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The World Needs Dr. King Now More Than Ever Color of Law

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BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board

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On this 80th anniversary of the birth of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., as I look at the state of human rights in the world I ask myself, "What would Dr. King do?"

Look at the situation in the Mideast, particularly the current bloodshed in Gaza. These attacks, a violation of international humanitarian law, can be described most charitably as a disproportionate use of force by the Israeli Defense Forces. Some have referred to this indiscriminate bombing of Gaza as a case of collective punishment, with the dehumanizing legacy of the occupation as the obvious backdrop.

As [Gideon Levy of Ha'aretz, the Israeli daily newspaper](#) noted, Israel's military commander is now inclined "to kill as many as possible," adding that "The unbridled aggression and brutality are justified as 'exercising caution': the frightening balance of

blood - about 100 Palestinian dead for every Israeli killed, isn't raising any questions, as if we've decided that their blood is worth one hundred times less than ours, in acknowledgement of our inherent racism."

Such are the consequences when the drums of war drown out the voices of peace.

Let me take you to Philadelphia: Rabbi Linda Holtzman represents the best of Dr. King's philosophy of standing up against injustice and for the rights of all people, particularly when it is unpopular to do so. Recently, [she participated in a protest](#) in front of the Israeli consulate. Rabbi Linda, as we affectionately call her, has been a spiritual advisor to my family. She was there for us when my son Ezra Malik was buried, when we sent him off, wrapped in a traditional shroud, to join his ancestors.

And she went to the protest, guided by her convictions, because the attacks in Gaza sickened her, and she could not tolerate what was going on there. To be sure, such a stance does not make Rabbi Linda very popular in some circles. Yet, it is because she exemplifies the teachings of Dr. King that she is one of my heroes.

Drum Major Instinct

As for Dr. King's antiwar stance, we need not speculate, because he was very clear on the matter. As a key spokesperson for the human condition, King had no choice. On February 4, 1968, only two months before his assassination, Martin Luther King gave a sermon at Ebenezer Baptist Church titled, "The Drum Major Instinct," which dealt with the propensity of human beings to want to be superior to others. The concept is important because it linked King's condemnation of racism, economic exploitation and militarism, the "triple evils that are interrelated." King, after all, well understood the universality and the interconnected nature of these three forms of oppression, that in order to eliminate one of them, it was necessary to eliminate them all. "And think of what has happened in history as a result of this perverted use of the drum major instinct," King said. "It has led to the most tragic prejudice, the most tragic expressions of man's inhumanity to man."

For King, the world was being led down a suicidal path due to the drum major instinct, and the contest between nations for world supremacy:

"But this is why we are drifting. And we are drifting there because nations are caught up with the drum major instinct. 'I must be first.' 'I must be supreme.' 'Our nation must rule the world.' And I am sad to say that the nation in which we live is the supreme culprit. And I'm going to continue to say it to America, because I love this country too much to see the drift that it has taken.

God didn't call America to do what she's doing in the world now. God didn't call America to engage in a senseless, unjust war as the war in Vietnam. And we are criminals in that war. We've committed more war crimes almost than any nation in the world, and I'm going to continue to say it. And we won't stop it because of our pride and our arrogance as a nation."

For the civil rights leader who stood true to the gospel of social justice, and the Nobel Peace Prize winner who was thrust onto the international stage as a prominent human rights figure, his opposition to war was a natural progression from his platform on racial segregation. He remembered Dante's admonition that "the hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in a moment of moral crisis seek to maintain their neutrality."

Letter From Birmingham Jail

And today, when many people, particularly religious leaders, remain silent in the midst of war, oppression, killing and other injustices, I am also reminded of Dr. King's *Letter From Birmingham Jail*. King had special criticism reserved for the Southern White moderates who may have disapproved of segregation and the attendant racist policies and brutal treatment of Negroes, yet did or said nothing out of fear of retaliation or social ostracism.

He was particularly disappointed with the White clergy, who disapproved of his desegregation efforts as "unwise and untimely," and whose otherworldly approach to religion precluded them from taking any action regarding social problems. Under their conservative brand of Christianity, order was (and still is) given preference over justice and freedom. "In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro," King said, "I have watched white churches stand on the sideline and merely mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities." Sadly, conservative Christianity made many White religious leaders reluctant to acknowledge the equality of humankind under society and the law, just as all people were supposedly equal before God in the spiritual sense.

Civil Disobedience and Unjust Laws

Martin Luther King led a movement which led to the writing of new laws such as the civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s. These laws were written in the blood of those demonstrators who risked, and at times gave, their lives for social justice. Ironically, yet appropriately, Dr. King's achievements came not merely by challenging unjust and immoral segregation laws, but through disobeying such laws.

His attitudes toward immoral laws were rooted in his religious beliefs, and out of a concern for the effects of the oppressive laws on the oppressed. In King's eyes, segregation was unacceptable because it denied blacks their self-respect. The segregation laws assigned a false badge of inferiority to African Americans and a false badge of superiority to whites. Laws which degrade human personality, in King's view, are unjust.

The man who broke unjust laws was responsible for the creation of new laws. To that end, Dr. King demonstrated the true potency of nonviolent resistance. "We made our government write new laws to alter some of the cruelest injustices that affected us," he said. "We made an indifferent and unconcerned nation rise from lethargy and subpoenaed its conscience to appear before the judgment seat of morality on the whole question of civil rights."

China is one country in desperate need of a Kingian-style movement of civil disobedience. On the one hand, that nation's rate of economic growth has been stunning by any measure. Until the global economic crisis, this world economic power was bankrolling America by holding \$1 trillion in U.S. debt.

On the other hand, the 2008 Beijing Olympics proved that police states put on the best shows. While they do everything to try to prove to you how great and perfect they are, for all of their ostentatious displays, never can they hide the truth.

The world gave China - this Communist totalitarian state turned hypercapitalist totalitarian state - a big huge pass by allowing it to conduct business as usual throughout the Olympics. And in the process, the Chinese government was able to

show its people that the world respected it, and that it could do what it wanted to them with impunity.

So during the Olympics coverage, one could learn where to find the best Peking Duck in Beijing, or hear about the hottest fashions in China, or admire that nation's glitzy, ultramodern, high-tech capital city. The biggest scandals reported were the fake, computer enhanced fireworks display during the opening ceremonies, the allegedly underaged gymnasts, and the lipsynching little girl who replaced a singer judged not cute enough for display at the Olympics.

But the world heard nothing about China's arbitrary laws and unjust punishments. China promised to allow permits to protesters during the Olympics, yet [subsequently sentenced two elderly Chinese women to "re-education through labour"](#) for applying for such a permit.

We heard nothing of China's economic relationship with Sudan's genocidal regime. No word about China's oppression of minority groups, suppression of religious freedom, or its policy of cultural genocide in Tibet. No word about forced labor and torture, a socio-economic apartheid system for rural areas, the assaults on freedom of speech, the arrests of journalists, and the imprisonment of critics of the government.

Journalist and documentary filmmaker [Kevin McKiernan](#) is in the post-production stages of a film called [Bringing King To China](#). The documentary focuses on a groundbreaking play in China about Dr. King, and a [young American woman's quest](#) to introduce Chinese audiences to Dr. King's message of universal rights, peace and nonviolent struggle. Perhaps a cross-cultural dialogue about the man's philosophy could provide the spark that will transform Beijing the way it transformed Birmingham. Time will tell.

But this is certain: the world needs Dr. King more than ever, and although he is no longer with us physically, he has provided us with a blueprint for international peace that will forever endure...if we allow it.

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The BlackCommentator Readers' Corner Blog


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