

Confession

By [James Calvin Schaap](#)

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Perhaps my father was wrong, but he wasn't alone. Check out [this document](#)—the general title is unmistakable: "COMMUNIST PARTY, USA" and then "NEGRO QUESTION." It's a memorandum of the United States Government dated August 30, 1963. That's right, and that date is worth repeating—August 30, 1963.

Someone, somewhere, underlined the fourth paragraph's last line, perhaps as an action item: "We must mark him now," the memo says, speaking of Dr. Martin Luther King, "as the most dangerous Negro of the future in the Nation from the standpoint of communism, the Negro, and national security."

My father considered MLK an enemy of the people, an agitator with communist leanings who was upsetting everything, pushing a perfectly good political system into danger, risking chaos in the streets. My father and millions of others had spent way too many years in the South Pacific or somewhere in occupied Europe, taking bullets, and, dang it, all they really wanted was to come back to a good home with a good wife and good kids. And then this blame Negro comes along and claims we've been doing things wrong forever and ever and that we owe them some kind of blessing, a bowl of porridge, after hundreds of thousands of American GIs died—thousands on Omaha Beach alone!

Who does he think he is? He must be a communist.

He wasn't. He was a preacher.

Even to a life-long Calvinist like my father, a man who spent more time in church than he did anywhere other than home and office, Martin Luther King was a dangerous scourge, a malcontent, who threatened everything with his blame talk about equality. Doggone it, he was always agitating, never happy, always making life miserable for the rest of us. He was dangerous too. People said he's been seen with card-carrying communists—and how can a Christian hang around with atheists? Answer me that. All that Christianity he robes himself in with is phony baloney.

What kind of Christian would urge insurrection? Tell me that. What kind of

Christian would agitate the way that man does? He's dangerous.

People said my father was a saint. But all of that is what he thought about Martin Luther King. I remember. I remember very well.

And he wasn't alone. The man in charge of the bureau of government that created this memo was the attorney general of the United States; and that attorney general wasn't George Wallace but Robert F. Kennedy, a staunch Democrat who would, just five years later, run for President himself when Hubert Humphrey seemed to stumble on Vietnam. Kennedy was a liberal my father would have never voted for. But when it came to MLK, they were on the same page.

Dad was no extremist. He never stockpiled goods thinking men in black helicopters were coming to rural Wisconsin to confiscate guns. He never owned one. He was a pious, saintly man, president of the village, chair of the Christian school board, and a perennial church elder.

Today is the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington and the most famous speech of America's post-World War II era—"I have a dream." All Martin Luther King was asking for was the opportunity for all of God's children to play in the same park, swim in the same pool, and look down the road at similarly promising futures. What he wanted was a legalized end to legalized discrimination.

And a lot of good Christian people, well-meaning believers in the blood of Jesus, thought of him as an enemy of the state, diabolical and anti-American. In most white churches, his association with communists made him the enemy.

When he comes up this next Sabbath morning in sermons in many of those same churches, 50 years later, I'd guess there won't be much confession of sin, only adulation. That's sad. We need to know what we came from, even when what we came from is something it might be more pleasant not to remember.

Today, Martin Luther King is a saint. Fifty years ago, he was anything but. Once upon a time [this picture](#) looked nothing like righteousness to most of white America.

Christians like me need to remember that part of the story too when they remember the speech. We need to remember we need forgiveness.

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