

What Would KING



Martin Luther King III

President and CEO, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change

ONE of the questions I am frequently asked in one form or another is "What would your father do if he were alive today?"

It's an interesting question, but one that can never be answered with absolute certainty... I do occasionally wonder how my father might have approached 21st century phenomena such as the Internet... [But] any answers to such questions that I might supply are purely speculative.

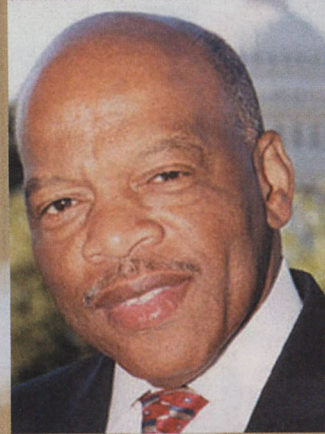
As a man of intense intellectual interest, I imagine that my father would have loved the Internet as a living, breathing encyclopedia, updated every second. As a leader of nonviolent campaigns, he would surely recognize and use the



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THERE have been so many Black "firsts" since Dr. King's death, and I know every one would make him pleased and proud. He would definitely be pleased by how much Black people have accomplished in the last four decades and by the growing numbers of Black college graduates, teachers, doctors, lawyers and other professionals. But if Dr. King were here today, I think he would feel we still have so much, much work to do. I don't think he would be pessimistic—he was never one to give up. But Dr. King is famous for saying he hoped his own children would grow up in a world that would judge them not by the color of their skin but the content of their character, and I know he would be shocked and



U.S. Rep. John Lewis

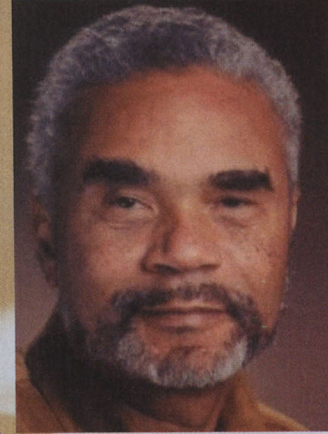
(D-Ga.)

ON April 4, 1968, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., was killed by an assassin's bullet. It had been 13 years since the Montgomery Bus Boycott, when I had first heard of Dr. King and a woman named Rosa Parks.

It had been nine years since the sit-ins in Nashville, Greensboro and throughout the South. I was one of thousands of college students who, inspired by Dr. King, used his teaching of nonviolent protest to challenge segregation.

It was five years after the March on Washington, where Dr. King shared his dream with the nation and the world.

It was 1968. Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights



Clayborne Carson

Director, Martin Luther King Jr. Papers Project

WE can surmise much of what Martin Luther King Jr., would say today because, during his lifetime, he was a visionary who said so many things of enduring relevance. In 1956, even as he celebrated the success of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King spoke prophetically of "a new world in which men will live together as brothers; a world in which men will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks; a world in which men will no longer take necessities from the masses to give luxuries to the classes; a world in which all men will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality."

King's prophetic vision was rooted in his belief that

Do Now?

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Web's power as an efficient and time-saving organizing tool for social change.

With respect to rap and hip-hop culture, I can imagine him applauding the artists who hold up positive values and social change advocacy, such as P. Diddy, Russell Simmons and others in the recent voter registration campaigns. On the other hand, as a husband, father, and minister of the gospel, I believe he would speak out against the vulgarity, misogynist lyrics and bling-bling materialism expressed by some, and would urge them to use their talents to promote education and the advancement of human dignity...

Speculation aside, on many other critical issues and matters of principle, my father's view were unequivocal, and I have found them to be invaluable to me as guidelines for prayerful consideration of current events and issues.

With respect to war, some of my father's words could be applied with prophetic eloquence to the current situation in Iraq, such as his warning that "a so-called limited war will leave only a calamitous legacy of human suffering, political turmoil and spiritual disillusionment."

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angered by how many Black children still don't have equal chances to succeed in our country.

Today, in 2005, there is still a "cradle to prison" pipeline that tracks too many Black children from birth for failure and for a prison cell rather than Princeton. From the day they are born, thousands of our children are denied access to the basic keys to healthy development and successful transition to adulthood: high quality health and mental health care, affordable and nurturing child care, effective early childhood and K-12 education, after-school programs, economic stability, and safe and supportive families. And without access to what should be the birthrights of every child, these children are diverted...into the pipeline that leads to poor development, isolation, failure, abandonment, mental health problems, substance abuse, violence, and ultimately, prison. There may not be signs on a wall pointing our children toward this pipeline the way the "Whites Only" and "Colored" signs directed them under Jim Crow, but this pipeline is very real, and more and more of our children are being systematically tracked there every year.

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Act of 1965. Legal segregation was all but dead. Yet Dr. King knew that his work was not done... There was still a great distance to go before we built the Beloved Community, a community of racial and social justice, a community at peace with itself.

It was 1968, and Dr. King was busy waging the Poor People's Campaign. He had come to believe that the struggle for justice and equality was not just a question of race, but also a question of class. So he had come to Memphis, Tenn., to stand in solidarity with striking sanitation workers. And he was killed.

But what if Dr. King had lived? What if Dr. King were still with us today? What would he be doing? How would he be working to change the world?

I see the answers in his work of 1968. Dr. King had refused to join the Establishment, remaining an out-

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Christianity was a potentially powerful force on behalf of social justice. In a 1965 EBONY article, he reflected that he was "many things to many people: Civil Rights leader, agitator, troublemaker and orator, but in the quiet recesses of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher." Rejecting otherworldly Christianity, he insisted, "The faith must have some relevance here, where the precious lives of men are still sadly disfigured by poverty and hatred, where millions of God's children are trampled over by the iron feet of oppression." The son and grandson of Baptist preachers who were also civil rights leaders, King vowed during his years in seminary to become an advocate of "the social gospel," committing himself not only "to change the soul of individuals so that their societies may be changed," but also "to change the societies

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sionment." I feel very comfortable in standing with those who are calling for a rapid de-escalation of U.S. military involvement in Iraq, while strengthening the role of the United Nations in ending this war.

One of my father's most profound insights was a unified theory of peace... He believed that the most powerful method for achieving both peace and social justice was nonviolence, and this remains the touchstone of my commitment to his legacy. . .

And so, I can easily imagine him leading marches to legislative houses to demonstrate in support of strengthening voting rights legislation. I can envision him organizing boycotts of corporations that discriminate ... and lobbying for sanctions against countries that violate human rights. And I can see him organizing sit-ins at state and local boards of voter registration to protest against suppression of the voting rights of people of color.

When he was assassinated, Martin Luther King Jr. was engaged in organizing the "Poor Peoples' Campaign, a coalition of people of all races united in support of the eradication of economic injustice and in favor of a job at a decent wage for all workers... He understood that this would be the most difficult phase of the Movement, and it

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How unequal do Black children's chances remain? Consider just a few facts:

- Children of color enter foster care at higher rates, even when their families have the same characteristics as comparable White families.

- Black children are twice as likely as White children to be without health insurance.

- Only 35 percent of Black 3- to 5- year-olds are able to perform three out of four basic reading and math skills.

- A Black student who graduates from high school has a greater chance of being unemployed than a White student who dropped out of elementary school.

- Although they represent just 34 percent of the U.S. adolescent population, minority youths make up 62 percent of the youths in detention.

- At present rates, a significantly higher proportion of Black men will go to prison than receive a college degree.

The evidence shows that for all our progress, for too many Black children 2005 doesn't look that different from 1965 . . .

How would Dr. King respond? I think Dr. King would see this pipeline for what it is—a tragic and unnecessary loss of our children's potential that we *can* fix and we *must* change it if our hard-earned racial progress is not to be undermined... And I think Dr. King

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side voice that forced our nation's leaders to confront the ugly truths that they would rather ignore. He was a moral voice against the war in Vietnam, against unemployment, racism, bigotry and hatred. And so he would remain today.

As Dr. King denounced the war in Vietnam, so would he denounce the war in Iraq. He would again quote Gandhi, that "the choice is nonviolence or nonexistence." He would renew his call that "we must learn to live together as brothers and sisters, or we shall perish as fools."

As Dr. King stood with the Memphis sanitation workers, so would he stand with those who remain left out and left behind. In the richest nation on earth, 45 million of our brothers and sisters have no health care. The unemployment rate among minorities is double that of White Americans. The high school drop-out rate for male students of color is unacceptable . . .

America would be a lot less quiet about these tragedies if Dr. King were still with us. He would be traveling to houses of worship, to colleges and universities, to wherever he could find an audience.

As in the Movement, he would use music and popular culture, including rap, to further the cause. He even would have challenged hip-hop culture to use its power

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so that the individual soul will have a chance."

Thus King would challenge the current tendency in the United States to equate Christian faith with right-wing politics, for he saw Christianity as a potentially powerful force on behalf of social justice. He rejected religious fundamentalism based on selective, literal interpretations of the Bible. Rather than emphasizing isolated biblical injunctions against, for example, homosexuality, King stressed the numerous biblical statements mandating justice and compassion for the poor. In the EBONY article, King expressed his dismay at the "un-Christian Christian" who thought of the Church as a "private country club" and refused "to take up the cross and march beside their oppressed brethren . . ."

Although King's legacy has often been reduced to an "I have a dream" sound bite, the landmark civil rights legislation of the 1960s achieved only part of his dream. As Congress debated that legislation, he had already proposed a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged," and at the end of his life he launched a Poor People's Campaign. The King who spent his last hours struggling on behalf of Memphis sanitation workers would certainly speak strongly against the gulf that still exists between rich and

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would require a more resolute commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience, economic withdrawal and more confrontational forms of nonviolence. I believe that this is exactly what is needed today.

There was a lot of discussion about "values" during the presidential election, but the values in question were inadequately defined. In his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* my father called for "a new revolution of values" to create a society based on compassion, justice, peace and brotherhood... With prophetic relevance for our times, he declared, "We still have a choice today: nonviolent co-existence or violent co-annihilation. This may well be mankind's last chance to choose between chaos or community."

Martin Luther King Jr. envisioned a new America and a worldwide Beloved Community, in which all people could have a decent life and live together in peace and security. As he said in his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech 40 years ago, "I have the audacity to believe that people everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits." This audacious vision of hope challenges us still, as we carry forward his unfinished work into the 21st century. ■

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would respond with every resource he had available, beginning with one of the most basic tools we used in the 1960s: voter registration and participation. The last two presidential elections have proven beyond a doubt that every vote counts, and Black people have a critical responsibility to use our right to vote ... But Dr. King wouldn't want us to stop there. He would work with community leaders, including ones in communities that are already making positive changes and can be an example to others. He would preach sermons asking his fellow leaders in the faith community to get involved and to encourage their congregations to focus on children's needs. He would be speaking out to young people themselves—encouraging them to make the right decisions and do what they need to do to stay on track for positive futures. And he would want to make sure parents and teachers and service providers and all other adults who are involved in children's lives every day understand how important their responsibilities are.

The cradle-to-prison pipeline remains a crisis for our children, but Dr. King would be right at the front lines with those of us who are already working to end it for good. That requires us all to build a mighty movement to save our children! ■

REP. LEWIS *Continued*

and influence for good. Like all communication, it must treat each man and woman with dignity and respect . . .

He would use all the tools at his disposal—tools that we did not even dream of during the Movement—computers, fax machines, e-mail.

Despite the challenges that remain, Dr. King would marvel at all that we have accomplished. As a nation and a people, we have come a great distance since the days of Jim Crow and segregation. All the good that we have accomplished would only fuel his hope . . .

I remember when I was lying in a hospital bed just after "Bloody Sunday." Alabama State Troopers had attacked and beaten us during a peaceful march from Selma to Montgomery to demand the right to vote. Dr. King visited me and said, "John, we are going to make that march from Selma to Montgomery. We are going to pass the Voting Rights Act." And we did.

This was the hope, the determination, and the courage that made Dr. King such a great man.

If Dr. King were still with us today, he would use that hope, that determination and that courage to make our world a better place.

And with Dr. King, with all that he could do and all those he could inspire, we would be that much closer to the Beloved Community. ■

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poor, not only in the United States but in the world. To those who labeled him a subversive, King responded, "I didn't get my inspiration from Karl Marx; I got it from a man named Jesus, a Galilean saint who said he was anointed to heal the broken-hearted ... anointed to deal with the problems of the poor."

He would also speak out against war, for his ideal of nonviolence applied as much to the powerful as to the powerless, as much to nations as well as freedom movements... Four decades before the war in Iraq, he called upon all nations to reduce "their arsenals of weapons of mass destruction." King's opposition to the war in Vietnam was rooted in the same moral and religious values that motivated his civil rights activism. Speaking to critics who maintained that peace and civil rights did not mix, he insisted, "They seem to forget that before I was a civil rights leader, I answered a call, and when God speaks, who can but prophesy. . ."

The eulogy King suggested for his own funeral provides the best indications of the values he would still affirm if his life: "I want you to say that day, that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry... I want you to say that I tried to love and to serve humanity." ■