

# Forty years on, some lessons from the life—and death—of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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Friday's 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was marked by a march in Memphis, Tennessee, where the civil rights leader was slain, and numerous commemorations and tributes throughout the country, as well as widespread media attention.

There was little, however, that conveyed a sense of the real King, and of his historical significance, achievements and limitations. The American political establishment sets strict limits on how much to say about a man once regarded as a dangerous agitator and hounded unmercifully by the FBI.

Nearly a century ago, V.I. Lenin wrote in *State and Revolution*: "During the lifetime of great revolutionaries, the oppressing classes constantly hounded them, received their theories with the most savage malice, the most furious hatred and the most unscrupulous campaigns of lies and slander. After their death, attempts are made to convert them into harmless icons, to canonize them, so to say, and to hallow their *names* to a certain extent for the 'consolation' of the oppressed classes and with the object of duping the latter, while at the same time robbing the revolutionary theory of its *substance*, blunting its revolutionary edge and vulgarizing it."

King was a reformer, pacifist and Baptist minister, not a revolutionary socialist. Nonetheless, he was the leader of a mass popular movement that for more than a decade challenged the barbaric racial oppression in the American South. Lenin's observation aptly characterizes the process by which the civil rights leader has been transformed into a public icon, the recipient of insipid tributes from contemporary big business politicians—Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, John McCain (who voted against the King national holiday), and even the wretched George W. Bush.

But King was not only the author of the "I Have a Dream" speech memorized by school children throughout the country, or the author of treatises on Gandhian nonviolence. Forty years on, the real, historical King remains an exceptional figure, a genuine, authentic and principled opponent of oppression, a man of great physical and moral courage. Despite the limitations of his religious ideology and reformist politics, he challenged the power structure of his day, not only on racial discrimination, but on war, on poverty, on the very structure of the society in which he lived.

King became an increasingly passionate opponent of the war policies being pursued by the administration of Lyndon Johnson, openly breaking with the Democratic president who had been his ally in the passage of civil rights legislation. The United States government, King said, "is the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," referring not only to the Vietnam War, but to US backing for oppressive dictatorships in many countries.

In a speech two months before his death, King denounced American

foreign policy as a "bitter, colossal contest for supremacy." Referring again to Vietnam, he said, "We are criminals in that war" and "have committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world."

Contrast that bluntness and moral fervor with the bogus "antiwar" speeches of today's Democratic politicians, who invariably praise the heroism of American soldiers and the nobility of their efforts, while criticizing the war in Iraq mainly as a diversion from a greater commitment of the American military to bloody adventures elsewhere—Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, etc. Obama, for example, always couples his criticism of the war with calls for increasing, not decreasing, the manpower and material resources of the US war machine.

King had been drawn into opposition to the war in Vietnam by his growing understanding of the connection between militarism abroad and the oppressive social structure at home. He saw the resources promised for the Johnson administration's "War on Poverty" drained into the swamp of Vietnam.

In remarks to his staff at the Southern Christian Leadership Council, King said that the civil rights reforms of the early 1960s "were at best surface changes" that were "limited mainly to the Negro middle class," adding that demands must now be raised to abolish poverty. "We are saying that something is wrong ... with capitalism," he concluded. "There must be a better distribution of wealth, and maybe America must move toward a democratic socialism."

It is impossible to imagine such language coming from Barack Obama, who in a recent interview with *BusinessWeek* rejected "confiscatory" tax rates on the wealthy, declaring, "My opponents to the right would like to paint me as this wild-eyed liberal, but I believe in the market. I believe in entrepreneurship. I believe in capitalism, and I want to do what works." As for Hillary Clinton, her role in the distribution of wealth was demonstrated Friday when she released tax returns Friday revealing that she and her husband raked in \$109 million in income since leaving the White House.

During the last year of his life, from his public antiwar speech at Riverside Church in New York City to his murder in Memphis, King was in increasing political crisis. The old-line civil rights organizations and much of the Democratic Party establishment had turned their backs on him because of his outspoken criticism of the Vietnam War.

More militant advocates of physical resistance to police violence and racial oppression, such as the Black Panthers, SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) and Malcolm X, had won growing support among black youth, particularly in the urban centers outside the South, which were swept by rioting in the summer of 1967.

Although he deplored the ghetto upheavals as a rejection of his principle of nonviolence, he recognized their social roots, declaring, “A riot is at bottom the language of the unheard.”

King himself had begun to recognize the necessity for a wider struggle against the economic conditions that confronted not only blacks, but all working people, and he had taken the decision to launch a “Poor People’s Campaign” to bring tens of thousands of demonstrators to Washington in the summer of 1968, despite pleas from the Democrats to wait until after the presidential election. He was reportedly also considering an independent presidential campaign focused on the issues of war and social justice.

The civil rights leader traveled to Memphis in March 1968 to lend his support to the strike being conducted by black sanitation workers, after two workers were crushed to death by the compacting mechanism on their vehicles. The strike dragged on for two months, with the workers staging regular protest demonstrations in the face of police harassment and racist intimidation.

The first march at which King appeared erupted in a violent clash between police and local youth, leaving one person dead, 62 injured and 218 in jail. King was preparing for a second demonstration when he was shot to death April 4, on the balcony outside his room at the Lorraine Motel.

In all the hours of media coverage and pages of newspaper articles marking the anniversary, comparatively little attention is paid to the event itself—King’s murder, allegedly by a single bullet fired from ambush by James Earl Ray.

The murder of Dr. King has key features in common with the other political assassinations of the 1960s, particularly those of President John Kennedy and Senator Robert Kennedy. All three assassinations were supposedly carried out by “lone assassins” motivated only by their own inner demons.

None of the assassins was ever actually put on trial—Lee Harvey Oswald was himself assassinated by Jack Ruby, while James Earl Ray and Sirhan Sirhan accepted plea bargains to avoid death sentences—with the result that much of the evidence against them was never tested in court. In each assassination, major questions remain that suggest that the gunmen may have been either cogs in a larger conspiracy, or outright patsies set up to take the fall for killings organized by powerful interests.

If this string of assassinations had been carried out in some other country, the starting point of an investigation would be the presumption of a political motive. Take, to cite a recent example, the murders of liberal journalists in Russia, where there is widespread suspicion that the Putin government and the security services are involved.

Why shouldn’t a similar presumption guide an investigation into the assassination, between 1963 and 1968, of the most prominent figures in liberal politics in the United States? The search for those organizing the killers would logically begin in the political circles on the right and in the state apparatus which stood to benefit from the elimination of their most prominent opponents.

Moreover, what was the *modus operandi* of the US intelligence agencies in the 1960s? When faced with political figures overseas regarded as threatening, or merely inconvenient, the CIA’s “Murder Incorporated” would have them eliminated. This was the period of the assassinations of Patrice Lumumba (1961), Rafael Trujillo (1961), and Ngo Dinh Diem (1963), and countless attempts to murder Fidel Castro.

The American intelligence apparatus was waging war within the

United States against radical opponents like the Black Panthers, the targets of countless murder plots by local police departments and the FBI’s COINTELPRO operation. The FBI is widely believed to have played a major role in staging violent provocations to discredit civil rights leaders like King, as well as the mass antiwar protest movement.

King was a particular obsession of FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, who had branded him “the most dangerous Negro in America,” conducting extensive wiretapping and surveillance, and orchestrating hate mail that included death threats. The same agency was then placed in charge of the investigation into King’s murder, and served up Ray as the lone suspect. There is little doubt that the FBI version of the killing is a whitewash.

Ray, despite his background as a drifter and small-time criminal, was able to obtain a false passport and flee to Europe after the murder of King. He was subsequently captured, extradited, pled guilty and sentenced to 99 years in prison. Ray later attempted to withdraw his plea bargain and mount a defense, claiming he had not been the shooter. Andrew Young, the former close aide to King who became US ambassador to the United Nations, now says flatly that Ray had nothing to do with King’s death. King’s family came to the same conclusion.

Forty years after the murder of Dr. King, the limitations of his reformist outlook are obvious. Despite the abolition of official segregation in the South, the social conditions of the majority of black working people have not fundamentally altered. Hunger, homelessness, poverty and unemployment are all worse among blacks than among the population as a whole, and worse today than at any time since King’s death. The number of African Americans in US prisons, more than 900,000, is nearly six times the number in jail in 1970.

For the most privileged layer of blacks, the past four decades have brought significant gains. Some 10 percent of black households have incomes over \$100,000 a year, a fivefold increase, although that figure hardly represents living in luxury. The number of black millionaires and multimillionaires, while small, has skyrocketed. There are 10,000 black elected officials, an eightfold increase, and Obama—one of the newly minted black millionaires—could well be elected the first African-American president.

This is not the outcome that King would have desired, nor does it represent the strivings of the millions of working people and youth—white as well as black—who joined in or were inspired by the civil rights struggles of the 1960s. Those aspirations will only be carried forward through the emergence, at a far more politically conscious level, of a new mass movement of working people to challenge the capitalist system as a whole.



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