MLK's moral authority

By Raymond Haberski Jr.
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We continue to bask in memories, tributes and outright celebrations of the day, 50 years ago, when Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his most lauded speech. We embrace the March on Washington as a singular national event, we marvel at the many thousands who filled the National Mall as heroes, and we nearly worship King's "Dream" unequivocally.

Clarence B. Jones, one of King's closest advisors, suggests the reception of the speech on that day was not much different from our remembrance now:

> Everyone on the Mall and a whole lot of people watching on their tiny television sets were aware that they had just experienced something transcendent. The "I Have a Dream" speech was less than a minute old, yet it already felt timeless. Martin had reached deep, and, with a prod in the right direction from the angelic Mahalia Jackson, come up with a way to paint a portrait of how it felt to be black in America.

King's speech made him a mountain of a man, both admired and feared. It confirmed his position as a preeminent moral authority in America, and, according to an FBI assessment, the single most dangerous African-American leader in the nation.

These two titles go together. King's power stemmed from his ability to, as Jones contends, "challenge the conscience of America." When King began to speak extemporaneously about his dream of a just nation, he offered the American creed. To deny anyone that creed was to deny that the nation had a soul, and King's rhythmic admonitions and rhetoric were driven by the recognition that such injustice had been perpetrated from more than 200 years. King had not merely challenged the conscience of America but also implanted his moral authority within it.

Such prophetic power had limits, though. King's moral authority rang throughout America and down through generations when he used it to affirm the American creed. When he claimed that war had poisoned this creed, his moral authority ran into a stone wall.

On April 4, 1967—exactly a year before he was assassinated—King spoke from the pulpit of the Riverside Church in upper Manhattan. He addressed a huge audience that evening at the invitation of Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam. He came to denounce his nation's war.

"Now, it should be incandescently clear," King observed,

> that no one who had any concern for the integrity and life of America today can ignore the present war. If America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read Vietnam. It can never be saved so long as it destroys the deepest hopes of men the world over. So it is that those of us who are yet determined that America *will* be are led down the path of protest and dissent, working for the health of our land.

King's Riverside address did not endear him to the press, the public, or even to his own advisors. Carl Rowan, a black journalist with access to Lyndon Johnson, said that the president was "flushed with anger."

King's colleagues in the Southern Christian Leadership Council worried that his stance would hurt the movement financially and politically. "The tragedy is not that King is going to the peace issue but that he's leaving civil rights," said one close associates. "And how are you going to denounce Lyndon Johnson one day and ask him the next day for money for poverty, schools, housing?" A Harris Poll showed that 73 percent of Americans polled disagreed with King's position on the war, and 60 percent believed his opposition to the war would hurt the civil rights movement. Forty-five percent of black respondents also disagreed with King.

And yet he persisted. Why? Again, Clarence Jones provides insight—King's moral authority was not tempered to fit the times:

> If he were still here today, he would in my opinion have emerged as the preeminent moral spokesperson for America. Not the preeminent spokesperson for black America, but for America. . . He was such a unique person in the history of our country that I think things would have been different. I think he would have continued to challenge the conscience of America. . . Remember, he was unalterably committed to nonviolence. Unalterably. His position was either it's nonviolence or non-existence, nonviolence or co-annihilation. There was no middle ground for him. There was no compromise on this issue."

In an age of political gridlock caused by narrowly ideological pandering, one wonders how Americans would celebrate the towering moral courage King had to brook no compromise on war. When asked to atone for the sins of the war and to use national guilt to put a stop to the war, America rebuffed King.

Let’s by all means celebrate King, but let’s not use him and his declarations about the nation as another way merely to celebrate ourselves.

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