

## MLK's agenda remains unfinished



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Sen. Barack Obama, in his books and in a recent speech, explains why Americans have been pitted against one another by race, and how to get beyond it. He asks us to "break out of the racial stalemate we've been stuck in for years."

He also offers ways to get beyond race to a greater degree of social and economic justice. He calls on ethnic minorities and white Americans to recognize that we all need the same things -- better health care, better schools, better jobs -- and can get them only by joining to find solutions to our common problems.

Obama calls on us to build a new movement "to continue the long march of those who came before us, a march for a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America."

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. would be proud. Forty years ago, he called for a multiracial coalition to end poverty, racism and war, and called it the Poor People's Campaign. King said our dire situation called for a "planetary movement" for social and economic justice. Above all, King believed in the power of love to transform the individual, and society. "Someone," he said, "must have sense enough and morality enough to cut off the chain of hate."

In the spring of 1968, many of us hoped that a new president and a movement would create new priorities. On April 4 in Memphis, an assassin took King's life. On June 5, another assassin killed Democratic presidential candidate Robert F. Kennedy. Both men had called for withdrawal from the Vietnam War and for shifting the nation's spending from military pursuits to creating jobs and ending poverty. Their deaths shattered our hopes.

Instead of moving toward reform, Americans elected Richard Nixon as president. His "secret plan" for peace consisted of seven more years of murderous military escalation. That "surge" resulted in the loss of millions of lives. Nixon began the coded racial appeals that expanded the Republican Party in the South but divided voters along racial lines. His "southern strategy" has prevailed in politics ever since.

King's dreams of a labor-civil rights coalition, a peaceful foreign policy, mitigating racism and ending poverty were destroyed. Now we stand eerily at another crossroads. Our current government's priorities are even more skewed than in 1968. We face the devastating economic and moral consequences of a potentially \$3 trillion war; a massive bailout of Wall Street companies and CEOs, and a trillion dollars in tax cuts for the rich that have swelled budget deficits. Government resources for our infrastructure, education, health care and basic human needs continue to dwindle.

Will a progressive reform movement fix what ails us, or will we fall back on another conservative leader who relies on military escalation and "free market" nonsolutions to problems of human need? Will we fall prey to racial slogans and sound bites intended to confuse rather than to clarify? Or will we move America and the world in a better direction?

Sometimes, it seems we have learned little from our history