

President Obama Spurred by MLK's Legacy

Written by Earl Ofari Hutchinson
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It was more than fitting that President Obama's inauguration fell on the national day of celebration for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was even more fitting that he took the oath of office on the bible that King used. More than any other resident of the White House, Obama understood that King is a big reason for his political success. Then Democratic presidential candidate Obama first publicly expressed deep gratitude to King and the civil rights movement in a speech in Selma, Alabama in March, 2007. He's referenced King many times since then.

An accurate, but often overlooked read of King's legacy was not just his monumental fight against racial segregation. King was also a masterful political analyst and strategist. He recognized that winning battles against segregation was much easier than breaking the strangle hold of Jim Crow political disenfranchisement. White political domination and black political disenfranchisement were the twin cornerstones to maintain economic and social segregation for a near century. If blacks in the South and elsewhere could not vote, they could not hold political office. If they could not hold political office, they would have absolutely no chance to change the rigid laws that entrenched segregation.

King understood that ultimately the battle for political enfranchisement didn't solely entail challenging the dominance of bigoted white Southern politicians. He also had to challenge the Democratic and Republican parties nationally. He led massive protest marches at both the 1960 Democratic convention and Republican conventions. He did more. He also put forth a pointed agenda for civil rights to both conventions demanding an end to Jim Crow restrictions on voting in the South.

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In the next few years, King stepped up the assault on Jim Crow politics. He coupled his mass marches against segregated public accommodations with voter registration and education drives, relentless court challenges to the poll tax, literacy tests, and political gerrymandering. These along with naked terror were the ancient weapons the white South used to chase blacks from the polls. King relentlessly pushed the Justice Department and the FBI to protect blacks that sought to register from the organized terror campaign.

King backed to the hilt the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964, and its challenge to the seating of the lily white Mississippi delegation at the 1964 Democratic Convention. He was instrumental in brokering the deal with Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party stalwarts to seat some members of the MFDP. This was the first real crack in the armor of white political power and dominance. It set the stage for the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act that blew apart whites only political domination and paved the way for the explosion in the number of black elected officials in the coming decades.

King also quickly realized that transforming the political process would insure that more elected black officials could be advocates for political equality in the South and in major urban areas in the North where blacks increasingly were the majority of the population. This was especially important to King who never lost sight of the fact that the legacy of segregation, bigotry and discrimination trapped thousands of poor blacks and that offered no easy resolution.

Obama has publicly taken exception to the notion that the civil rights movement is outdated, or worse, that he somehow supplants the ongoing work of civil rights leaders. He has not bought into the notion that his election signaled the nation has reached the nirvana of a post racial society. Since the first public acknowledgement he made of the debt of gratitude he owes King and the civil rights movement, he has repeatedly praised past civil rights leaders for their heroic battle against racial injustice and not just yearly during the King holiday celebration. This is an appropriate tribute to the civil rights movement that challenged the nation to make King's dream of justice and equality a reality. Obama faced that challenge and defied the racial odds in winning the White House. But he could not have beaten the odds without the hard, patient, in the trenches effort of and recognition by King that political empowerment was the key to racial uplift.

King, though, would likely temper his cheers at the towering progress that blacks and minorities have made in the political arena with the admonition to be vigilant against the attempts by the GOP to rollback those gains through voter gerrymandering, and the passage of a tangle of racially tinged vote restricted laws. Adding to the danger, some conservatives are loudly trying to prod the Supreme Court to do away completely with the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

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King was the driving force to meet and overcome the barriers to black political empowerment. His success is the big reason Obama took and again took the oath of presidential office.

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