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The Lost Voice of Protest

by Bob Herbert

On the evening of the fourth of April, 1967, one year to the day (almost to the hour) before his assassination, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. walked into Riverside Church in Manhattan and delivered a speech that was among his least well known, yet most controversial.

"I come to this magnificent house of worship tonight," he said, "because my conscience leaves me no other choice."

The speech was an eloquent, full-throated denunciation of the war in Vietnam, one of the earliest public critiques by such a high-profile American. Silence in the face of the horrors of that war, said Dr. King, amounted to a "betrayal."

The speech unleashed a hurricane of criticism. Even the N.A.A.C.P. complained about Dr. King stepping out of his perceived area of expertise, civil rights, to raise his voice against the evil of the war. The Times headlined an editorial, "Dr. King's Error."

The war would go on for another eight years, ultimately taking the lives of 58,000 Americans and a million to two million Vietnamese. Dr. King himself would be silenced, at the age of 39, by a bullet in Memphis.

The widespread celebration of Dr. King's birthday on Monday brought that Vietnam speech to mind. It's both gratifying and important that we honor this great man with a national holiday. But it's disturbing that we pay so much more attention to the celebrations than we do to the absolutely crucial lessons that he spent much of his life trying to teach us.

Whether it's the war in Iraq, or the plight of New Orleans in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, or the violence and self-destructive behavior that plagues so many black Americans, our attitude toward the wisdom of Dr. King has been that of the drug addict or alcoholic to the notion that there might be a better way. We give lip service to it, and then we ignore it.

In the Vietnam speech, Dr. King said, "A nation that continues year after year to spend more money on military defense than on programs of social uplift is approaching spiritual death." He may as well have been speaking into the void. The war in Iraq, a reprise of Vietnam, will cost us well over a trillion dollars before we're done, and probably more than two trillion. More than 3,000 American G.I.'s have been killed and the death toll for Iraqis is tallied by the scores of thousands.

No one knows what to do, although the politicians and the pundits are all over television, day and night, background singers to the carnage.

Here at home the city of New Orleans is on life support, struggling to survive the combined effects of a catastrophic flood, the unconscionable neglect of the federal government, and the monumental ineptitude of its own local officials. As ordinary residents of New Orleans continue to suffer, the rest of the nation has casually turned away. The debacle is no longer being televised. So it must be over.

Dr. King held the unfashionable view that we had an obligation to help those who are in trouble, and to speak out against unfair treatment and social injustice. "Our lives begin to end," he said, "the day we become silent about things that matter."

New Orleans matters. And the long dark night of the war in Iraq must surely matter. But not enough voices of protest are being raised in either case. The anger quotient is much too low. You can't stop America's involvement in a senseless war or revive a dying American city if your greatest passion is kicking back with pizza and beer and tuning in to "American Idol."

The quality of life for black Americans more than 38 years after the death of Dr. King is a mixed bag. Blacks are far better off economically and educationally than ever before. Barack Obama is a leading candidate for the Democratic nomination for president, and the last two secretaries of state have been black.

But the ominous shadow of racial prejudice is still with us. Even President Bush acknowledged that conditions in New Orleans pre-Katrina were proof of that. The nation's prisons are filled to the bursting point with black men who have failed, or been failed, and have no viable future. And too many black Americans are willing and even eager to see themselves in the culturally deprived lineup of gangsters, pimps and whores.

Dr. King would be 78 now, and I can't believe that he would be too thrilled by what's going on. In his view: "He who passively accepts evil is as much involved in it as he who helps to perpetrate it. He who accepts evil without protesting against it is really cooperating with it."

We miss his leadership, all of us, whether we're wise enough to realize it or not.

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