

We've Come a Long Way, But We Have Far to Go

Written by Rev. Jesse Jackson Sr.
Wednesday, 16 January 2013 00:00



When President Barack Obama is sworn in for his second term, his hand will rest not only on President Abraham Lincoln's Bible, but on Dr. Martin Luther King's, too.

As the ceremony falls on the federal holiday celebrating Dr. King's birth, the civil rights leader would no doubt be proud as an African-American president is sworn in on the steps of a Capitol built by slave labor, about 170 miles from Jamestown where slave ships landed.

We have come a long way. But Dr. King would not be satisfied. He marched to his own drummer, and wanted to be remembered as a "drum major for justice." He worked tirelessly for change, but he never took his eyes from the prize.

He understood there must be a creative tension between the political and the prophetic.

The political seeks the popular, and attempts the possible. The prophetic seeks the moral, states the truth, and challenges the limits. For Dr. King, bipartisan agreement had little value in itself. There was bipartisan agreement on slavery. Abolition was outside the consensus.

There was bipartisan agreement on segregation. The Montgomery bus boycott, the Selma march for voting rights were outside the box. When Lyndon Johnson pushed through the Voting Rights Act, stating that "We shall overcome," Dr. King praised him. But he challenged Johnson's war in Vietnam, and the retreat on the war on poverty. He spent part of his last birthday organizing a poor people's march on Washington, prepared to commit civil disobedience to force the nation's attention on the poor.

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We know what Dr. King would be focused on today. Nearly one in four children are being raised in poverty. More than 46 million people struggle with poverty in this wealthy nation. Nearly 18 million households are “food insecure.”

Millions are facing foreclosure. School budgets are being starved, even as jails are stuffed. An extreme and obscene gulf exists between rich and poor, with working families suffering mass unemployment, falling wages and increasing insecurity. There is a growing racial polarization as African Americans and Latinos, the greatest victims of the Great Recession, are the last to recover from it. Schools today are more segregated than they were in Dr. King's time, but now no one talks about it.

The U.S. also has a larger military budget than at the height of the Cold War, and drones in six countries are likely generating more terrorists than they are killing.

Dr. King would no doubt celebrate the re-election of an African-American president, but he would not stop there. He would challenge the limits of the current debate. He would be organizing mass civil disobedience to call the nation back to its senses — and to demand action against poverty, violence and the endless war that has shredded our Constitution, wasted lives and squandered scarce resources.

The partisan is too petty to address the unpopular. The bipartisan is too limited to speak the truth. Dr. King told us that “there comes a time when silence is betrayal.” He understood that the movement for justice would often offend the majority. We would make progress, he argued, “not through the complacent adjustment of the conforming majority, but through the creative maladjustment of a nonconforming minority.”

The second inauguration of Barack Obama on the day we celebrate Dr. King's birthday reminds us how far we have come. But Dr. King would demand that we look clearly at how far we have to go. It is not a time for complacent celebration.

We cannot accept mass unemployment, grinding poverty and endless war as a new normal.

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On Dr. King's birthday, it's time to mobilize the creative maladjustment of citizens of conscience once more.{jcomments on}