

Dr. King saw economic buildup as key to justice

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in organizing for civil rights, frequently spoke on the necessity for a just economic program for the United States. The following comes from the chapter, "The Days to Come," in the book *Why We Can't Wait*, which was released 30 years ago (New York: Harper, 1963):

"Civilization, particularly in the United States, has long possessed the material wealth and resources to feed, clothe and shelter all of its citizens. Civilization has endowed man with the capacity to organize change, to conceive and implement plans. . . ."

Dr. King called for a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged." He said, "While Negroes form the vast majority of America's disadvantaged, there are millions of white poor who would also benefit from such a bill. The moral justification for special measures for Negroes is rooted in

the robberies inherent in the institution of slavery. Many poor whites were the derivative victims of slavery. As long as labor was cheapened by the involuntary servitude of the black man, the freedom of white labor, especially in the South, was little more than a myth. It was free only to bargain from the depressed base imposed by slavery upon the whole labor market. . . ."

"It is a simple matter of justice that America, in dealing creatively with the task of raising the Negro from backwardness, should also be rescuing a large stratum of the forgotten white poor. A Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged could mark the rise of a new era, in which the full resources of the society would be used to attack the tenacious poverty which so paradoxically exists in the midst of plenty. . . ."

Dr. King called for full employment in building the national economy. "The energetic and creative expansion of work opportunities, in both the public and private sectors or our economy, is an imperative worthy of the richest nation on earth, whose abundance is an embarrassment as long as millions of poor are imprisoned and constantly self-renewed within an expanding population."

as it ages, those whose knowledge stretched back to days gone by, when things were different, pass on, and the survivors are left with their memories of those who knew, to pass on through family or other means, and the quality of the culture is attenuated. So it is in our time. There are two defining moments, for people of a certain age; three for those of an older generation. Most, out of childhood at the time, know precisely where they were, and what they were doing, at that moment, 30 years ago now, when President John F. Kennedy's assassination was reported to the world from Dealy Plaza in Dallas. And again, later, when no credible solution to that crime was forthcoming from the highest levels of the country, everyone old enough knew, whether they wanted to admit it or not, that we had a big problem on our hands, if such a monstrous thing could be done, and then covered up. Most of those, and some others, also remember that moment, in the summer of 1969, when Neil Armstrong took his "one small step for a man, one giant leap for mankind" and stepped off the ladder of the Apollo spacecraft's lunar module to raise the Stars and Stripes on the surface of the Moon. At that moment, the project Kennedy had launched when he called on the nation to make the commitment to put an American on the Moon, within the decade, had been brought to fruition. It was a project which involved us all, a project whose success was a victory for us all. For an earlier generation, VE-Day 1945 is similar, a day that lives in memory, precisely because it also affirms that the higher purpose which unites us all as humans is knowable,

and does exist, no matter what anyone else says to the contrary.

Such considerations not only tell us that individuals can and do contribute to a higher purpose, but they also tell us, if you want to comprehend what is going on, now, in the United States, you have to go back in time, 25 to 30 years, to days when things were organized differently—not perfectly, but differently. Though we have maintained some of the capabilities we developed to put men on the Moon, cities, such as Detroit, Newark, Los Angeles, Oakland, Hartford, also still do bear the unreconstructed scars of the riots of a generation ago.

Compare what went before with what changed, and how it changed. If you're too young to know, you should want to find out. If you're old enough to remember, it's your life, you changed too, becoming a different, lesser person, and the chances are, if you are honest with yourself, that you can remember the moments of decision in your life which mark that process of decline, just as clearly as you can remember the large-scale events which shaped the world in which you made them. And, of course, the rationalizations employed to justify them. It seemed like it was all for the best. It seemed like the lesser of various evils. There didn't appear to be any choice. "I knew it was wrong, but there was nothing I could do about it. I didn't want to do it, but I had to." Out of such seemingly small decisions, consoling themselves with such justifications for impotence, tragedy, of classical proportions, is written for the life of nations and cultures.