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Remembering Martin Luther King, but not as a conservative

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NCR Today

On Monday, we celebrated one of the greatest figures of the 20th century, Martin Luther King Jr. It is perhaps indicative of his greatness that everyone now wants to claim him as their own.

A CNN article focuses on how conservatives want to claim that King was actually a traditionalist and a conservative.

As one who lived through the civil rights movement, I can assure you that no one thought of him in those terms at the time. While growing up in West Virginia, I saw the best of our white community disturbed by the radical nature of King's message. He was considered pushy. They saw blacks as having already advanced sufficiently. The country simply wasn't ready for the kind of changes King was proposing. The black community would have to wait. We were, after all, a law-abiding country, and breaking the law through civil disobedience was not acceptable, and it certainly wasn't conservative.

As I say, these attitudes represented some of the gentler and kinder approaches to King's message. The response in the South in particular was, as we know, more violent and hateful.

To those whites who felt King was moving too fast, his response was that justice delayed was justice denied. He was willing -- and in fact did -- go to jail to promote the changes he sought. He placed his life in danger time and time again to further the cause of justice. He challenged all America to fulfill the true promise of its Constitution.

How, then, can he be considered to be a conservative? Conservatives point to King's oft-repeated phrase that we should all be judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin. Conservatives

going back to President Ronald Reagan use King's words to argue against affirmative action. They say that King was against any use of the race factor to provide special advantages for a particular group.

It is interesting that these same conservatives opposed the work of King every step of the way. Reagan opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King was called a communist, a subversive and an agitator. Conservatives certainly did not support any of his efforts to address poverty or develop an economic Bill of Rights for the poor.

Those who once opposed him now want to distort his image. They point to his emphasis on self-help for blacks. Yet Jesse Jackson has also traveled throughout the black community encouraging young people to help themselves. This has always been an important message from within the black community. While King strongly opposed discrimination based on the color of one's skin, that does not mean he was against taking steps to redress the wrongs of slavery and segregation.

The truth is, most historians would suggest King actually became more radical toward the end of his life. He opposed the Vietnam War. He believed in a guaranteed annual wage for all and supported the redistribution of wealth. He definitely supported affirmative action programs. The CNN article even refers to a trip to India where he supported government programs to remedy the longstanding discrimination against "Untouchables."

I believe the bottom line is that people do not change on their own. Change occurred because of the actions and sacrifices of people like Martin Luther King Jr. and all those other heroes of the civil rights movement. The good news is that those who opposed him now recognize the rightness of what he fought for. However, that does not make it OK to now say that he was really always one of them.

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