

Why MLK Would Applaud 2012 Voters

"We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land!"

Those were the words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as he closed the last speech of his life, the evening before he was assassinated in Memphis, TN. His eerily prescient words revealed a faith that many would envy: fearlessness and peace in the face of death. They also exposed utter confidence not only in the righteousness of his cause, but also in the inevitability of its success.

Like everyone who lived through that era, I have often wondered what Dr. King would have thought of the events of our times. Could he have imagined that our country would have twice elected a black president? I think so. The man who spoke those words was convinced that the day would come when black Americans would break every unbreakable barrier in the professional world.

Indeed, he had reason to believe it would be so. Dr. King had seen success in his lifetime: he had watched his strategy of non-violent resistance effectively prick the nation's conscience and catalyze the revocation of unjust laws. Even as his successes enraged the Bull Connors of his day, they also exposed them for what they were: the desperate, bigoted guardians of a bygone era, doomed to pass away.

Protest marches are so common now that we are almost immune to them. But then, Dr. King and his followers watched their marches change the nation, one state and locality at a time. What would he think of today's marchers who want churches to perform homosexual weddings or students to be relieved of their school loans?

The fact that black Americans rose up and peacefully demanded that their government be true to its own founding principles gave rise to a new era of opportunity that my grandfather could have scarcely imagined. And there is no question that countless black Americans, as well as other racial minorities, have taken full advantage of the opportunities men like Dr. King died for. When we think of wealthy black Americans, it is easy to focus on Oprah, Michael Jordan and other athletes and entertainers. But according to the U.S. Census, there are now well over one million black households making six figure incomes. Few are surprised to encounter black doctors, engineers, professors and lawyers. While interracial marriage is still frowned upon in some circles, it is growing in frequency and has certainly won mainstream acceptance.

The fact that our nation elected a black president also signifies that the no door is closed to an individual simply because of the color of his skin. In this way, we have truly arrived in the Promised Land Dr. King glimpsed before its time. But what would Dr. King think of the current state of American race relations?

Ironically, Obama's presidency has not ushered in the racial harmony of which Dr. King dreamed. A study by Washington University in St. Louis revealed that many black Americans actually feel less empowered under President Obama than they did before his election. President Obama's cabinet choices have been so lacking in ethnic diversity as to prompt jokes from ESPN comparing it to the lack of black head coaches in the NFL. And while most black leaders stand firmly behind their president, black conservatives, as well as liberals like

Dr. Cornel West and Mr. Tavis Smiley have staunchly criticized his policies.

While I think there is little question Dr. King would celebrate the election and reelection of a black president, I think it much harder to know what he would say about the current state of race relations in our country. In most regions of the country, particularly at work, in sports and in school, people of various races are comfortable interacting with one another. But when the topic of race is raised for discussion, people of all races become uncomfortable and defensive.

It is impossible to ignore the fact that Democrats lean largely on racial, class and religious fears to win key races. Despite their skillful narratives, Tavis Smiley and Cornel West shocked most liberals by declaring that the local politics of grievance will not be enough in the 21st century. There have to be tangible policies that make a difference for "the least of these" in our society. On the other hand the GOP seems oblivious to their outdated messaging, methods and technologies. In addition to this, they lack a unifying dream that could bring Americans of all races, cultures and classes together—from minorities to union workers, or from single professional women to people on public assistance. If such a vision had been given, we would gladly have elected our first Mormon president because we would have seen him as just one of us.

Finally, impossible to ignore is the ongoing wealth and education gap between blacks and whites which leaves de-facto segregation intact in too many cities. While most Americans would love to see this erased, there is no consensus about which policies actually achieve their desired ends. So at the very minimum, I believe Dr. King would tell us we have much work left to do. In the coming weeks, I will give specific thoughts on what some of that work entails.

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