society based on love and justice. He wanted America to undertake a moral revolution to replace self-seeking individualism with concern for the common good. He said racism, poverty and war are intertwined problems that can only be resolved together.

King wanted a larger agenda and a better kind of world. To put America to work, to overcome systemic racial and other forms of inequality, to study war no more; that agenda would constitute a politics of hope worthy of the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

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