

Hypocrisy from Bush, Clinton at funeral of Coretta Scott King

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A funeral service was held Tuesday in Atlanta for Coretta Scott King, the widow of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. Over the last several days more than 157,000 mourners came to pay respects to Mrs. King who died of ovarian cancer on January 30 at the age of 78.

The death of Coretta Scott King evoked an outpouring of popular sympathy from those who identify her and her husband with the struggle for social equality and justice that animated the mass movement against Jim Crow segregation. Her death also evoked a torrent of hypocrisy and posturing from leading figures from both political parties, including President Bush and three former US presidents who gave tributes at the funeral service.

One could not listen to their remarks without being struck by the fact that Martin Luther King Jr. was opposed to just about everything these people stand for. From Carter, to former president Bush, to Clinton, to the current occupant in the White House, they have all presided over an enormous rollback in civil liberties, the growth of poverty and inequality, and an explosion of US militarism around the world. It should be recalled in regard to this last point that King was murdered in 1968 as he was coming into sharp opposition to the Democratic Party over the Vietnam War.

George W. Bush's presence at the ceremony was particularly grotesque. The president's career is closely associated with those who opposed the civil rights movement, including his own father. In his unsuccessful election campaign for the Senate in 1964, George Herbert Walker Bush opposed the Civil Rights Act enacted that year, denouncing Texas' Democratic Senator Ralph Yarborough as an "extremist" and "left-wing demagogue" for supporting the federal legislation

that outlawed racial segregation.

The modern-day Republican Party is the product of a conscious appeal to win segregationist votes in the 1960s, after the national leadership of the Democratic Party—which had long been the party of Jim Crow in the South—moved to support civil rights legislation. Prominent figures in the Republican Party today, such as former Georgia Congressman Bob Barr and former Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott of Mississippi, have had close and public ties to white supremacist organizations such as the Council of Conservative Citizens.

Bush, whose utter indifference towards the conditions of life confronted by the working class and poor African Americans in particular was demonstrated to the whole world during Hurricane Katrina, is systematically dismantling whatever social safety net remains in the US, including Medicare, Medicaid, public education and housing. Moreover, while he referred to the "vicious words," "bombings" and other threats that Coretta Scott King and her family endured, he has launched a campaign of illegal spying on American citizens that mirrors the FBI surveillance against King and others in the civil rights movement 40 years ago.

As of late last week, Bush reportedly had no intention of attending the funeral and had planned to send his wife and father, the former president, while he gave a speech on his budget-cutting plan in New Hampshire. The president's handlers apparently convinced him it would be a good move politically to attend, particularly since his minimal support among black voters had plummeted since Hurricane Katrina. The fact that a black minister with close ties to the White House was officiating at the ceremony also helped.

The remarks by Bush and his father were perfunctory

with all present aware of the hollowness of their efforts to identify with King's legacy.

The enormous chasm between the lifestyles of the privileged representatives at the funeral and the broad masses of blacks and working class people was impossible to conceal. Despite all of the hypocritical tributes to the struggle for civil rights waged four decades ago, the ceremony provided a palpable sense that developments in American since 1968 have betrayed the ideals for which King had fought.

Southern Christian Leadership Council co-founder Reverend Joseph Lowery and others noted that Coretta Scott King had publicly opposed the war in Iraq, which he suggested had been launched on the basis of lies. In a clear reference to Bush's attack on civil liberties former president Jimmy Carter noted that the Kings had been the target of "secret government wiretapping" and that the "color on the faces" of the victims of Hurricane Katrina had shown that the struggle for civil rights had not been completed.

The underlying political tensions within the ruling elite were highlighted when Carter deliberately refused to shake the Republican president's hand.

The efforts of the Democrats to wrap themselves in the mantle of the civil rights movement, however, were no more sincere than Bush's. The Democrats' capitulation to the Bush administration on a host of questions, from the war in Iraq, to government spying, to the appointment of right-wing Supreme Court justices, is an expression of the fact that, in the end, this party defends the interests of the same economic elite as the Republicans.

Former President Clinton noted that just four days after her husband's assassination Coretta Scott King traveled to Memphis to support the struggle of the striking sanitation workers that her husband had been championing when he was killed. At the time, she insisted that the "right to a job and an income" was the only way to "pursue life, liberty and happiness" in America.

But the Democrats today, no less than the Republicans, are thoroughly hostile to the struggle of the working class to attain such basic rights. Just two months ago, the entire political establishment was denouncing transit workers in New York City as "selfish thugs" because they dared to go out on strike to defend their right to health care and pension benefits.

Hillary Clinton, the US Senator from New York, who joined her husband in addressing the funeral, called the strike illegal and upheld the state's strike-breaking Taylor Law that imposed thousands of dollars in fines on the workers.

President Clinton whose, "welfare reform" had a devastating impact by eliminating the guarantee of a minimal income for millions of poor people, including African Americans, epitomized the rightward shift of the Democratic Party over the last several decades and its repudiation past social reforms.

The past 40 years has seen an enormous social polarization in the US that has affected the entire political establishment, which is unified in its efforts to further enrich the wealthiest layers of American society.

This process also had a severe impact upon the civil rights movement King built. That movement—which never challenged the underlying economic causes of inequality, i.e., the capitalist system itself—in the end elevated a privileged layer of African Americans through such programs as affirmative action, while failing to significantly change the economic conditions of the great mass of black workers and youth.

The struggle against racial discrimination is directly connected to the great social question in America: the division of society into two classes whose interests are irreconcilably opposed. The guarantee of genuine equality and democratic rights can only be achieved through a fundamental reorganization of economic life to meet the needs of the masses of working people, not the wealthy few.



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