

King's greatest legacy: Seeing polarization as progress

Written by Lee A. Daniels

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I've always disliked the way Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday is often celebrated. The reasons why became even clearer to me these past few days, as the importance of considering King's life and work was juxtaposed against three other developments: the 150th anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation; the celebration of Barack Obama's

second

inaugural as president of the United States; and the splenetic, knee-jerk resistance of the National Rifle Association and other conservatives to the president's efforts to devise sensible gun-regulation proposals.

Those events tell me I'm right in thinking too many King ceremonies indulge too much in the simplistic, feel-good rhetoric of "Can we all just get along?" and ponder too little why he was so widely criticized in the last years of his life – not just by the overt racists but by White liberals and more than a few Black politicians and colleagues in the civil rights leadership as well.

The reason is that King refused to temper his increasingly sharp criticism of America's flaws. Instead, he became more provocative in identifying those flaws existence in the North and West as well as the South. Those were the years that the Apostle of Nonviolence fully took on the mantle of, as Rev. Hosea Williams, one of his trusted aides, described him, "the militant of the century."

So, I'm sure that, while many in pulpits and auditoriums these past few days bemoaned the "racial divide" and the "partisan gridlock" that are roiling American society, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. would have been pleased.

Not pleased as in "happy" or "delighted," but because he'd understand that the polarization itself is a sign that the nation's "outsider groups" are making progress in gaining a full measure of their American citizenship.

For example, recall the furious response to and the ratcheting up of polarization over the Massachusetts Supreme Court's 2003 ruling legalizing gay marriage. Who would have predicted that by 2013, albeit still-heated opposition from conservatives, public acceptance of gay marriage would have come so far so fast?

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So it was for the 13 brief years Martin Luther King, Jr. flashed across the American landscape. Even a cursory reading of media headlines from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s illuminates how widespread the racial polarization was. Yet, it's now clear the opposition to the Movement was so fierce precisely because overt, legalized racism was about to fall. The polarization was one of the "rainbow signs" that a change was going to come far more quickly than most White Americans expected.

Indeed, the Civil Rights Movement underscored that there are two different kinds of polarization. One results from the oppression that confines its targets to second-class status. Before the mid-1960s Black Americans (and other Americans of color) had been locked in that physical and psychological ghetto for, literally, centuries. The other kind of polarization, however, comes into being when the targets of oppression start challenging the status quo in significant ways.

King and the Movement's other leaders and rank-and-file activists understood that securing equal rights for Blacks required relentlessly, nonviolently upsetting the White majority's comfort with the country's racist laws and customs. Their actions compelled the nation, and the world, to juxtapose America's soaring ideals and rhetorical commitment to freedom for all with its tawdry reality. The ensuing polarization led straight to the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

Today's political chatter is saturated with gloomy descriptions of and predictions about the fierce polarization in the political arena.

Yes, it's evident that in the wake of Obama's re-election, conservatives have re-committed themselves to flooding the state legislatures with reactionary measures and fomenting chaos in the Congress. Yes, it's critically important to not lose sight of the magnitude of the challenge: the callous proposals to restrict women's right to determine what reproductive choices are best for them that conservatives are yet again trying to push through state legislatures; their resistance to pursuing reasonable solutions to the crisis of undocumented immigration; their continuing to try to find ways to undermine Blacks' right to vote, to mention just a few.

But we should also realize that the president's re-election not only cemented in history his individual importance. It also underscored the rise of multicultural America as a powerful, progressive voting force which enabled Obama to overcome the most dangerous reactionary threat to democracy the country has faced since the Civil War. In that regard, America's current polarization is a stark, and welcome, reminder that we're still fighting for the full measure of our rights as Americans – and that at this moment we're winning.

So, if you happened to be at a celebration marking Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday, or an event marking the second inauguration of President Barack Obama, and some of the 1960s civil rights freedom songs were sung, you should realize that wasn't an indulgence in nostalgia but an acknowledgment of our present reality – and responsibility.

Lee A. Daniels is a longtime journalist based in New York City. His latest book is, Last Chance: The Political Threat to Black America.