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# Martin Luther King Jr. 35 years after his death

**Gregory Lewis**  
South Florida Sun-Sentinel (KRT)  
FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — The myth of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was born 35 years ago today.

Assassinated on April 4, 1968, as he stood on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, Tenn., King has become a victim once again — this time, of selective memory.

As far as Julian Bond is concerned, the day King was shot to death is "the beginning of the reshaping of King's legacy by erasing the last five years of his life, freezing him in August 1963." Since his death at the age of 39, King's image as a dreamer has supplanted King the radical opponent of the Vietnam War and economic exploitation of the poor.

Bond said history has pushed aside King's anti-war sentiments for the more mainstream ones found in the Aug. 28, 1963, "I Have A Dream" speech, recognized as one of history's greatest, that he delivered from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial to more than 200,000 people attending his March on Washington for equal opportunity. "The dream was five years before he died," said Bond, the former Georgia state legislator who was a friend of King's. "He did much, much more than that speech between 1963 and 1968. He was more radical in 1968 than in 1963. We were uncomfortable with those issues when he was alive and still are years after his death."

"With many people who die young, they instantly become martyrs and people quickly rush to freeze their image in one way or another," said Bond, now chairman of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and a civil rights history professor at American University in Washington, D.C.

Here's a King statement that isn't generally taught in schools and that isn't flashed across television screens in Black History Month blurbs:

"Perhaps a more tragic recognition of reality took place when it became clear to me that the war was doing far more than devastating the hopes of the poor at home. It was sending their sons and their brothers and their husbands to fight and to die in extraordinarily high proportions relative to the rest of the population. We were taking the black young men who had been crippled by our society and sending them eight thousand miles away to guarantee liberties in Southeast Asia which they had not found in southwest Georgia and East Harlem."

— "Beyond Vietnam," April 4, 1967

In the American psyche, Malcolm X represented the black bogeyman and King, with his non-violent philosophy, was a more palatable alternative for masses of people, historians say.

Yet, just as Malcolm still is defined by rhetoric like "by any means necessary" and his racial separation speeches when he was allied with the Nation of Islam, Malcolm moderated those views on race after a 1964 pilgrimage to Mecca, where he was accepted as a Muslim by people with white skin and blue eyes.

Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. agreed about the Vietnam War and the use of black soldiers to fight for democracy overseas when they had none in their own country.

As King said:

"So we have been repeatedly faced with the cruel irony of watching Negro and white boys on TV screens as they kill and die together for a nation that has been unable to seat them together in the same schools. So we watch them in brutal solidarity burning the huts of a poor village, but we realize that they would hardly live on the same block in Chicago. I could not be silent in the face of such cruel manipulation of the poor."

— "Beyond Vietnam"

Clayborne Carson, head of the Martin Luther King Jr. Papers project at Stanford University, said the King-

and-dream image developed out of our "soundbite" mentality and efforts to sell the King birthday holiday to skeptical Americans.

"Before his death, King was quite unpopular, so it was easy to dismiss the last three years of his life, to return to a time of approval of what he said," Carson said. "You need to go to a part of King that's not too controversial, not too radical. It's easier to celebrate that."

Carson recalled that even close advisers wanted King to avoid his final trip to Memphis, where the Nobel Peace Prize winner would take up the issue of striking garbage workers.

"He had the intestinal fortitude to die at the scene fighting for the rights of people who pick up garbage, who pick up trash," said Fort Lauderdale City Manager Floyd Johnson, 55. "That speaks to the essence of the man more than any speech."

In King's words:

"The issue is injustice. The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants, who happen to be sanitation workers. Now, we've got to keep attention on that."

— "I've Been to The Mountain Top," April 3, 1968

King was shot to death the next night.

"There are few shocks that rocked the black community like the assassination of Martin Luther King," said Julian Bond. "Malcolm X did not, except in certain circles. John F. Kennedy rocked America more."

While King's legacy is marked by his "I Have A Dream" speech, Carson said that his take on the war and the cause of the poor were consistent with his philosophy. "He believed that a society is judged by how it treats those at the bottom of the social order."

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